

UDC 1:37.014

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31874/2309-1606-2025-31-2-9>

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Reconstructing Nigeria's educational ideals: a philosophical blueprint for sustainable policy reform



Relevance. Nigeria's education system, once envisioned as a transformative tool for national development, has suffered persistent policy inconsistencies, underfunding, and ideological disorientation. Despite successive reforms – ranging from the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme of 1999 to the current National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013), the nation continues to witness low literacy rates, infrastructural decay, and declining moral standards. **The purpose** of this paper is to interrogate the philosophical roots of Nigeria's educational crises and proposes a reconstructive framework anchored on indigenous humanism, ethical reorientation, and epistemic relevance. **Methods.** Employing the method of critical and conceptual analysis, the study explores how the disjunct between Nigeria's educational ideals and its socio-cultural realities fosters a cyclical paradox. **Novelty.** Findings reveal that Nigeria's educational vision remains largely derivative, imported, and detached from local epistemologies. The study reconstructs the normative foundations of education by integrating African communitarian ethics with Deweyan pragmatism, thereby outlining a blueprint for sustainable reform. **Conclusion.** The paper advocates a reconstruction that emphasises education for moral character, civic responsibility, and productive self-reliance rather than mere credentialism. The study concludes that without a philosophically grounded educational ideal – rooted in African humanism and practical rationality – Nigeria's reforms will remain cyclical and ineffective. It recommends a triadic reform approach: reorientation of educational purpose, realignment of policy with indigenous values, and restoration of philosophy as the moral compass of educational design.

Keywords: African humanism, education, educational policies, reform, Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as the cornerstone of national development, yet in Nigeria, it has increasingly become a site of paradox and policy disarray. Post-colonial governments have successively launched

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several educational reforms such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999, while also engaging in multiple revisions of the National Policy on Education (NPE) – all aimed at revitalising the system. However, the outcomes of these various endeavors have been largely underwhelming. According to a 2024 report of the National Bureau of Statistics, only 56.7% of children aged 6–14 are in school, while the World Bank estimates that 70% of school-aged children in rural Nigeria cannot read or comprehend a simple sentence [World Bank 2023]. According to UNESCO, over 20 million Nigerian children remain out of school, the highest number globally [UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2023], while tertiary institutions grapple with incessant strikes and outdated curricula [National Bureau of Statistics 2024]. This failure raises a plethora of philosophical questions; fundamental of which is: What should education mean for a nation struggling between inherited colonial paradigms and indigenous aspirations?

The philosophical significance of this question lies in the recognition that education is not merely a technical enterprise of knowledge transmission, but a moral and ideological project aimed at shaping human character and national identity. Nigeria's educational system, however, reflects a crisis of purpose where policy rhetoric emphasizes development, but curricular and pedagogical content remain detached from ethical formation, civic engagement, and creative productivity [Adebayo 2022; Oladipo 2020]. The result is a generation of graduates who are intellectually equipped but ethically disoriented, economically dependent, and socially alienated.

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the philosophical roots of Nigeria's educational crises and proposes a reconstructive framework anchored on indigenous humanism, ethical reorientation, and epistemic relevance.

Methods

The paper seeks to philosophically reconstruct Nigeria's educational ideals by developing a normative framework grounded in African humanism, communal rationality, and pragmatic ethics. Through critical conceptual analysis, the study seeks to provide a blueprint that transcends bureaucratic policy cycles by reimagining education as a moral and transformative enterprise. This philosophical blueprint contributes to knowledge by re-theorizing education as a moral and communal enterprise, positioning policy reform as an ethical imperative rather than a bureaucratic exercise.

The article proceeds with a literature review that critically examines the philosophical and policy debates surrounding Nigeria's educational crisis, followed by a reconstructive argument for a new educational ideal.

Literature Review

Philosophical treatments of education consistently locate it within a normative framework: education is not merely the transmission of facts but the cultivation of persons capable of moral judgment, civic participation, and creative problem-solving [Peters 1966]. These reflections situate education as a telic activity oriented toward human flourishing [Nussbaum 2011]. Education is derived from the Latin words *educare* (to bring up, to train) and *educere* (to lead out). It denotes the systematic process of developing an individual's intellectual, moral, and physical capacities for effective participation in society. According to John Dewey 1916, education is "the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct subsequent experience" [Dewey 1916]. Thus, education is both a process and an outcome – a lifelong endeavor aimed at nurturing individuals to attain self-realisation and social responsibility.

