

HUMANISING THE CLASSROOM: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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Abstract

The formal educational system of any society has specially designated environment for its activities, and that is the classroom where teaching and learning take place. This paper examines what constitutes a humanised classroom environment, what the teacher ought to do to ensure a mutual, friendly classroom climate between the teacher and the student. The paper equally highlighted the outcome of a humanized classroom environment in terms of student's life style, and achievements, as well as their contributions later in society.

Keywords: Humanizing, the classroom, sympathy, understanding, empathy

Introduction

The main activities associated with teaching and learning in any formal educational setting take place in the classroom: an environment that is isolated from the hustle and bustle of the usual daily activities of society – a serene and academic enabling environment. These are some features of an ideal classroom, where the teacher and students meet and interact, and relate in a cordial, mutual and friendly atmosphere; in which the student could be seen to have learnt from the teacher. Indeed, Dewey (an advocate of child-centred education) in Uduigwomen and Ogbinaka (2009) emphatically stressed that “unless the child has learnt, the teacher has not taught”. The two activities in the classroom cannot take place without interaction that engenders a form of relationship that should encourage learning.

But unfortunately, these days, the classroom setting, in most cases, is almost a market or motor-park situation, especially in the mushroom schools that are springing up on daily basis. In this atmosphere, everybody does what he/she likes with impunity – the teacher and the student alike. In such a

situation, humaneness and humanism are thrown to the winds. The teacher in this scenario assumes the posture of a tyrant or a demi-god, while the student lives in constant fear, and swallows anything the teacher dishes out to him/her as knowledge. It is for this reason that we may ask: why do many students drop out of school mid-way without completing their course of study? Why does many a student antagonize their teachers within and outside the classroom? And what are the likely effects of humanizing the classroom on the student and the society at large? These and many more are the questions that should agitate the minds of all educators and lovers of good education.

It is against this background that this paper examines the two key concepts that underlie this discourse, the human elements in the classroom, humanization of the classroom, and the implications of a humanized classroom. Finally, recommendations are made on how to humanize the classroom in the interest of the child and the society in general.

Conceptual Clarification

For a clearer understanding of the focus of this paper, it is imperative that the operational concepts be clarified or analysed. The concepts are: *humanizing*, *pragmatism* and *classroom*.

The Concept of Humanising

The term “humanizing” is derived from both the adjective “humane” and the noun “human”. The derivation from the noun “human”, simply implies belonging to or concerning human beings – people (man, woman, child) especially as opposed to animals and inanimate objects. On the other hand, the adjective “humane” implies treating people or animals in a way that is not cruel and inflicts like pains and suffering on them. To humanize a situation means to treat such a situation as if it were a human being, and not as if it were a thing or an object that has no feelings or thoughts. In other words, to humanize in this context implies to accord human attributes to all things whether or not they deserve them. In other words, this evokes the feeling of humaneness, i.e., a feeling tinged with compassion, sympathy, empathy and consideration for others. Humanization in the classroom context, therefore, is a process of giving human attributes and values such as honour, respect, love, dignity, friendship, etc., to other people: their social status, age, and level of education notwithstanding. This approach is anchored on the theory of humanism, which is a system of beliefs concerned with the needs of people, and the restoration of the universally acceptable human values.

In fact, the concept of humanization seems to be in tandem with the existentialist philosophy, the fundamental drive or urge is to exist and to be

recognised as an individual (Titus, et al, 1979). In recognition of this, the existentialists argue that teachers should concern themselves with the unique personality of each individual student, and that they should strive to relate to their students in what Buber in (Nwafor, 2010) refers to as an “I-thou” instead of “I-it” relationship. In other words, students in the classroom (and even outside of it) should be regarded and treated as humans and not as objects. Thus, in the classroom, teaching and learning can effectively take place if the entire atmosphere is aptly humanized by the teacher.

In essence, to humanize the classroom therefore implies to impart desirable human qualities, values, attitudes and interests to the learners with a view to making them acquire worthwhile affective qualities of human beings. This can only result from a healthy interaction between the teacher and his/her students, which in turn would engender effective learning. Teaching process is only meaningful and desirable when there is a warm and cordial interaction and relationship between the teacher and his/her students (Emeh and Enuokoha, 1994); a relationship that recognises and respects the personality of both the teacher and the learners. The teacher in this case is instrumental to how students react in the classroom: how they react to the subject matter, and how they perceive the teacher and his teaching methods (Omoguere, 2000). In short, all interactions in the classroom should have the stamp of humanism and pragmatism.

