

Existentialism as a Framework for Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the relevance of existentialism as a philosophical framework for reimagining education in Nigeria. It argued that the prevailing educational system, marked by rigid curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and examination-driven pedagogy, has produced graduates who often lack creativity, resilience, and authentic self-direction. By engaging key existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beauvoir, Marcel, and Camus, the paper foregrounds themes of freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and meaning-making as vital to educational reform. Drawing from African communitarian philosophy, particularly the Yoruba concept of *omoluabi*, it considered how existentialist principles can be reconciled with Nigeria's communal values to cultivate learners who are both individually responsible and socially committed. Potential objections are also addressed, including concerns about existentialist individualism, policy constraints, cultural authenticity, and religious sensitivities. The paper concluded that existentialism, when critically adapted to Nigeria's socio-cultural and religious contexts, offers a transformative model of education capable of nurturing reflective, responsible, and resilient citizens who can contribute meaningfully to national development.

Keywords: Existentialism, Philosophy of Education, Nigerian Education, Authenticity, Communitarianism

Introduction

Education in Nigeria has long been both a source of hope and frustration. On the one hand, it is widely regarded as the key to national development, individual empowerment, and social mobility. On the other hand, it is frequently criticized for being rigid, exam-oriented, and overly focused on the acquisition of certificates at the expense of genuine learning and personal growth. Scholars have noted that Nigerian schools often prioritize conformity and rote

memorization rather than cultivating creativity, critical thinking, and independent judgment (Ocho, 2005). This has led to a system where learners are too often passive recipients of pre-packaged knowledge, rarely encouraged to question, to doubt, or to wrestle with the meaning of their own existence in a rapidly changing society. The mismatch between educational goals and the existential needs of learners has produced graduates who are literate but not necessarily empowered to live authentic and responsible lives.

The search for an alternative philosophical grounding for education in Nigeria is therefore not a matter of luxury but of necessity. A philosophy of education is not merely an abstract reflection; it shapes the way societies envision their learners, their teachers, and the purposes of schooling. As John Dewey (1916) famously argued, education is the means by which a society renews itself, and its philosophical orientation determines whether learners are shaped into docile conformists or responsible, creative citizens. In the case of Nigeria, the colonial legacy of education, which was designed to produce clerks and administrators for the colonial bureaucracy, still lingers in the emphasis on standardized testing and credentialism (Fafunwa, 1974). What is missing is a philosophical orientation that speaks to the lived experiences of Nigerian students, that affirms their individuality, and that challenges them to take responsibility for their lives in the face of uncertainty.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, offers such a framework. Thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre confronted the human condition with remarkable honesty. They were concerned not with abstract systems but with the concrete realities of freedom, choice, responsibility, and the quest for meaning in an often indifferent world. Sartre's dictum that "existence precedes essence" captures the existentialist conviction that individuals are not born with predetermined roles but must define themselves through their choices and commitments (Sartre, 1943). In education, this implies that learners are not empty vessels waiting to be filled but free beings who must discover themselves, confront their possibilities, and live authentically.

Educational theorists have long recognized the relevance of existentialism to pedagogy. George Kneller (1958) argued that existentialist philosophy liberates education from the tyranny of uniformity, allowing students to pursue their own meanings and purposes. Van Cleve Morris (1966) suggested that existentialist education is concerned not with transmitting a fixed body of knowledge but with engaging students in the drama of human existence, where choice and responsibility are central. Maxine Greene (1973), building on these insights, emphasized the importance of imagination and the teacher's role as a "stranger" who provokes learners to question, to doubt, and to envision alternative possibilities. These perspectives resonate strongly with Nigeria's current educational challenges, where conformity and exam preparation too often eclipse authentic intellectual and moral development.

The problem, then, is clear: Nigeria's educational system is trapped in a cycle of rote learning and credentialism, leaving little room for learners to become authentic, self-directed individuals. The central question this paper addresses is: How can existentialism serve as a philosophical framework for reimagining education in Nigeria? Three sub-questions flow from this:

1. What are the key existentialist principles relevant to education?
2. How can these principles address the specific challenges of the Nigerian educational system?
3. What practical and cultural considerations arise in attempting to apply an existentialist framework in the Nigerian context?

Methodologically, this study employs philosophical analysis and critical reflection. Philosophical analysis involves unpacking existentialist concepts such as freedom, authenticity, responsibility, choice, and meaning, and clarifying their implications for education. Critical reflection involves interrogating the Nigerian educational system and assessing how existentialist insights may provide a viable alternative. This is not an empirical study but a normative one; its concern is not to describe what *is* but to prescribe what *ought* to be, drawing on philosophical resources to chart a path forward.

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. First, it enriches the philosophy of education in Nigeria by drawing on existentialism—a tradition that has not been widely applied in African educational discourse. While African philosophers of education such as Nyerere (1967) and Fafunwa (1974) emphasized communalism and functionalism, existentialism shifts the focus to individuality, freedom, and authenticity. This does not negate communal values but complements them, reminding us that communities are composed of individuals who must first embrace their freedom and responsibility before contributing meaningfully to collective life. Second, this study contributes to the broader debate on educational reform in Nigeria by offering a philosophical lens that moves beyond pragmatism and credentialism.

