

# PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS GUIDING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION TOWARD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S 21ST CENTURY

Adenigbagbae Henry Adeloye. PhD<sup>1</sup>, Quaye Regina Modupe PhD<sup>2</sup>, Ibraheem Adewale  
Moshood<sup>3</sup> & Sunday Olusugo Elijah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Foundations and Counselling, University of Ilesa, Ilesa. Osun State.  
[henryade2013@gmail.com](mailto:henryade2013@gmail.com)/[henry\\_adenigbagbe@unilesa.edu.ng](mailto:henry_adenigbagbe@unilesa.edu.ng),

<sup>2</sup>Department of Educational Foundations and Counselling, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife  
[dupsie3000@gmail.com](mailto:dupsie3000@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Educational Management, University of Ilesa, Ilesa  
[waleontop@gmail.com](mailto:waleontop@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup>Department of Educational Management, University of Ilesa, Ilesa.  
[olusugo\\_Sunday@unilesa.edu.ng](mailto:olusugo_Sunday@unilesa.edu.ng)

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of 21st-century Nigeria, the role of multicultural education in advancing sustainable development is more vital than ever. This article explored the philosophical underpinnings that guide multicultural education and its potential to contribute to sustainable development. It examined how concepts of equality, justice, pluralism, and social cohesion—derived from philosophical traditions—are essential in shaping an education system that can accommodate the nation's diverse cultures while promoting inclusive growth and development. A qualitative research method was employed using document analysis and philosophical inquiry to interrogate existing literature, educational policies, and multicultural practices within Nigeria. The findings revealed that embracing multicultural education grounded in philosophical reflection enhances national integration, ethical citizenship, and respect for diversity. The paper concluded that without a strong philosophical base, multicultural education in Nigeria risks becoming fragmented and ineffective in addressing developmental challenges. It recommends the deliberate integration of indigenous and global philosophical values into curriculum reforms, teacher training, and educational policy to create a balanced multicultural education framework that supports peace, equity, and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Foundations, Multicultural Education, Cultural Diversity, Sustainable Development.

## Introduction

Nigeria, as one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, faces significant challenges in fostering national unity while respecting its multicultural heritage. With over 250 ethnic groups, multiple languages, and a variety of religious practices, Nigeria's diversity is both a strength and a source of tension. These tensions often manifest in political, social, and educational settings, where conflicts related to ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences can undermine national cohesion. The nation's educational system must evolve to embrace these cultural differences, not merely as an issue to be managed, but a valuable resource to be leveraged for sustainable development. Education in Nigeria must be seen as a transformative tool, capable of fostering mutual respect and understanding among its diverse groups.

Multicultural education refers to a comprehensive set of educational strategies, reform practices, and philosophical commitments aimed at ensuring equity, inclusion, and academic excellence for students from diverse cultural, racial, linguistic, and social backgrounds. It goes beyond celebrating festivals or adding mirror content; it involves transforming curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture to empower all learners and to address systemic discrimination, while fostering pluralism and democratic values (Banks 1995). According to Banks, multicultural education functions as an idea, a movement, and a process whose goal is to restructure educational institutions so that *all* students—regardless of background—acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to thrive in a multicultural and interconnected world (Banks & Banks, C. A. M. 2001).

Multicultural education offers an effective model for addressing the complexities of Nigeria's ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. According to Banks (2019), multicultural education goes beyond the mere inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives; it involves a comprehensive approach that seeks to restructure the curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional practices to be more inclusive and reflective of the country's pluralistic nature. This approach facilitates not only an appreciation for the diversity of the Nigerian populace but also promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for navigating the challenges of a multicultural society (Obiagu, Onyekachi., Amadi, & Eze. 2025). The grounding of this educational approach in philosophical principles such as justice, equality and social responsibility becomes possible to create an educational environment that nurtures values that support social justice, equity and sustainability (Nussbaum, 2001).