In the African philosophical tradition, thinkers such as Nyerere and Wiredu stress the communal dimension of formation: education should strengthen social bonds, produce socially responsible citizens, and embed knowledge within local cultural horizons [Nyerere 1967; Wiredu 1996]. These philosophical positions provide a normative benchmark against which policy success can be judged: programs that fail to cultivate moral, civic and communal capacities are deficient not only practically but conceptually.

However, the educational structure and system in Nigeria seems an opposite of the above. Nigeria's policy architecture articulates lofty aims such as self-reliance, national unity, and development but results repeatedly highlights a gap between aspirational rhetoric and lived outcomes [Federal Ministry of Education 2020; Obanya 2019]. Empirical reviews and sector analyses indicate that despite numerous policies and program launches, many initiatives have been implemented in a piecemeal, politically driven manner, yielding limited systemic transformation [World Bank 2022]. This recurring pattern can thus be aptly described as a cacophony of well-formed policy texts that lack conceptual embedding in social realities and long-term commitment.

Recent data paints a grim picture of systemic distress in Nigerian education. UNESCO's monitoring estimates that Nigeria accounts for roughly 20 million out-of-school children, a figure that places it among the global leaders in educational exclusion [UNESCO 2022]. National statistical publications corroborate large deficits across social indicators: Nigeria's Social Statistics Report documents persistent regional disparities in school attendance, literacy, and access to basic services (e.g., water, sanitation, qualified teachers), which compound implementation challenges [National Bureau of Statistics 2023]. Other researched and reports indicate gaps in funding, with public education spending frequently falling short of internationally recommended

benchmarks, and weaknesses in monitoring and accountability that permit resource leakage and poor follow-through [World Bank 2022]. These layered challenges – access, quality, governance – constitute the empirical substratum that any philosophical reconstruction must address.

Beyond chronic governance and funding deficits, acute factors such as insecurity have become decisive drivers of educational collapse in several regions. UNICEF and other humanitarian assessments document thousands of school closures and disruptions (due to insurgency, banditry, and climate-related disasters), which have removed large cohorts of children from learning environments and deepened inequities (UNICEF consolidated emergency documentation [UNICEF 2023]).

In addition, scholarly and policy literature attributes a substantial portion of implementation failure to governance deficits. Studies and sector reports emphasize weak fiduciary systems, politicized appointments, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation – factors that erode the integrity and impact of education spending [Universal Basic Education Commission 2022; Federal Ministry of Education 2020]. The resulting misalignment of resources and objectives means that even well-designed programs suffer from inconsistent rollout and lack of sustainability. Several commentators connect these governance failures to deeper moral and institutional pathologies that require normative remediation rather than purely technical fixes.

A recurring theme in several literatures that have dealt with various challenges associated with the educational structure in Nigeria is the epistemological mismatch between curriculum design and societal needs. Nigerian curricula are often criticized for privileging rote knowledge and credentialism over problem-solving, vocational relevance and civic education [Okebukola 2021; Obanya, 2019]. This misplacement reflects a broader intellectual dependence on imported models and a devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems. The consequence is a schooling culture that produces graduates who are poorly equipped for local economic contexts and civic life – a practical failure that also signifies a failure of educational imagination.

Succinctly, various literatures on the Nigeria's educational challenges converge on several diagnoses such as persistent gap between policy rhetoric and practical outcomes, governance and funding weaknesses that blunt policy effects, epistemological dependency on imported models that ignores local knowledge and values, disruptions (security, climate) that exacerbate inequities. Nonetheless, this article seeks to provide a philosophical blueprint that integrates ethical reorientation, epistemic localization, and durable governance reforms into a single, coherent program of sustainable policy reforms in Nigeria's educational sector.

Presentation of the main research results

The Paradox of Educational Policy and Practice in Nigeria

The Nigerian educational system represents one of the most paradoxical institutions in postcolonial Africa. Despite the country's numerous policy reforms – ranging from the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999, to the more recent National Policy on Education (NPE) revisions in 2013 and 2020 – the educational sector continues to struggle with systemic inefficiency, poor quality outcomes, and moral decadence [Federal Ministry of Education 2020; Okebukola, 2021].