This paper contends that existentialism, with its insistence on freedom, choice, and authenticity, offers a promising philosophical framework for reimagining education in Nigeria. It is an invitation to see learners not as passive vessels but as active agents in the project of their own becoming. In the words of Sartre, “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). Nigerian education must therefore be reoriented to empower students to make something meaningful of themselves, not merely to pass examinations or secure certificates. The challenge is formidable, but the promise is profound.

Existentialism: Philosophical Foundations

The term “existentialism” designates a diverse but interconnected body of thought that places the individual human being at the center of philosophical inquiry. Unlike rationalist systems that begin with universal principles or scientific laws, existentialism insists that philosophy must grapple with the lived reality of existence: the experience of freedom, the burden of choice, the inevitability of death, and the struggle for meaning in a contingent world. It is less a doctrine than a movement, unified not by strict agreement on principles but by a shared orientation toward existence itself.

Kierkegaard and the Primacy of Subjectivity

The roots of existentialism are often traced to Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish thinker who rebelled against the abstractions of Hegelian philosophy. For Kierkegaard, philosophy must begin not with “the system” but with the individual standing before God. He

argued that truth is not something external and objective, but rather something appropriated subjectively. "Truth is subjectivity," Kierkegaard (1992) declared, meaning that authentic existence requires inward passion, decision, and commitment. For him, education in the deepest sense is not about acquiring information but about choosing oneself before God, in faith and responsibility. Kierkegaard's insistence on personal choice resonates strongly with educational contexts, particularly in societies where students are pressured to conform to rigid paths. His idea that each individual must take a "leap of faith" into authentic existence challenges any educational model that denies the learner's freedom. Nigerian education, still shaped by colonial structures and societal expectations of conformity, often leaves little space for such individuality. Kierkegaard reminds us that genuine learning involves not only intellectual growth but existential commitment.

Nietzsche and the Call to Self-Overcoming

If Kierkegaard rooted existentialist thought in the Christian struggle for authentic faith, Friedrich Nietzsche took the opposite path, critiquing religion as a force of conformity and life-denial. Nietzsche's provocative declaration that "God is dead" (Nietzsche, 1974) was not a celebration of atheism but a diagnosis of the collapse of metaphysical certainties in modernity. With the old absolutes gone, Nietzsche challenged individuals to create their own values and to embrace the project of self-overcoming. His notion of the *Übermensch* (often translated as "overman" or "superman") symbolizes the human capacity to transcend mediocrity and live creatively, courageously, and authentically. Nietzsche's thought offers important insights for education. He warned against what he saw as the "herd mentality" promoted by conventional morality and institutions. In his view, education should not merely reproduce societal norms but should cultivate individuals who can think independently and creatively. This critique speaks powerfully to the Nigerian educational context, where emphasis on rote memorization and certification often suppresses originality. Nietzsche calls educators to "philosophize with a hammer," to dismantle inherited idols and open space for learners to craft their own values. While Nietzsche's tone is radical, his underlying point that education must cultivate strength, creativity, and authenticity offers a sharp critique of systems that prize conformity over individuality.

Heidegger and the Question of Being

Martin Heidegger carried existentialist concerns into a deeper ontological register. In *Being and Time* (1962), he argued that philosophy must return to the "question of Being," which had been neglected since Plato. Heidegger described the human being as *Dasein*, literally "being-there," a being uniquely aware of its own existence and possibility. For Heidegger, existence is characterized by "being-in-the-world," which emphasizes that human beings are always situated within particular contexts, histories, and relationships. Heidegger introduced the concept of authenticity, which involves confronting one's own mortality and taking ownership of one's possibilities, rather than living in the anonymity of "the they." His description of the individual lost in the crowd, absorbed in idle talk, curiosity, and distraction, rings true in societies where superficial conformity is valued over personal reflection. For education, Heidegger's analysis implies that authentic learning must awaken students to their own

possibilities and finitude. To educate is not merely to provide skills for the labor market but to call learners to face their own “being-toward-death” and thus to take their lives seriously.

In the Nigerian context, where education is often instrumentalized as a means of securing employment, Heidegger's thought challenges educators to think beyond utility. Education should not only train workers but also nurture authentic individuals capable of asking the fundamental questions of existence.

Sartre and Radical Freedom

Jean-Paul Sartre brought existentialism into the public sphere with remarkable clarity. In *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), he articulated the slogan that “existence precedes essence,” meaning that humans are not born with predetermined natures but must define themselves through their actions. This radical freedom is both exhilarating and terrifying, for it places the burden of responsibility squarely on each individual. Sartre rejected excuses and determinisms; to claim that one is bound by fate, society, or nature is, in his words, an instance of “bad faith.” For Sartre, education becomes a site where individuals are confronted with their freedom and encouraged to assume responsibility for their choices. He insisted that man is “condemned to be free,” which means that even refusing to choose is itself a choice (Sartre, 1943). In the classroom, this implies that teachers must not impose meanings but create conditions in which students can recognize their freedom and responsibility. Sartre's political engagement, particularly in his critiques of oppression and colonialism, also offers resonances for postcolonial contexts like Nigeria. He would likely have rejected any system that turns education into mere indoctrination.