Philosophical foundations refer to the basic ideas, principles, and worldviews drawn from philosophy that shape and guide the aims, content, methods, and values of education. In simple terms, they answer the big questions like: *What should we teach? Why should we teach it? How should we teach?* and *What kind of person or society do we want education to produce?* (Okafor, 2012). These foundations come from different branches of philosophy: Metaphysics: exploring what is real and meaningful in human life. Epistemology: examining what knowledge is and how it should be taught. Axiology: studying values—what is good, beautiful, or morally right. Logic: guiding clear and rational thinking. Ethics: clarifying moral responsibilities of teachers and learners (Nwafor, 2017). In practice, philosophical foundations help educators set educational goals, choose curriculum content, design teaching methods, and decide what kind of citizenship or social order education should support. For example, a teacher guided by humanistic philosophy may focus on student self-expression and creativity, while another influenced by pragmatism may prioritize critical thinking and real-world problem solving (Izuagie, 2014).

In the context of multicultural education, philosophical foundations are especially important because they provide the ethical and cultural reasoning that justifies why we should value diversity, teach inclusively, and challenge prejudice and inequality. Philosophies like Ubuntu (“I am because we are”) and *Omọlúàbí* (the Yoruba ideal of good character) supply culturally rooted frameworks that help educators nurture learners who respect others, act ethically, and contribute to sustainable development (Osler & Starkey, 2010).

Sustainable development is most famously defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This definition, known as the Brundtland Report’s definition, has shaped global thinking about balancing human progress with ecological responsibility (United Nations, 1987). At its core, sustainable development rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. This means that to be truly sustainable, policies and projects must create economic opportunities, reduce inequality, and protect ecosystems all at once (UN DESA, 2015). Sustainable development is not merely about economic progress today; it is about ensuring that such progress is socially fair and ecologically balanced so future generations can thrive too (UNESCO, 2019).

Philosophical frameworks such as liberal humanism, pragmatism, and critical theory provide the intellectual foundation for such educational reforms. Liberal humanism, with its emphasis on human dignity and the equality of all people, advocates for an education system where the rights of all cultural groups are respected and supported (Kymlicka, 1995). Pragmatism, as emphasized by Dewey (1938), calls for an education system that is responsive to the needs of society and actively engages students in real-world problem-solving. Critical theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the need to address structural inequalities and social injustices through education (Giroux, 2020). These philosophical perspectives offer a powerful vision for reshaping Nigeria’s educational system in a way that values cultural diversity and promotes the sustainable development of the nation.

Thus, by integrating these philosophical principles, Nigeria can create an educational system that not only respects its multicultural heritage but also transforms it into a driving force for national unity and sustainable development. This shift is essential for fostering an inclusive society where the values of equity, social justice, and environmental sustainability are embedded in both the educational framework and the broader socio-political fabric.

This paper explores the philosophical foundations of multicultural education, its role in fostering social harmony, and its potential contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria. It examines key philosophical perspectives such as pragmatism, critical theory, and postcolonial thought, and how they inform educational practices in the Nigerian context.

## **Philosophical Foundations of Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education is rooted in the belief that education should reflect the diversity of the human experience and respect the values, traditions, and identities of all cultural groups. Several philosophical traditions underpin the concept of multicultural education, each contributing unique insights to how education can promote social justice and sustainable development.

### **1. Liberal Humanism and Social Justice**

Liberal humanism, which emphasizes individual rights, equality, and the dignity of the person, provides a strong philosophical basis for multicultural education. Philosophers such as John Rawls (1971) argue that fairness and equality should be central to any societal structure. According to Rawls, a just society is one in which individuals from diverse backgrounds can

participate equitably, with opportunities for personal development and flourishing. Recent scholarship also stresses that achieving educational equity is central to fostering a just society (Kymlicka, 1995). In the context of Nigeria, liberal humanism suggests that education should not only recognize the cultural diversity of its people but also actively promote inclusivity. Multicultural education in this framework becomes a tool for achieving social justice by ensuring that every cultural group—whether ethnic, religious, or linguistic—has equal access to resources, opportunities, and a voice in the national dialogue (Nussbaum, 2001).