The Concept of Pragmatism

The word pragmatism is derived from the Greek word “pragma”, which means “work”. In this regard, pragmatism has been conceived as “philosophy of workability which encourages us to seek out processes, and to do things which work best to help us achieve desirable ends” (Ozmon and Craver in Nwafor 2013). Pragmatists hold that everything should be tested on the touchstone of experience, and that an idea is true if it works; if it can be verified, validated and corroborated, otherwise it is abandoned (Aggarwal, 2002). This is because knowledge claims are tentative and subject to revision. Hence, pragmatists are more concerned with the process of constructing, using and testing knowledge than with transmitting bodies of alleged permanent truths (Ornstein and Levine, 2008).

In the classroom, adopting pragmatic approach implies giving the learner a great deal of freedom of choice in seeking out the experiential (learning) situations that would be most meaningful to him. In other words, the learner must be actively involved in the teaching-learning process, i.e., he should learn by doing because the classroom is a scientific laboratory where ideas are put to test to see if they are capable of verification. In this regard, the teacher plans and arranges the learning experiences, while the learner is given the freedom to work on materials provided in order that he personally

experiences the outcome of his actions (Ozmon and Craver in Nwafor, 2013). Education, for the pragmatists, is an experimental process – a method of solving problems that challenge the individual as he interacts with his environment. In the classroom, the teacher should bear in mind that pragmatists hold that a variety of methods be employed as no one method of teaching would adequately cater for the different interests of the learners. This can only take place in a humanized classroom.

From the pragmatist point of view, a humanized classroom is not only one in which the learner is given freedom to choose what interests him to learn, but also one in which the personality and dignity of the learner is respected.

The Concept of the Classroom

The classroom simply denotes a place within the formal education environment, where a group of students meet on regular basis at designated period to have lessons in different subject areas under the tutelage of a teacher or teachers as the case may be. Although, the teacher controls every teaching and learning activities in the classroom, but the students deserve to be treated like “a king”. This implies that the teacher’s approach to his duty should take the nature and age of the learners into consideration with a view to warming himself into their hearts so that they can learn and participate effectively without undue pressure.

The classroom, in effect, is not a place where the teacher claims that he knows it all, and therefore drums in facts into his students using morally reprehensible methods. It is not an environment where students in the course of learning are labeled or bullied. Knight (1980) observed that “the classroom is an axiological theatre in which the teacher cannot hide his moral self”. This implies that the classroom gives an insight into the nature, character and behaviour of the teacher towards his students and subject(s) he teaches. The classroom is indeed a melting pot for students from different family backgrounds – the good, the bad, and the ugly, and so on. In this regard, the teacher has a herculean task in terms of classroom discipline and control. It would therefore be wrong for the teacher to expect every student to reason, behave and work in like manner. He should expect individual differences and as a result be tolerant and accommodating.

In the real sense, an ideal classroom is well-furnished with furniture for the teacher and students, well-ventilated and spacious so that movements within cannot be distracting. It should also have the necessary facilities that encourage learning. This includes the chalkboard, textbooks, laboratory equipment and recent instructional materials such as televisions, computers and other information and communication technology equipment, and so on.

Human Elements in the Classroom

The classroom as an environment for educational activities comprises, among others, the teacher and the learner. This category of persons constitute the human elements in the classroom. No matter how magnificent the school building may be, even with the most ambitious curriculum, and the most sophisticated material equipment, it would remain meaningless if it is not given a human touch by a cream of well-educated and devoted teachers, and a crop of ambitious and knowledge – hungry students. The two human elements are briefly discussed below one after the other.

➤ **The Teacher**

In any teaching and learning process, the teacher occupies a central position, and he stands between the learner and the subjects to be learnt or taught. As such, he plays multifaceted role associated with his profession or calling. It could be stated without equivocation that “some teachers are called, while others are made.” The difference between the two classes of teachers manifests itself in the classroom vis-à-vis their human relations and attitude to students.

However, a foray into the qualities, role and attitudes of the teacher can give us a clearer picture of his personality. The teacher plays a prominent role in humanizing the classroom and even beyond the school environment. He is an important factor in the educative process, given his personal qualities, professional training, and the place he also occupies in the community (Bhatia, 2000). The following are some qualities of a good teacher, whose intentions are geared towards humanising the classroom.