Camus and the Absurd

Although Albert Camus resisted being labeled an existentialist, his reflections on the “absurd” complement existentialist concerns. Camus (1942) described the human condition as absurd, and humans seeking meaning in a universe that offers none. Yet rather than collapsing into nihilism, Camus urged us to embrace life with defiance and creativity. His image of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only to see it fall again, captures the resilience of the human spirit. For education, Camus's philosophy suggests that learners must be prepared to confront the difficulties and uncertainties of life without illusions. To educate existentially is to cultivate resilience, courage, and the capacity to find meaning even in struggle. In Nigeria, where students face systemic challenges, from underfunded schools to uncertain futures, Camus's insistence on affirming life in the face of adversity has profound relevance.

Educational Implications of Existentialism

Existentialism is not a philosophy that remains confined to abstract speculation; it is inherently concerned with how individuals live, act, and make meaning. Because education is one of the primary sites where societies shape individuals, existentialist themes inevitably spill into educational theory. If, as Sartre argues, existence precedes essence, then education must be conceived not as the imposition of a predetermined essence but as the facilitation of authentic self-discovery. To educate existentially is to affirm the learner as a free being, situated in a particular context, yet capable of transcending it through choice and responsibility.

Freedom and Responsibility in Learning

Perhaps the most important existentialist contribution to education is the emphasis on freedom. For Sartre, every individual is “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1992). This paradoxical phrase underscores the inevitability of human freedom: whether one likes it or not, one must choose. Applied to education, this means that learners are not passive vessels into which knowledge can be poured; they are free beings who must actively engage with knowledge and make it their own.

George Kneller (1958), argues that existentialist pedagogy begins with the recognition of student freedom. The teacher's role is not to dictate but to provoke, not to prescribe meanings but to open horizons of possibility. Similarly, Van Cleve Morris (1966) stresses that existentialist education avoids “indoctrination” by encouraging students to confront problems, dilemmas, and paradoxes rather than memorizing fixed answers. Learning, in this sense, is not about reproducing the teacher's thought but about exercising freedom responsibly. This insistence on responsibility tempers the danger of freedom degenerating into anarchy. For existentialists, freedom is not license but accountability. As Sartre (1946) insists, when one chooses for oneself, one also chooses for humanity, because one's choices contribute to the construction of human values. In the classroom, therefore, existentialist education encourages learners not only to make choices but to take responsibility for them. Assignments, projects, and classroom discussions are not simply tasks to be completed but opportunities for students to own their learning, to see themselves as responsible for the consequences of their intellectual and moral decisions.

Authenticity and the Critique of Conformity

A second existentialist theme with strong educational implications is authenticity. Heidegger's (1962) distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence highlights the danger of being absorbed in “the they” the anonymous crowd that dictates norms and conventions. Nietzsche earlier warned against the “herd morality” that suppresses individuality. Both concerns resonate with the tendency of mass education to produce conformity rather than authentic individuals. Maxine Greene (1973) applies this insight to education by insisting that the task of the educator is to disrupt complacency and provoke students to think for themselves. She argues that education must awaken students from the slumber of conformity, encouraging them to imagine alternative possibilities and to live reflectively. For Greene, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a provocateur, a stranger who unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions and opens new horizons.

This perspective is profoundly relevant in contexts where education is reduced to examination preparation. Nigerian schools, for instance, often produce students adept at reproducing information but hesitant to ask “why” or “what if.” Existentialist education insists that authenticity cannot be fostered by memorization alone; it requires space for questioning, for doubt, for dialogue. This does not mean discarding content knowledge but reframing it as material through which learners grapple with their own existence. Literature, philosophy, and history become not mere subjects but windows into the human condition, challenging students to situate themselves authentically within their world.

Education as Self-Discovery and Meaning-Making

A third existentialist contribution is the conception of education as self-discovery. Kierkegaard's insistence that truth is subjectivity reminds us that knowledge is not simply external information but something that must be appropriated inwardly. This is why, for existentialists, the educational process is less about transmission and more about transformation. Kneller (1958) puts it succinctly: existentialist education is not concerned with the "what" of knowledge but with the "who" of the learner. It asks: Who is this student? What are their possibilities? What choices confront them? Similarly, Van Cleve Morris (1966) emphasizes that existentialist pedagogy is problem-centered: it situates learners in dilemmas where they must wrestle with alternatives and make commitments. The point is not to shield students from anxiety but to help them face it, to cultivate the courage to live meaningfully in an uncertain world.

Paulo Freire, although not strictly an existentialist, provides an important complement to this view. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000), Freire critiques the "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students. He advocates instead for dialogical education, where teachers and learners engage in mutual inquiry. While Freire's concerns were primarily socio-political, his pedagogy aligns with existentialist emphases on freedom, dialogue, and responsibility. Both traditions reject the objectification of students and insist on their active participation in meaning-making.

Anxiety, Choice, and Educational Growth

Existentialism also emphasizes the role of anxiety in human growth. Kierkegaard described anxiety as the "dizziness of freedom," the unsettling awareness that one can choose but does not know what the outcome will be. For Heidegger, anxiety reveals the nothingness at the heart of existence, pushing us toward authenticity. In education, this suggests that discomfort and uncertainty are not obstacles but necessary conditions of growth.