Statistics from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reveal that Nigeria has over 10.2 million out-of-school children, the highest in the world [UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2023]. Furthermore, the World Bank reports that more than 70% of Nigerian primary school pupils cannot read or write proficiently at grade level [World Bank 2022]. These figures highlight the yawning gap between policy formulation and policy actualization – a gap that demands philosophical interrogation.

The central paradox, therefore, lies not in the absence of policies but in their philosophical vacuity. Policies are often drafted within a technocratic and economic framework that privileges skills acquisition and employability over moral formation, cultural continuity, and civic responsibility [Akinpelu 2021]. This utilitarian bias has transformed education from a process of human development to a means of economic survival.

It is imperative to state at this point that fundamental to Nigeria's educational dilemma is a philosophical crisis of purpose and vision. The question – What is education for? – remains ambiguously answered in policy texts. Dewey defined education as the reconstruction of experience to promote continuous growth [Dewey 1916]. In contrast, Nigerian policy documents tend to define education as an instrument for achieving national development, without specifying the existential dimensions of development. This instrumental conception of education ignores the ontological and ethical bases of learning within African thought systems. In traditional Yoruba epistemology, for instance, the goal of education is the cultivation of *ìwà* (character) and *omolúàbí* (moral personhood), which links knowledge acquisition to social responsibility and moral integrity [Adebayo 2022]. By neglecting these philosophical ideals, Nigeria's education system produces graduates who are intellectually trained but ethically impoverished – what Okafor describes as “educated illiterates” [Okafor 2020].

Thus, the failure of educational programs in Nigeria is not principally administrative but philosophical; a failure to root education within a coherent moral and cultural vision.

The Need for Philosophical Reconstruction

The failure of successive educational reforms in Nigeria stems from an epistemological and moral vacuum rather than a lack of administrative will. Policies have been conceived as technocratic instruments, detached from philosophical reflection on what constitutes a good education and an educated person. As Dewey contended, “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself” [Dewey 1916] Without an underlying philosophy, policy becomes a set of bureaucratic rituals lacking moral coherence.

Nigeria’s educational system thus requires reconstruction – not merely reform. Reconstruction implies a philosophical reorientation: a return to first principles that define the purpose, content, and methods of education. It asks not only how education should be administered, but why and to what end. This distinction is critical, for while reform tinkers with the structures, reconstruction interrogates the foundations [Dryden, & Nnorom 2021]. The failure of reforms such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs lies in their neglect of this philosophical groundwork.

At its core, education is a moral enterprise. It aims at forming individuals capable of ethical reasoning, empathy, and civic participation. Nigerian education, however, has become increasingly instrumentalist – valuing credentials over character and utility over virtue. This disjunction has produced what Adebayo and Oladipo describe as “the educated illiterate”: individuals who possess degrees but lack civic and moral consciousness [Oladipo 2022].

Drawing on African humanist philosophy, the reconstruction of educational ideals must recover the communal conception of the self. In African thought, personhood is achieved through moral action and social participation [Mbiti 1970]. Education, therefore, should nurture not only cognitive ability but also ethical sensibility and social responsibility. Nyerere envisioned education as *ujamaa* – a process of building community and mutual care [Nyerere 1967]. Nigeria’s policy blueprints have echoed similar values in principle but rarely operationalized them in practice. To address this, moral education should be integrated as a cross-disciplinary pillar across curricula – linking civic studies, philosophy, and social sciences. This moral reconstruction provides the ethical compass for all other reforms.

At this point, it is imperative to argue that the crisis of Nigerian education is also epistemological. As Wiredu argues, African education remains largely a transplantation of Western epistemologies that privilege abstract cognition over practical rationality [Wiredu 1996]. The result is a knowledge system alienated from the lived realities of Nigerian learners.

A philosophical blueprint must, therefore, entail epistemic decolonization – the critical recovery of indigenous modes of knowing and their integration

into the formal curriculum. This is not an argument against global knowledge exchange, but for epistemic balance. Subjects such as environmental science, ethics, and social studies should incorporate indigenous knowledge of land, communal relations, and local governance systems. Moreover, language policy should recognize indigenous languages as legitimate vehicles of instruction, at least in early education, in line with UNESCO's recommendation that children learn best in their mother tongue [UNESCO 2022]. The continued dominance of English as the sole language of education reinforces cognitive dependency and alienation [Afolayan 2018].

