

The Concept of Education in Plato's Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to answer the question “why should Plato’s view on education be used in shaping good citizens for the development of a state.”⁴ The aim of this paper is to show that education is important to be a good citizen and to create a virtuous society. This research paper will attempt to solve the problem of why Plato’s view on education is needed in shaping good citizens for the development of the state.⁵ The hypothetical solution will be that Plato’s view on Education is closely connected with his other concepts of the theory of virtues and justice. Firstly, this hypothetical solution will be collected by descriptive method and will be discussed by evaluative one with the principle of fairness. This research paper will contribute to the knowledge that education plays a vital role for not only to be a good citizen but also to create a virtuous society and an individual for the development of the state.⁶

Keywords: education, good citizen, virtue, justice

INTRODUCTION

From ancient times to the present, man has continued to search for the ideals and philosophy which shape the education system. The word ‘Education’ is derived from the Latin word ‘Educare’ which means ‘to lead out or bring forth’. Education is a process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits. The purpose of education is to give knowledge, to transmit culture, to help people adapt to society, to give religious education and to provide practical experience.

Myanmar’s education system is being reformed in line with the changing times. At present, in Myanmar’s education system, multifarious endeavors are being made for the upgrading of national education. Moreover, Myanmar society has consistently cherished, respected and valued learning in all its forms.

In the age of knowledge, we must make endeavor towards the emergence of a learning society in Myanmar. So, by incorporating the educational thought and concept of Myanmar people, the vision of Myanmar education will be more effectively implemented. In addition, information technology is advancing rapidly around the world day by day. Myanmar is a developing country. So, Myanmar’s education, economy, health, etc. are behind the other developed countries.

Therefore, every citizen is responsible for the development of human society. In creating a virtuous society, modern and prosperous democracy country, good citizens or educated persons are necessary. Education can refer to the wellbeing of human society. Education is also a fundamental foundation to produce such a good citizen or an educated individual. That is why, education plays a vital role for not only creating a virtuous society and an individual but also in shaping good citizens for the development of a state.

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⁴ Research Question

⁵ Research Problem

⁶ Contribution

This research paper will attempt to solve the problem why Plato's educational thought needs in shaping good citizens. First of all, when we study ancient Greek philosophy, we find that among the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato is the first thinker of education. Plato regarded that education is a matter of leading a person from mere belief to true knowledge and his educational theories have the practical aim of training for citizenship and leadership. The aim of this paper is to show that why education is needed to be a good citizen and to lead a good life.

Plato's View on Education

Western philosophy began with Greek thoughts. Similarly the Western educational thought originated in ancient Greece. The study of ancient Greek civilization provides beneficial lessons on citizenship and civic education that illustrates the important roles of education in shaping good citizen. Ancient Greeks philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had speculated the various ideas of knowledge. Among them Plato and Aristotle are the first two thinkers of knowledge. Plato's educational view is highlighted in this paper. Plato founded 'The Academy', the first institution of higher learning in Greece, in 387 BC. It became an intellectual center in Greece and equivalent to the first university in the history of Europe. Hence Plato is an essential Greek philosopher and his educational thought will illuminate many problems today's educators face.

Plato was a student of Socrates. But, later he put more emphasis on utilitarian, institutionalized and state-controlled education. He opposed Socrates' liberal and all-encompassing search for truth. Plato observed Spartan methods of education and put into operate some aspects of Spartan order into his theories. Plato was the first great educator and the founder of educational thought. Plato's theory of education can be found in 'the Republic' and 'the Laws'. In these books, Plato expands a framework for his ideas about education. Plato regards education as an important activity of human beings which is the main responsibility of the state.

Plato gives the subject of education in 'The Republic' as an integral and vital part of the well-being of society. The ultimate aim of education is to help people know the idea of the 'good', which is to be virtuous. He believed that education and justice are connected. Hence without education, there will be no justice which include individual, social, and excellent and knowledge virtue. According to Plato, justice is the highest social good and ideal.

In fact, Plato's educational thoughts cannot be separated from his other works. Education should be understood in the context of ethical and political consideration in his ideal state that all men are entitled to happiness and good life. Plato's concept of education aims at preparing learners for future life. The object of education is to turn the soul towards light. Once Plato suggested that the chief function of education is not to put knowledge into the soul, but to bring out the latent talents in the soul by directing it towards the right objects.