Educational theorists have recognized this. Greene (1973) argues that teachers must create spaces where students can confront dilemmas, ambiguities, and contradictions. Rather than rushing to provide easy answers, educators should allow students to wrestle with uncertainty, to feel the anxiety of freedom, and thereby to grow. This is especially pertinent in a globalized world where Nigerian students must navigate complex cultural, economic, and moral landscapes. Shielding them from ambiguity does not prepare them for life; guiding them through it does.

Critiques and Limitations

Existentialist education is not without its critics. Some argue that its emphasis on individuality risks neglecting communal values, which are particularly important in African contexts. Others worry that existentialist pedagogy may be too vague, offering lofty ideals without concrete methods. Indeed, as Kneller (1958) admits, existentialist education resists codification because it insists on the uniqueness of each learner and context. However, these criticisms may also be seen as strengths. By resisting rigid methodologies, existentialism keeps education flexible and adaptable. And by emphasizing individuality, it does not necessarily deny community but seeks to ground community in authentic persons rather than conformist

masses. As Sartre (1946) insists, freedom and responsibility are inseparable; one cannot authentically choose without recognizing the implications for others. Thus, an existentialist framework for education can coexist with African communal values, provided the latter are not used to suppress individuality.

Toward an Existentialist Pedagogy

Bringing these insights together, the contours of an existentialist pedagogy begin to emerge in a manner that is both challenging and liberating. The classroom, rather than being conceived as a site of monologue in which the teacher dictates information to passive learners, is reimagined as a space of genuine dialogue. In this setting, both teacher and student participate in the co-construction of knowledge, with the teacher serving as a facilitator who opens up questions, encourages inquiry, and acknowledges the lived experiences of learners. Such dialogical engagement prevents education from degenerating into indoctrination, as it creates room for learners to grapple with issues that are personally meaningful and socially relevant.

Equally significant is the existentialist insistence that education must provide learners with opportunities to make real choices and embark on projects that engage their freedom. It is not enough for students to merely repeat formulas or memorize facts; they must be placed in situations that call for decision and initiative. In doing so, they come to recognize that knowledge is not a static body of information but an unfolding process in which they themselves are participants. This experience of choice also introduces them to the burden and dignity of responsibility, for every decision entails consequences both for the self and for others. In an existentialist classroom, therefore, critical reflection becomes indispensable. Learners are encouraged to question assumptions, to interrogate inherited traditions, and to evaluate the ideas presented to them rather than accept them uncritically. By cultivating intellectual independence in this way, education fosters individuals who are not merely compliant followers of convention but reflective agents capable of assessing their own values and commitments. Such reflection naturally leads students into confrontation with dilemmas that do not admit of simple or predetermined solutions. Here, the role of the educator is not to provide definitive answers but to guide learners as they wrestle with uncertainty and ambiguity. In this process, students develop courage, resilience, and the capacity to make authentic choices even in the absence of absolute security.

Finally, existentialist pedagogy underscores that freedom, far from being a license for unrestrained self-assertion, is always tethered to responsibility. Students must come to appreciate that their choices are never purely private but ripple outward, shaping the lives of others and the community at large. Thus, existentialist education is not a celebration of atomistic individualism but an invitation to assume responsibility for both personal integrity and the well-being of society. When learners internalize this dual orientation toward authentic selfhood and toward solidarity with others they are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world and to contribute meaningfully to the renewal of their communities.

Such a pedagogy does not discard structure or content, but it reframes them within the existentialist conviction that education is about becoming an authentic person. As Morris (1966) observes, existentialist education is not about preparing students for life but about helping

them live life here and now, meaningfully and responsibly.

The Nigerian Educational Context: Challenges and Prospects

Any attempt to apply existentialist philosophy as a framework for education in Nigeria must begin with a sober recognition of the context in which education takes place. Nigeria's educational system is a complex product of colonial legacies, socio-political instability, economic constraints, and cultural dynamics. It faces daunting challenges, ranging from infrastructural decay and underfunding to the prevalence of rote learning and examination-driven pedagogy. Yet, it also holds prospects for reform, especially if reconceived through lenses that emphasize authenticity, freedom, responsibility, and creativity.

The roots of Nigeria's current educational problems are traceable to its colonial history. Colonial education was not designed to cultivate independent thinkers or authentic persons but to produce clerks, interpreters, and low-level administrators who would serve the colonial bureaucracy (Fafunwa, 1974). In this sense, colonial education was instrumental rather than humanistic: it aimed to create subjects who conformed to imposed norms rather than individuals who could interrogate and transform their world.

Even after independence, this legacy persists in the form of rigid curricula, examination-focused learning, and a utilitarian orientation that views education primarily as preparation for employment rather than as a process of personal and communal self-realization. As a result, many Nigerian students go through schooling without developing critical thinking skills, creativity, or the courage to make authentic choices. Here, existentialist critiques of conformity and "herd morality" resonate sharply: Nigeria's system too often suppresses individuality in the name of uniformity.