Policy Reorientation and a Quest for Pragmatic Reconstruction

In the spirit of Deweyan pragmatism, education must be tied to the social reconstruction of Nigeria's democratic and economic life. Knowledge should be functional, fostering problem-solving, creativity, and entrepreneurship. A reconstructed educational blueprint must therefore promote curricular relevance – linking theory with local realities and job markets, pedagogical innovation – emphasizing inquiry, experimentation, and creativity over rote learning, community participation – involving parents, traditional institutions, and civil society in school governance, teacher professionalization – developing ethical and pedagogical competence through continuous training.

More so, a philosophical reconstruction also demands a transformation of policy ethos. Educational policy in Nigeria must transcend political cycles and become an enduring national covenant. Policies should emerge from public deliberation and philosophical consensus, not from political expediency. Jurgen Habermas's communicative rationality provides a theoretical model here: legitimate educational reform arises from inclusive discourse where citizens, educators, and policymakers engage in reasoned dialogue [Habermas 1984]. Institutionalizing philosophy of education as a required component in teacher education and policy formulation programs will ensure that future decisions are ethically informed. In practical terms, this means embedding philosophical reasoning within the Federal and States' Ministry of Education's strategic planning processes.

At a deeper level, the reconstruction of Nigeria's educational ideals is an existential task: it involves redefining what it means to be educated and what it means to be human within a complex, pluralistic nation. Education must affirm human dignity, cultural diversity, and social justice. Thus, a sustainable educational blueprint must cultivate what Nussbaum calls "capabilities for humanity": the capacity for critical reflection, empathy, and global citizenship [Nussbaum 2011]. Only through such moral and philosophical cultivation can education become a genuine instrument of national renewal.

The Philosophical Blueprint: Towards a Reconstructed Educational Ideal in Nigeria (A Humanistic and Communitarian Model)

A philosophically grounded reconstruction of Nigeria's educational ideals must integrate both humanistic and communitarian dimensions. Drawing from African humanism, education should aim at cultivating the full moral and rational capacities of the learner – encouraging critical thought, creativity, and empathy [Wiredu 1996]. In the communitarian sense, education should serve the moral order of the community by reinforcing virtues of solidarity, justice, and respect for life.

This synthesis aligns with Nyerere's vision of Education for Self-Reliance, which sought to harmonize intellectual growth with social responsibility [Nyerere 1968]. Similarly, Fafunwa emphasized the integration of cultural values, ethical training, and functional knowledge as the triad of meaningful education in Africa [Fafunwa 1974]. Hence, a philosophical blueprint for educational reform in Nigeria must rest upon four interrelated pillars:

Ethical Reorientation – embedding moral education and civic ethics in curricula at all levels;

Cultural Reconnection – integrating indigenous knowledge, language, and philosophy into learning systems;

Critical Pedagogy – promoting reflective and participatory learning rather than rote memorization and

Policy Consistency – ensuring continuity and philosophical coherence across administrations.

These pillars not only address the intellectual dimensions of learning but also the moral and social imperatives of nation-building. Education, when philosophically grounded, becomes the bedrock of sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) advocates inclusive and equitable quality education; however, achieving this goal in Nigeria demands more than infrastructural investment – it requires value reconstruction.

The current reform discourse must therefore shift from education as manpower production to education as moral and civic cultivation. As Achebe argued in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, no system of education can rise above the moral vision of its society [Achebe 1983]. By cultivating ethically conscious citizens, Nigeria's educational system can serve as the foundation for good governance, social justice, and innovation.

Novelty. Recommendations

The philosophical analysis of Nigeria's educational system reveals that the crisis of quality and sustainability is not merely administrative or infrastructural but deeply ideological. Therefore, any genuine reform

must begin with a reconstruction of the philosophical ideals underpinning educational policy. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutionalise a Philosophy of Education Commission

The Federal Ministry of Education should establish a National Council on the Philosophy of Education, comprising philosophers, curriculum experts, and cultural theorists, to periodically review policy content in light of Nigeria's moral and cultural heritage to ensure philosophical coherence and policy continuity.