## **2. Pragmatism and Practical Application in Education**

The pragmatist tradition, particularly the ideas of John Dewey (1938), offers a practical approach to multicultural education. Dewey emphasized the importance of experience in learning and advocated for education that prepares students for active participation in a democratic society. Pragmatism stresses the need for education to be adaptable to the needs of society and responsive to the challenges that arise within it. This approach is increasingly relevant in contemporary Nigeria, where educational strategies must adapt to the diverse needs of its population (Biesta, 2020). In Nigeria, a pragmatist approach to multicultural education would involve creating curricula and teaching practices that reflect the diverse needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. Such education should not be confined to the classroom but should actively engage students in real-world issues related to multiculturalism and sustainable development (Biesta, 2020). By emphasizing experiential learning, this approach encourages students to critically assess and engage with societal challenges in ways that promote both personal growth and collective progress.

## **3. Critical Theory and Social Transformation**

Critical theory, with its roots in the Frankfurt School and thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, focuses on the role of education in challenging the status quo and promoting social transformation. Critical theorists argue that education should not merely transmit knowledge but should also encourage students to critically examine and challenge oppressive systems of power and inequality. This perspective remains essential in the Nigerian context, where systemic inequalities continue to persist across ethnic and religious lines (Giroux, 2020). In the Nigerian context, critical theory offers valuable insights into the ways in which multicultural education can be a tool for challenging entrenched forms of ethnic and religious discrimination. By incorporating elements of critical pedagogy, educators can foster an environment where students learn to question societal injustices and work toward building a more inclusive and sustainable society. Critical theory also encourages the recognition of the historical and cultural experiences of marginalized groups, thereby fostering empathy and solidarity across cultural divides (Freire, 1970).

## **4. Postcolonial Thought and Cultural Identity**

Postcolonial philosophers, such as Frantz Fanon (1961) and Edward Said (1978), have highlighted the importance of cultural identity and the legacy of colonialism in shaping contemporary societies. Postcolonial theory critiques the ways in which Western-dominated educational systems often marginalize indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. This perspective argues that education should serve as a means of reclaiming cultural identity and fostering pride in one's heritage. In this vein, recent studies show that the educational system in postcolonial nations like Nigeria must prioritize decolonizing curricula to better reflect indigenous knowledge systems (Ngugi, 1986). For Nigeria, postcolonial thought emphasizes the need to reframe the educational curriculum to include indigenous knowledge systems and to challenge the lingering effects of colonialism on the national consciousness. Multicultural education, from a

postcolonial perspective, is not merely about tolerating diversity but about celebrating it and using it as a foundation for societal growth (Said, 1978). In this way, multicultural education can help to heal the wounds of the past and foster a sense of national unity based on mutual respect for all cultures.

### **Multicultural Education and Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

Sustainable development is a multifaceted concept that includes economic, social, and environmental dimensions. In the context of education, sustainable development refers to the creation of an education system that not only provides the knowledge and skills necessary for economic progress but also promotes values that foster social equity, peace, and environmental stewardship (UNESCO, 2021). The education system plays a central role in shaping a society that can meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987).

Multicultural education, by embracing the diversity of cultural perspectives, is fundamental in advancing sustainable development. This educational approach promotes social cohesion, tolerance, and respect for diversity—values that are crucial for building a peaceful and prosperous society. As noted by Banks (2019), multicultural education aims to transform societal attitudes by recognizing and respecting the contributions of all cultural groups. This, in turn, supports a more harmonious and integrated society, which is a key component of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, fostering a culture of respect for diversity within educational environments is essential in reducing conflicts and promoting societal stability, which is a necessary precondition for sustainable development (Giroux, 2020).

In Nigeria, achieving sustainable development cannot be realized without addressing the deep-seated issues of ethnic and religious conflict. The country's rich diversity, while a source of cultural wealth, has also led to significant tensions, particularly in regions where ethnic and religious identities are strongly tied to socio-political power structures (Udom, & Okolie, 2022). The prolonged nature of these conflicts has hindered national unity and posed a challenge to sustainable development efforts. In this context, multicultural education becomes an essential tool for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. According to Anyika, V. O., & Ani, K. J. (2023), educating citizens about cultural differences, fostering an understanding of shared values, and promoting cross-cultural dialogue can significantly reduce the potential for ethnic and religious conflicts in the future.