Moreover, Plato strongly believed in a state to control education system. Plato's idea of education was primarily intended for those who were to be statesmen. To avoid the statesmen not to be the blind leaders, Plato put more emphasis on education because these statesmen will be given a state, and if they are not educated, they will lead the country or the state into a terrible situation. In addition, education was the positive measure for the operation of justice in the ideal state. Plato was convinced that the root of the vice lay chiefly in ignorance, and only by proper education can one be converted into a virtuous man.

According to Plato, the whole range of the education system would be in part physical, in part intellectual, and in part moral. If one cannot resist moral temptation, then one might

sacrifice the interest of the society in order to satisfy one's own interests. For Plato, for the good of individual and for the safety of the state is the goal of education.

Plato's System of Education

There are two systems of education in ancient Greece which are Athenian and the Spartan. In Athens, the education was privately controlled unlike Sparta and the sophists who taught for fees. On the other hand, Sparta was a military aristocracy and had a state controlled education system that imparted mainly military education and discipline. Plato synthesized the two and added the study of the dialectic at the highest stage of the scheme. Plato divides the education into two parts: elementary education and higher education.

The Elementary Education

The elementary education is divided into three stages. From the birth to 6 years is the first stage, the second stage is from 6 to 18 years and the third stage is from 18 to 20 years.

The first stage of the elementary education is the children from the time of birth to age of 6 years. As the "early life is very impressible" and the children are like wax and can be molded in the shape, one wishes to. In this stage, children are eager to observe; they can imitate quickly with thinking faculty at the early stage of its growth, and also unprotectable to indoctrination. At this stage, the purpose of education is to provide examples of appropriate exposure. The teacher must teach by giving examples. Plato, in his educational thought, emphasizes the role of teacher in formal education. Teacher should have eagerness; they should have a spirit of helping students, and good behavior, treat students with equality and friendship. He believed that students learn many things from their teachers, not only what teachers teach, but also social behavior through the example shown by their teachers. Plato suggests the teacher as the following;

"Do not the train youths by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each".¹

According to Plato, education plays a vital role in this stage and it helps to build one's moral character and state of mind. In the early stage, the most effective kind of education is that a child should play among lovely things. The children are taught morality and goodness. The study must be related to story-telling and then go on to poetry. Plato suggested that before the age of seven the children should stay with their mothers for moral education and boys and girls should be allowed to play with each other. And there should have a school where children love to go and stay there and play with things which increase their education by playing.

The second stage is till the age of eighteen. After the age of six years, boy and girls should not play together and boys should play with boys and girls with girls. In the second stage, the content of education includes Gymnastic, literature, music and elementary mathematics. Music is chosen as the medium of education, the path to the growth of the soul and ideas are the content of education. In this stage, Plato emphasized the influence of environment on growing mind because music and poetry is required to be used in education. In Plato Republic, he said as the following;

"The musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly

¹ Edgar Wallace Knight (1940). *Twenty Centuries of Education*. California: Publishing Ginn P.405.

educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful; and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar".¹

Plato strongly believes that music has influences in character building. Moreover, for Plato, Gymnastics is essential for the physical and mental development. In other word, every school must have a gymnasium and a playground in order to develop the body and health of children and make them resistant to any disease. It includes instruction of simple diet and cure of the body. Plato regards that doing exercises not only keeps the body fit but also helps in building the moral character to reach the final goal. So, gymnastics makes the youth courageous, patient, reasonable, considerate, and temperate and whole- minded.

Plato's third stage of education is from seventeen to twenty years of age. This is the time for the most practical education and training. At this stage, children should be brought to the field of battle, and "like young hounds, have a taste of blood given them."

After the 20 years education, a child must take an examination that would determine whether to pursue higher education or not. Those who failed in the examination were asked to take up activities in communities such as businessmen, clerks, workers, farmer and the like. And those who passed the exam are admitted to higher education and the rest take up the responsibility of warriors as disciplined sliders.

The Higher Education

There are also three stages in higher education. The age between 20 to 30 years is the first stage, the second stage is from 30 to 35 years and the third stage is from 35 to 50 years.

In the first stage of higher education, the students are given the subjects like arithmetic (mathematics) astronomy, geometry, astrology and harmonics. Scientific education bent the youth towards the truth. Plato emphasizes the study of mathematics and geometry. This will sharpen the minds of student. Mathematics trains one mind to think clearly, reasoning, logic and analysis.

Again at the age of 30, student would take another examination, which served as an elimination test much severe than the first test. Those who fail would become executive assistant, auxiliaries and military officers of the state. Those who passed in the examination would receive another five years advanced education in dialectics, in order to find out as to who was capable of freeing himself from sense perception.