He must possess a general academic background in addition to the knowledge of his area of specialization. A good teacher must necessarily have a reasonable dose of professional efficiency, i.e., he must have acquired some level of pre-service training that would enable him know the ins and outs of his job. Teacher’s enthusiasm, professional insight and competence, and dedication are his invaluable assets.

Personality traits of a good teacher impact deeply on his students. The traits include love for the students, high moral character and sound principles, emotional stability, articulate both in speech and writing. He must be a humorous, cheerful and sociable person, who has a strong leadership quality, among others. A good teacher therefore is one who adopts friendliness approach in place of strict obedience to classroom rules and regulations.

A respectable teacher is one who has the interest of his students at heart and knows most of them by name. Okorie (1986) observed that a good teacher provides his students situations to think while the lesson is going on. This type of teacher, Onoguere (2000) maintained, is accessible and thorough, fair and straight-forward in dealing with students.

In addition, the teacher has many roles to perform, in terms of humanising the classroom. Since teaching is his first and foremost duty, the teacher must of necessity regularly prepare his lessons, and use suitable teaching methods to motivate his students. A teacher, who knows his onions, also functions as an organiser, supervisor, disciplinarian and guide, record keeper, evaluator, and maintainer of good relationships. In fact, a good teacher should be a role model, a mentor, and a father or mother figure to his or her students.

However, the teacher who has the basic requirements for teaching may mar his career by lack of corresponding positive attitude to his students, and to his work. In short, the attitude of the teacher is critical to his efforts and attempts at humanising the classroom. Nwafor and Nwogu (2007) observed that the teacher stands between the learner and the content of what should be taught. Hence they argue that the teacher’s attitude is simply an indicative of his feelings towards another person or thing, whether positive or negative. In this case, feelings could be expressed in the form of respect and friendliness, sympathy and empathy, or feelings of envy, anger, frustration, scorn or resentment, and so on. Hence feelings could be conscious, or deliberate, unconscious or inadvertent.

The teacher’s feeling or attitude in the classroom is sometimes determined by certain factors such as truancy, lateness, absenteeism, disobedience, intellectual laziness, etc., on the part of the students. In such situations, the teacher could display emotional outbursts, which may have adverse effects on his relationship with the students and on their academic performance. On the other hand, the teacher who is quite friendly, courteous, humorous and kind will certainly enjoy not only the cooperation, love and admiration, but also the cordial relationships and respect of his students. This type of situation engenders a humanised classroom, where the desirable changes in the learner take place effortlessly. The implication here is that the classroom is seen as “a circle inside which are the teacher and his students; a circle of sympathy and understanding, which binds them all together (Nwafor & Nwogu, 2007).

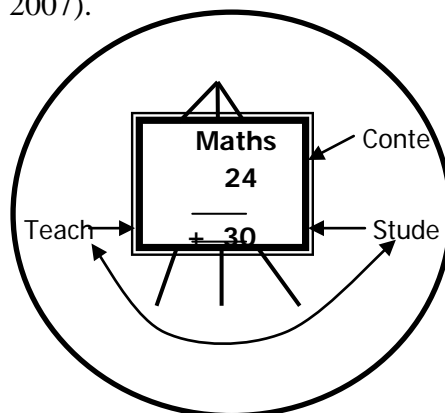


Fig. 1: Circle of Sympathy and Understanding

Unnecessary outbursts, lack of subject mastery, inappropriate methodology, indecent dressing, among others, can make the teacher or students to be outside the circle, and as a result affect learning.

However, it will not be out of place for the teacher as a human being, once in a long while, to lose his temper just to insist that the proper and the right thing is done, and also to assert his authority where and when necessary. This notwithstanding the teacher should personify the model of civility and to practice in the classroom (Ornstein and Levine, 2008).

In recognition of the role of the teacher in making the classroom humane, Hoy and Miskel (2008) asserted that experienced teachers make use of behavioural theory in their teaching. This involves the application of basic skills and principles of reinforcement and punishment. They corroborated the views of Woolfock (2007), who highlighted the principles as giving clear and systematic praise when deserved, recognition of genuine accomplishments; recognition of positive behaviour that the students value, setting clear and specific goals, using cues to establish new behaviours, using variety of reinforcers, attributing students' success to efforts and ability to build confidence, structuring situations to use negative reinforcement rather than punishment, and adapting punishment to fit the misbehavior. In this case, the teacher's job will centre on the provision of a warm and friendly atmosphere for the achievement of quality education.