Furthermore, multicultural education can play an important role in bridging the gap between urban and rural communities in Nigeria. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between urban and rural areas remains a significant obstacle to achieving sustainable development (Eyisi & Ibrahim 2021). Multicultural education, by incorporating diverse local perspectives and empowering rural communities, can foster a sense of inclusion and solidarity among all Nigerians, regardless of their geographic location. As argued by Nwosu and Omojuwa (2021), a curriculum that reflects the needs and realities of both urban and rural populations ensures that every segment of society is prepared to contribute to the country's long-term development goals.

The Nigerian government, in collaboration with educational institutions, must prioritize the development of curricula and policies that promote multiculturalism and social justice. A robust education system that encourages intercultural understanding and actively integrates diverse cultural practices and traditions into the curriculum is essential for building a more just and equitable society (Bush, K. D., & Saltarelli, D. 2000). This includes the incorporation of local



languages, traditions, and histories into the curriculum, as well as the training of teachers to handle cultural diversity effectively (Udom, & Okolie, 2022). The teaching of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage in schools can help preserve these valuable resources while simultaneously fostering national unity (Ngugi, 1986). By ensuring teachers receive proper training on cultural diversity, the education system equips students to live and work effectively in today's increasingly multicultural world (Giroux, 2020). 2020).

Moreover, the curriculum should be designed not only to provide knowledge but to instill values that promote peace, social justice, and sustainability. Incorporating sustainable development goals (SDGs) into education, as advocated by UNESCO (2021), can align educational outcomes with the global agenda for sustainable development, which includes environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and economic prosperity. This alignment ensures that future generations are prepared to face global challenges with a deeper understanding of sustainability in its broadest sense.

The promotion of multicultural education and the emphasis on social justice are not only about fostering harmony within Nigeria but also about preparing the next generation to take part in a globalized world. In a globalized economy, the skills of cultural competence and social responsibility are becoming increasingly important, as citizens of the world must work collaboratively to address global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and social injustice (UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, Nigeria's educational system must evolve to embrace these global imperatives while staying rooted in local cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

Philosophical principles are foundational to shaping an education system that promotes sustainable development in a multicultural society like Nigeria. By embracing the ideas of liberal humanism, pragmatism, critical theory, and postcolonial thought, Nigeria can create an education system that not only respects cultural diversity but actively uses it as a resource for social and economic development. Multicultural education, grounded in these philosophical traditions, has the potential to foster social harmony, address systemic inequalities, and contribute to the sustainable development of the nation in the 21st century. The path forward requires a commitment to rethinking educational practices and policies, ensuring that they are inclusive, reflective of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, and responsive to the pressing challenges of today. As Nigeria continues to navigate its complex socio-cultural landscape, multicultural education will be essential in shaping a future that is equitable, just, and sustainable for all its people.

## Recommendations

The Nigerian government should integrate multicultural education as a core component of the national education policy. This involves revising existing curricula to reflect the rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of the country. Multicultural principles should be embedded at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary education, to ensure that future generations grow up with an appreciation for diversity and the skills needed to manage social and cultural complexities effectively.

The curriculum should be redesigned to include local languages, histories, and cultural practices that are often marginalized in mainstream education. Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into the educational framework helps preserve these traditions while also fostering national unity. By teaching students about the rich diversity of Nigerian cultures, students can better understand the value of cultural pluralism and the importance of inclusivity.

Teachers should be trained to handle cultural diversity effectively in the classroom. Professional development programs should focus on enhancing teachers' cultural competence, enabling them to create inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environments. This training should include strategies for promoting intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution, as well as methods for incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into lesson plans. Furthermore, teachers should be equipped to handle sensitive topics related to ethnic and religious differences with empathy and neutrality.

To address the urban-rural divide and ensure equitable access to resources, the Nigerian education system must actively work to bridge the gap between urban and rural communities. This can be achieved by offering incentives for teachers and educational resources to be deployed to rural areas, as well as incorporating rural perspectives into the curriculum. Education can act as a powerful tool for social cohesion, encouraging understanding and mutual respect between urban and rural citizens, and fostering equitable development.

Multicultural education should be coupled with civic education programs that emphasize the role of citizens in achieving national development. These programs can teach students about their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, the importance of social justice, and the ways they can contribute to sustainable development. Incorporating sustainable development goals (SDGs) into civic education will help students understand the global context of their actions and prepare them to engage with both local and global challenges.

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