2. Embed Indigenous Philosophy and Ethics in Curricula

A sustainable education system must reflect the values of African humanism, particularly the Yoruba concepts of *ìwà* (character) and *omolúàbí* (moral personhood). Integrating ethics, indigenous languages, and community service learning will help restore moral education as the foundation of national consciousness [Adebayo 2022]

3. Reform Teacher Education

Teacher training institutions should emphasise critical and reflective pedagogy grounded in philosophical reasoning. Teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge but moral agents and intellectual cultivators. A Deweyan approach – linking learning with lived experience – can promote creativity and civic responsibility [Ekanem 2020].

4. Philosophical Evaluation of Policy Outcomes:

Beyond technical evaluation, educational reforms should be subjected to philosophical scrutiny. This involves critical reflection, and the raising of questions such as: Does this policy advance moral development? Does it promote equity and communal wellbeing? These philosophical scrutiny will help to consistently reshape educational sector while also ensuring value-orientation.

5. Promote Policy Continuity through Ethical Governance:

The establishment of a non-partisan National Education Framework (informed by philosophical principles) to ensure ethical stewardship of the educational sector.

6. Align Educational Philosophy with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Nigeria's educational ideals should align with the UN Sustainable Development Goal on quality education). Philosophically grounded education is essential for developing the moral and civic competencies required for long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Education in Nigeria stands at a philosophical crossroads. Decades of reform have yielded limited success because they have been driven by technocratic expediency rather than moral and intellectual vision. The

reconstruction of Nigeria's educational ideals, therefore, demands a return to philosophical first principles – a redefinition of education as the holistic cultivation of mind, character, and community. Drawing from the preceding analysis, the philosophical reconstruction of Nigeria's education must rest upon an integrated blueprint that bridges moral ideals, cultural values, and pragmatic governance: Such a framework ensures that education transcends utilitarian goals and becomes a moral enterprise, cultivating citizens who are thoughtful, innovative, and ethically grounded.

A philosophically informed education system will not only restore ethical direction but also serve as the bedrock for sustainable development. By integrating indigenous wisdom, moral education, and rational reflection, Nigeria can reconstruct its educational future on a foundation of integrity and inclusiveness.

Ultimately, the transformation of education is the transformation of the nation itself. As Plato observed in *The Republic*, "The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life". Nigeria's future, therefore, depends on whether it can reimagine education not merely as a means to an end but as the moral and intellectual soul of its civilization.

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Олуваборі Айобамі Оелана. Реконструкція освітніх ідеалів Нігерії: філософський план сталої реформи політики

Актуальність. Система освіти Нігерії, колись задумана як трансформаційний інструмент національного розвитку, страждає від постійних політичних непослідовностей, недофінансування та ідеологічної дезорієнтації. Незважаючи на послідовні реформи – від схеми загальної базової освіти (UBE) 1999 року до чинної Національної політики в галузі освіти (NPE, 2013), країна продовжує спостерігати низький рівень грамотності, занепад інфраструктури та зниження моральних стандартів. **Метою** цієї статті є дослідження філософських коренів освітньої кризи в Нігерії та пропонування реконструктивної структури, що ґрунтується на корінному гуманізмі, етичній переорієнтації та епістемічній релевантності. **Методи.** Використовуючи метод критичного та концептуального аналізу, дослідження досліджує, як розрив між освітніми ідеалами Нігерії та її соціально-культурними реаліями сприяє циклічному парадоксу. **Новизна.** Результати дослідження показують, що освітнє бачення Нігерії залишається значною мірою похідним, імпортним та відірваним від місцевих епістемологій. У дослідженні реконструюється нормативна основа освіти шляхом інтеграції африканської комунітарної етики з прагматизмом Дьюї, тим самим окреслюючи план сталої реформи. **Висновки.** У статті пропонується реконструкція, яка наголошує на освіті для розвитку моральних якостей, громадянської відповідальності

та продуктивної самостійності, а не просто на кваліфікації. У дослідженні робиться висновок, що без філософськи обґрунтованого освітнього ідеалу, що корениться в африканському гуманізмі та практичній раціональності, реформи Нігерії залишатимуться циклічними та неефективними. У ньому рекомендується триадний підхід до реформи: переорієнтація освітньої мети, переорієнтація політики з цінностями корінних народів та відновлення філософії як морального компаса освітнього дизайну.

Ключові слова: африканський гуманізм, освіта, освітня політика, реформа, Нігерія.

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Перше подання / Received: 04.11.2025

Прийнято до друку / Accepted: 29.12.2025

Опубліковано / Published: 31.12.2025