One of the most widely criticized features of Nigerian education is its obsession with examinations. Success is measured almost exclusively in terms of grades, certificates, and test scores. This creates a culture where rote memorization is rewarded over understanding, and students are pressured to reproduce information rather than to engage with it critically. The existentialist critique of inauthentic existence is helpful here. Heidegger warns against the absorption of the individual into "the they" the anonymous collective that dictates what is acceptable without reflection. Nigerian students, caught in the web of exam-driven conformity, often study not for themselves but for "the system." For instance, they ask: What does WAEC want? What will JAMB mark correct? rather than What does this mean for me as a human being? The result is a generation of learners who may hold degrees but struggle to live authentically or responsibly in the face of life's uncertainties.

Another challenge is the predominance of teacher-centered pedagogy. In many Nigerian classrooms, the teacher is viewed as the unquestionable authority, and students are expected to absorb information passively. Freire's (1970) metaphor of the "banking model of education" aptly captures this practice: teachers deposit knowledge into students, who merely store it for future regurgitation.

From an existentialist standpoint, this is deeply problematic. If learners are free beings responsible for constructing their own meanings, then a pedagogy that reduces them to passive receptacles of knowledge undermines their humanity. Existentialist education would instead advocate dialogical engagement, where teachers and students engage in mutual inquiry. In

such a classroom, students are not objects but subjectsco-authors of their own learning journey. In addition to philosophical and pedagogical problems, Nigerian education faces serious structural challenges. Chronic underfunding has led to decaying infrastructure, inadequate teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms (World Bank, 2020). The frequent strikes by university lecturers often in protest against poor funding and working conditions further destabilize the system, leaving students uncertain about their educational future.

This uncertainty is fertile ground for existential reflection. As Kierkegaard reminds us, anxiety is not merely negative; it is the “dizziness of freedom,” the recognition that one must choose in the face of uncertainty. Nigerian students already confront uncertainty daily about whether their institutions will remain open, whether they can secure employment after graduation, or whether their degrees will be recognized abroad. The tragedy is that the system does not equip them with the existential courage to confront this uncertainty constructively.

Beyond its structural weaknesses, Nigerian education is also plagued by issues of corruption, malpractice, and ethical decay. Examination malpractice is rampant, with students, parents, and even teachers sometimes colluding to secure undeserved success. Certificates are often valued more than competence, leading to the phenomenon of “educated illiterates” individuals who possess credentials but lack authentic knowledge or skills.

Existentialism's emphasis on responsibility and authenticity provides a corrective here. For Sartre, to act in bad faith, that is, to deny one's freedom and responsibility, is to live inauthentically. When students cheat or when teachers sell grades, they are not only violating ethical standards but also denying their own potential to live as free and responsible beings. Education that integrates existentialist principles would stress integrity as inseparable from authenticity: to cheat is not only to fail morally but also to evade one's own freedom.

Prospects for Reform: Existentialism as an Alternative Framework

Despite these challenges, the Nigerian educational system also presents prospects for reform. Several reforms in curriculum and pedagogy have already attempted to move beyond rote learning toward creativity, critical thinking, and student-centered approaches (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). However, these reforms often remain superficial because they do not rest on a clear philosophical foundation.

Existentialism offers such a foundation. By grounding education in the principles of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity, Nigerian educators can move beyond the colonial and examination-driven legacies that still shape the system. Existentialist pedagogy places the learner at the center of the educational experience by transforming them from passive recipients into active co-creators of knowledge. Rather than focusing on rote memorization of facts, it emphasizes a deeper engagement with ideas, dilemmas, and questions that challenge students to think critically and reflectively. This approach links the freedom of learning to a profound sense of responsibility, reminding learners that the choices they make in their academic journey mirror the choices they will face in life. At its core, existentialist teaching seeks to cultivate authenticity, encouraging students to approach education not merely as a pathway to employment or societal approval, but as a vital process of self-discovery and the shaping of one's identity and purpose. The prospects are especially promising in the age of digital learning and globalization. Nigerian students increasingly access global conversations

through technology. If guided existentially, they can engage with these conversations not as imitators of Western thought but as authentic contributors from their own cultural context.

Balancing Existential Individualism and African Communalism

One potential challenge in applying existentialism to Nigeria lies in reconciling its emphasis on individual freedom with African communal values. African philosophy often emphasizes community, interdependence, and the Ubuntu ethic of “I am because we are” (Mbiti, 1969). Existentialism, by contrast, foregrounds the individual's responsibility for choice. This tension, however, need not be seen as a contradiction. Existentialist education in Nigeria can stress that authentic individuals are not isolated atoms but beings-in-the-world, whose choices inevitably affect others. Sartre himself acknowledged this: every choice is simultaneously a projection of values onto humanity. Thus, existentialist education can complement African communalism by grounding community in authentic individuals who freely and responsibly choose solidarity, rather than in conformity enforced by tradition.

Existentialism and the Transformation of Nigerian Education

The challenge before Nigerian education is not merely infrastructural or administrative; it is deeply philosophical. Reform efforts often falter because they focus on surface-level issues funding, curriculum adjustments, examination reforms without addressing the underlying assumptions about what education is for. Existentialism provides a critical alternative framework. By insisting on freedom, authenticity, and responsibility, existentialism reorients education away from conformity and mere credentialism toward personal transformation and societal renewal. In this section, I argue that existentialism, far from being a foreign philosophy, offers insights that can resonate with Nigeria's present needs. The discussion will proceed by outlining key areas where existentialism can guide transformative reforms: pedagogy, curriculum, teacher-student relationships, ethical formation, and the reconciliation of individuality with community.