➤ **The Student**

The student, on the other hand, is another important human element in the classroom. He is usually considered in most cases as an immature, empty-headed and undisciplined human being, who needs the guidance, counsel and mentorship of the adult in his journey through life. This conception may not be absolutely correct and cannot be applicable to every individual. Since students come from different family backgrounds, and by nature have different behavioural patterns, it is therefore not unexpected that they will come to the classroom with their individual differences as well as their idiosyncrasies. Some of them might be extroverts, and others introverts; some might be bullies, deviants, class clowns, and rules breakers, and others stubborn and nonchalant (Calvert, 1975).

However, in the midst of the bad and the ugly, we can equally find the good, humble and obedient students, who know and constantly keep their vision and mission alive and aglow. In this mixed grill classroom, the teacher's role in humanising the classroom would be a Herculean task as he tries to instill in the students basic social values as opposed to social vices.

In essence, the moral and academic tone of the classroom depends so much on the exemplary role of the teacher. The students will always be the mirror through which the society could see the school, because the products of the school will in turn influence the society either positively or negatively.

Outcome of the Humanised Classroom

The implications of the humanised classroom could be felt beyond the classroom itself as its ripples could spread far into the society. First, the results of a friendly classroom climate are evident in the mutual relationship between the teacher and his students; a situation that in turn engenders mutual understanding and cooperation. The presence of this healthy atmosphere, unquestionably facilitates all educational activities in the classroom, and equally ensures that the dignity of the learner is respected, while the integrity of the teacher is honoured, and at times appreciated and rewarded. In the same vein, the mutual relationship is imbibed by students as a virtue worth practising and sustaining for their mutual benefits.

In addition, a humanised classroom is a *sine qua non* for effective and purposeful teaching and learning. This scenario enhances the academic achievements of the students, and also impacts positively on their moral life. This is important because both the academic achievements and the moral life of the students would directly or indirectly contribute to the socio-economic and political development of society. In effect, the students of a humanised learning environment actively participate in all the stages of the teaching – learning process because they work in unison with the teacher. In all, the ultimate result of this rapport is evident in the excellent academic performance of students, especially in external examinations.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that a humanised classroom is a “child-centred” one, where the learner is seen as a human being, and not an object. In analysing the role and the attitude of the teacher, it was observed that the teacher is the pivot on which all teaching and learning processes rotate. Hence, in this regard, his functions are basically channeled towards making the individual learner to realize his potentials in a friction – free environment. The student, on the other hand, is viewed as one who needs guidance and direction from an empathic and friendly teacher. It is therefore imperative to observe that “personal relations within the classroom are the most significant of the factors involved in education for the formation for humane persons” (Reardon, 2001). A humane person in this regard could be seen as one who has, to a large extent, been humanised in the classroom with special emphasis on the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.

Recommendations

As a result of the observations made above in relation to the elements that constitute the classroom vis-à-vis their necessary qualities, the following recommendations are imperative for an effectively humanised classroom:

- The government and all relevant educational agencies should ensure the provision of adequate classroom facilities: furniture (tables, chairs, desks), equipment (audio-visual aids, laboratory apparatuses), instructional materials (books, maps, charts, chalkboards), and so on.
- Parents should not unduly interfere with what goes on in the classroom, by way of threatening the teacher as a result of reports given to them by their children or wards. In this regard, parents should follow due process and exhaust all peaceful avenues of investigations, so that their actions will not jeopardize the academic performance of their children as well as whittle the authority and status of the teacher.
- The teachers also should not be insensitive, aggressive and hostile to their students bearing in mind that they are the second parents of children entrusted to their care to nurture, train, teach and mould into what society wants them to be, i.e., good, responsible and patriotic citizens.
- School administrators at all levels should be actively involved in humanising the classroom directly and indirectly. Directly, they should set a sound moral and academic tone in their institutions through regular interactions with teachers and students. Indirectly, they should approach the necessary government organs and other relevant agencies for adequate funding and vital equipment and facilities that would make teaching and learning in the classroom conducive and effective.
- In order to ensure a genuinely humanized classroom, where pragmatism is the cornerstone, then the class size should not exceed 1:35 teacher-student ratio as recommended by National Policy on Education (2004).
- Teacher – student relationship should go beyond the frontiers of the classroom; it should extend to parents, who would assist to paper the cracks in the walls of their children’s academics and morals.
- In all, humanising the classroom should be seen as a joint venture involving not only the teacher, but also other stakeholders in the educational enterprise.

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