The first site of transformation lies in pedagogy. Nigerian classrooms are often dominated by the teacher-centered model, where teachers are the authorities and students the passive recipients. Paulo Freire's critique of the “banking” model captures this reality vividly: students are treated like accounts into which teachers deposit information (Freire, 1970). Such pedagogy stifles creativity, undermines responsibility, and cultivates dependency. Existentialist pedagogy offers an alternative. Sartre's insistence that humans are “condemned to be free” means that students cannot be reduced to objects of instruction; they must be engaged as subjects. Dialogue, rather than monologue, becomes the central method of teaching. Greene (1973) highlights the transformative role of teachers who position themselves as co-inquirers rather than dictators of truth. Teachers, in this sense, are not simply authorities but companions who provoke students to think, to question, and to own their learning.

Applied in Nigeria, this would mean fostering classroom practices where students debate issues, challenge assumptions, and connect knowledge to their lived realities. Literature classes, for instance, could move beyond plot summaries to discussions of existential themes in Achebe or Soyinka, encouraging students to grapple with questions of fate, choice, and authenticity. Science education could be reframed to emphasize inquiry and problem-solving

rather than memorization of formulas. Such shifts would not only make learning more meaningful but also cultivate the very independence and courage needed to confront Nigeria's social and political challenges.

The second site of transformation is the curriculum. Much of Nigeria's curriculum remains overly utilitarian, geared toward producing employable graduates rather than reflective citizens. While employability is important, existentialism reminds us that education must also address the deeper question of what it means to be human. Kneller (1958) insists that existentialist education is less about the "what" of knowledge than the "who" of the learner. In practice, this calls for a curriculum that integrates humanistic disciplines literature, philosophy, history, and the arts with vocational and scientific training. Nigerian students need not only technical competence but also opportunities to engage questions of meaning, values, and purpose. For example, philosophy could be introduced earlier in the curriculum, not merely as an academic discipline but as a practice of questioning life. Students could be encouraged to reflect on existential themes in African oral traditions, myths, and proverbs, thereby grounding existentialist insights in indigenous wisdom. Courses could also integrate case studies of moral dilemmas in contemporary Nigeria corruption, religious extremism, unemployment challenging students to confront ambiguity and make responsible choices. Such curricular reforms would balance technical skills with existential reflection, producing graduates who are not only employable but also authentic and responsible citizens.

Existentialist thought also calls for a radical redefinition of the teacher student relationship. In many Nigerian classrooms, the relationship is hierarchical: the teacher commands, the student obeys. This reproduces conformity and discourages initiative. By contrast, existentialist pedagogy envisions a more egalitarian relationship grounded in mutual respect. For Sartre, to treat another as an object is to engage in "bad faith." Authentic relationships require recognizing the other as a free subject. Applied to education, this means teachers must resist the temptation to treat students as empty vessels or mere exam candidates. Instead, they should see students as unique beings with possibilities to be nurtured. Greene (1973) goes further, arguing that the teacher must be a "stranger" someone who interrupts the familiar and opens new horizons for the student.

In Nigeria, this would entail creating classrooms where teachers encourage questions rather than suppress them, where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth rather than failures to be punished. Teachers themselves would need to be re-trained to see their role not as authoritarian figures but as facilitators of authentic dialogue. Teacher education programs, therefore, must be redesigned to incorporate existentialist insights, emphasizing empathy, dialogue, and ethical responsibility.

One of the gravest problems in Nigerian education today is ethical decay. Examination malpractice, plagiarism, and corruption erode the credibility of the system. Existentialism's insistence on responsibility offers a philosophical framework for addressing this challenge. For Sartre (1946), freedom is inseparable from responsibility: when we choose, we choose not only for ourselves but for humanity. In educational contexts, this means students must be made to see that cheating is not merely a violation of rules but a denial of their own authenticity. To cheat is to live in "bad faith," pretending one is capable without actually being so. Education that

stresses existential responsibility would therefore frame academic integrity not simply as compliance but as an expression of one's humanity.

Practical reforms could include integrating ethics across the curriculum rather than relegating it to occasional civic education courses. For instance, students in science could be exposed to the ethical dimensions of research, while business students could engage with case studies of corruption in Nigeria. By embedding ethical reflection into all disciplines, Nigerian education could cultivate graduates who see responsibility as inseparable from freedom.

Existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger highlight the centrality of anxiety in human existence. Kierkegaard describes anxiety as the "dizziness of freedom," while Heidegger sees it as revealing the nothingness of existence. Anxiety, for existentialists, is not a pathology to be eliminated but a reality to be confronted and transformed. This insight is highly relevant for Nigerian students, who often face profound uncertainty regarding their academic future amid strikes, about employment prospects in a struggling economy, and about security in unstable regions. Traditional education tends to ignore or suppress such anxieties, focusing instead on standardized achievement. Existentialist education would acknowledge anxiety as part of learning. Teachers could help students confront uncertainty by engaging in reflective discussions, encouraging resilience, and affirming the courage to act despite ambiguity.

In practical terms, this could involve integrating reflective practices such as journaling, group discussions on life's challenges, or mentorship programs where students openly discuss the anxieties of career, identity, and nationhood. Such practices would not remove uncertainty but would equip students with the courage to live meaningfully in its midst.

Perhaps the most delicate issue in applying existentialism to Nigeria is reconciling its emphasis on individuality with African communal values. Critics might argue that existentialism, with its insistence on personal freedom, undermines the communal ethos central to African life (Mbiti, 1969). However, such a view may rest on a misunderstanding of both traditions. Existentialism does not advocate solipsism; Sartre himself acknowledges that one's freedom is always exercised in relation to others. Likewise, African communalism does not erase individuality but situates it within community. As Kwame Gyekye (1997) argues, African philosophy embodies a "moderate communitarianism," which balances individual autonomy with communal belonging. An existentialist framework for Nigerian education can thus complement, rather than contradict, African communal values. Students can be taught to see that authentic freedom entails responsibility for others. Group projects, community service, and cooperative learning can provide practical ways of integrating individuality with communal responsibility. In this sense, existentialist education in Nigeria would not undermine community but strengthen it by rooting communal life in authentic individuals who freely choose solidarity.

Prospects for Policy and Practice

The transformation of Nigerian education through existentialism cannot occur at the classroom level alone; it requires systemic change. Policymakers must recognize that philosophical frameworks shape educational practice. A national policy that explicitly integrates existentialist principles freedom, responsibility, authenticity could guide reforms in curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education.

The *National Policy on Education* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014) already acknowledges the need to produce citizens who are creative, resourceful, and morally upright. Existentialism provides the philosophical grounding to realize this vision. Teacher training institutions should be restructured to include courses in philosophy of education, with emphasis on existentialist thought. Curricula should integrate reflective and dialogical methods across disciplines. Assessment systems should be diversified to include not only examinations but also projects, portfolios, and reflective essays that encourage originality and responsibility. If implemented thoughtfully, such reforms could gradually shift Nigerian education from conformity to authenticity, from credentialism to character, and from rote learning to responsible freedom.

Critical Reflections and Possible Objections

No philosophical proposal is without tension, and existentialism as a framework for education in Nigeria is no exception. While the preceding sections have highlighted the promise of existentialist pedagogy its capacity to foreground individuality, authentic choice, and self-responsibility it is essential to recognize possible objections and critically evaluate whether these ideas can be sustained in the Nigerian educational and socio-cultural context. Engaging such criticisms does not weaken the argument but rather strengthens it by acknowledging limitations and clarifying how existentialist insights might be fruitfully adapted.

One major criticism centers on the perceived individualism of existentialism. Philosophers such as Sartre (1943) emphasize radical freedom and personal responsibility, a perspective that may appear to conflict with the communal orientation of African societies. Nigerian traditional values, often expressed through the philosophy of *ubuntu* or Yoruba notions of *omoluabi*, stress the importance of community, respect for elders, and social harmony. Critics may argue that existentialist education risks undermining these communal values by elevating individual autonomy above collective responsibility. As Gyekye (1997) has observed, African communitarianism places identity within the context of social relations, making it difficult to fully endorse an educational philosophy that emphasizes the solitary burden of choice. Yet, the apparent opposition between existentialist individualism and African communalism is not insurmountable. Nyerere (1968), in his reflections on education in Africa, emphasized that genuine freedom cannot exist without responsibility toward the community. Similarly, existentialist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir (1997) argue that authentic existence involves recognizing the freedom of others and working toward a shared world. In this light, existentialist education in Nigeria could be reframed not as a rejection of communal values, but as a call to cultivate individuals who take ownership of their role in sustaining and renewing the community. The existentialist stress on authenticity might actually strengthen Nigerian communal values by ensuring that participation in tradition and social structures is a matter of personal commitment rather than blind conformity.

A second objection relates to practical policy constraints. Nigerian schools often operate under rigid government curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and examination-oriented assessment systems. Critics might argue that existentialist ideals of open-ended dialogue, freedom of inquiry, and personalized learning are impractical in a context where teachers are

overburdened and resources are scarce. It may be contended that existentialist education is a luxury for well-resourced Western systems, not for an underfunded Nigerian one. However, this objection underestimates the adaptability of existentialist pedagogy. As Greene (1988) suggests, existentialist approaches do not demand vast resources but rather a reorientation of the teacher's role, one that moves him from authoritarian transmitter of knowledge to facilitator of meaning-making. Even within large classrooms, teachers can introduce practices that invite self-expression, critical questioning, and reflective choice. Moreover, Nigeria's ongoing curriculum reforms (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013) already emphasize creativity, problem-solving, and learner-centered pedagogy, which aligns with existentialist principles. Thus, existentialist education may be less a radical disruption than a deepening of reforms already underway.

A third critical concern arises from religious and cultural sensibilities. Nigeria is deeply religious, with Christianity and Islam shaping much of its moral and educational landscape. Some critics may argue that existentialist themes of radical freedom, the absence of predetermined essence, and confrontation with absurdity may be perceived as threatening to religious convictions about divine purpose and moral order. For instance, Sartre's atheistic existentialism, captured in his dictum that "existence precedes essence," might jar with the theological claim that God endows human beings with essence and purpose. Nevertheless, existentialism is not reducible to atheism. Thinkers like Kierkegaard (1989) offer a theistic existentialism that emphasizes faith as a passionate choice, while Marcel (1963) highlights the role of hope, fidelity, and transcendence. An existentialist framework for Nigerian education can therefore be appropriated in a way that resonates with religious perspectives by focusing on the shared existentialist commitment to authenticity, responsibility, and the seriousness of human freedom. Indeed, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the "leap of faith" might even speak powerfully to Nigerian students navigating the tension between tradition and modernity.

Another objection concerns the psychological burden of freedom. Critics might argue that introducing existentialist notions of radical responsibility could overwhelm students already facing socio-economic hardships. If every learner is told that they alone must shape their future, without sufficient structural support, the result may be anxiety rather than empowerment. This worry echoes Camus' (1942) recognition of the absurd: the confrontation between human longing for meaning and the apparent indifference of the world.

Yet existentialist education does not leave learners isolated. As van Deurzen (2010) reminds us, existentialism acknowledges anxiety as an inevitable aspect of human life, but also as a catalyst for growth. By helping students face uncertainty with courage, existentialist pedagogy prepares them for the realities of Nigerian society, where economic instability, corruption, and political upheaval are common. Rather than shielding students from these difficulties, existentialist education equips them with the resilience to confront them authentically. The challenge, then, is not to minimize anxiety but to guide learners in transforming it into a resource for responsible living.

Finally, there is the question of cultural authenticity. Some may ask whether applying existentialism, a European philosophical tradition, risks perpetuating intellectual dependence rather than fostering an indigenous Nigerian philosophy of education. This objection resonates with critiques from African philosophers such as Hountondji (1983), who warns against

uncritical adoption of foreign frameworks. This concern is crucial, but existentialism need not be imported wholesale. As Wiredu (1996) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) argue, African philosophy can fruitfully engage with global ideas through critical appropriation. Existentialist principles can be harmonized with indigenous values such as *omoluabi* (Yoruba virtue ethics), which also emphasizes integrity, responsibility, and authentic moral character. By interpreting existentialism in dialogue with African thought, Nigerian education can achieve a genuine synthesis rather than mere imitation.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has sought to demonstrate that existentialism, though often perceived as a Western philosophical tradition, provides a fertile framework for reimagining education in Nigeria. At its heart, existentialism emphasizes freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the pursuit of meaning in an uncertain world. These principles speak directly to the challenges of Nigerian education, where rigid curricula, exam-driven assessment, underfunded schools, and socio-political instability frequently reduce learners to passive recipients of information rather than active creators of knowledge. By foregrounding the lived experience of students and calling for education that nurtures personal responsibility and authentic choice, existentialism offers a path toward renewal.

One of the central insights developed in this paper is that existentialist education does not imply an uncritical embrace of individualism. While thinkers such as Sartre (1943) stress the radical responsibility of the individual, other existentialists, including Beauvoir (1997) and Marcel (1963), highlight the relational dimension of freedom and the necessity of recognizing others as co-authors of meaning. When interpreted in dialogue with African communitarian values such as *omoluabi* and the broader ethos of solidarity that characterizes Nigerian society, existentialism need not undermine communal life but can instead enrich it. Authentic individuals are not isolated beings but committed participants in sustaining the social fabric. At the same time, existentialism equips learners with the resilience to navigate the crises of contemporary Nigeria. The recognition, emphasized by Camus (1942), that life entails absurdity and uncertainty resonates with the lived realities of Nigerian youth who face unemployment, corruption, and instability. Rather than offering false assurances, existentialist pedagogy prepares students to confront these conditions with courage, creativity, and a sense of ownership over their futures. This resilience, cultivated in the classroom, has the potential to radiate outward into society, fostering citizens who are capable of questioning, resisting conformity, and engaging in constructive transformation.

Of course, adopting existentialism as a framework for Nigerian education is not without its challenges. Concerns about resource scarcity, cultural authenticity, and religious sensibilities are legitimate and must be addressed. Yet, as argued, existentialism is adaptable: its emphasis on freedom and responsibility can harmonize with theistic worldviews; its pedagogical practices can be integrated even in under-resourced classrooms through dialogical methods; and its global insights can be critically appropriated alongside African philosophical traditions to avoid intellectual dependency. The critical reflection section has shown that objections, far from being insurmountable, open avenues for contextual reinterpretation that can make existentialist education genuinely Nigerian. In practical terms, existentialism invites Nigerian

policymakers, teachers, and curriculum developers to shift emphasis from rote learning to inquiry-based, student-centered education. It calls for classrooms where learners are treated not as vessels to be filled but as individuals engaged in the project of becoming. It also urges teacher education programs to cultivate facilitators who can guide learners through existential questions rather than impose prefabricated answers. At the level of policy, existentialism reinforces current educational reforms that emphasize creativity, problem-solving, and learner agency, but it grounds them in a deeper philosophical vision.

Future research could further explore how existentialist pedagogy might intersect with indigenous African philosophies of education, thereby producing a genuinely hybrid model. Empirical studies could also examine how existentialist-inspired practices influence student engagement, resilience, and critical thinking in Nigerian classrooms. In this way, existentialism would not remain a purely theoretical proposition but would translate into measurable educational outcomes.

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