In the second stage, the students are taught dialectics. According to Plato, dialectic is contested but there are two main interpretations; they are a type of reasoning and a method of intuitions. Dialectics is the art of thinking in concepts. Those concepts are the essential parts of thinking. For example, if we do not know what justice is, we cannot call a man just or unjust without the notion or concept of justice; when we know this, we can judge why one is just or unjust.

¹ Benjamin Jowett (Translated by),(2008). *The Republic By Plato*. Cosmoclassic New York. P.205

The dialectical method consists of two ideas, the first is the understanding of scattered particulars in one idea, and the second is the division of the idea into species, that is, in the processes of generalization and classification. One of the distinctive features of the dialectic is that it emphasizes collective, as opposed to solitary activity. And then the training in the dialectics enables them to comprehend the idea of the good.

The last stage of higher education is the age between 35 to 50 years. After five years of training in dialectic, the student had to study for another 15 years for practical experience in dialectics. Finally at the age of 50, those who prove their worth in handling the tough task working on these positions, become philosopher kings or queens. These kings were expected to spend most of the time in philosophical pursuits. Thus, after accomplishing perfection, the ruler would exercise power only in the best interests of the state. The ideal state would be realized and its people would be just honest and happy.

Women Education

Plato also mentioned women's education in his Republic. In Plato's time, most Athenian women were only educated in the home. There are a few women's schools. Plato protected the discrimination of women. Women in Greece at that time were not considered like men. As a result, they were not educated because they had to take care of children at homes. For Plato, women should receive the same education as men. Plato strongly believed that gender diversity was irrelevant in building a society.

According to Plato, the girls and boy should have equal access to education because the interests of the state were paramount, and that good education would produce not only good men but also good women. He spoke out against gender and religious discrimination and suggested that education should be provided to all without any discrimination of race, sex or religion. Plato states in his Republic as follow;

“If women are to have the same duties as men, they must have the same nature and education? ... Then women must be taught music and gymnastics and also the art of war, which they must practice like the man?”¹

In the above passage, Plato describes equality in men and women in their personhood as so he was one of the first to propose equal education for man and women based on their ability to learn, not on their gender. Therefore, women have the same responsibilities as men and they must have the same upbringing and education to fulfill their duties.

Plato believes that women were equal to men although some women are physically weak, but some are equal to men. So, physically strong women should be allowed to learn the same skills as men do. In other words, ones who know what is good for the people and for the man kind and take their decision based on that knowledge. And the only notable difference between men and women is physical activity. Apart from physical activity, all can do the same function. Therefore, education is essential for them so that society could get the best values from both men and women.

However, Plato acknowledged some differences in intelligence and talents. So it was suggested to have different schools for those who have got special talents, this means that Plato advocated an educational system, which would distinguishes between ruler, soldiers and the

¹ Benjamin Jowett(Translated by),2003, *The Republic By Plato*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

populace. The main aim of Plato's educational thought was that each member of the society should undertake work and responsibilities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Myanmar's national education system has been primarily interconnected with Buddhist religious thought and beliefs, as well as the Buddhist culture. All through the past ages, the Buddhist Sangha provided Myanmar society with voluntary free education, which may be called the Myanmar Monastic Education or Myanmar National Education System. It can be said that the monastic education system was also a Myanmar Traditional Education System that cultivated the physical, intellectual and moral capabilities of the whole Myanmar society in all-round manner.

In Greece, the origin of many educational policies and systems can be found as it is the originating sources of Western civilization. Greek ideas about education and their educational practices have been very influential to the other cultures. When it is examined, Plato's philosophy can be found to have great relevance to contemporary education. For example, Plato was disturbed by Athens' carefree attitude toward education, especially for the lack of special training for the ruler of the state.

Furthermore, when we study Plato's concept of education, we find that boys and girls need to be educated in all areas of knowledge and understanding to a limited extent. And all children should be taken from their parents and educated by the state. Plato regarded that in elementary education, the early experience is quite important in building up of the mindset and Plato seeks to display children only to the good aspects of society.

In Myanmar traditional thought, the social status of parents and teachers is the highest in Myanmar society. It is in accordance with the Myanmar saying "Parents and Teachers, with joined hands" which means that it is the parent's responsibility to bring up good sons and daughters and it is the teacher's responsibility to produce good pupils. It is the responsibility of the nation to cultivate good citizens. Therefore, parents have to take charge of parents' duties, while teachers take care of the teacher's duties, and the responsible persons of the nation have to take charge of their duties while pupils have to do their work, each in his or her role.

Plato emphasized on the importance and the role of gymnastics and music in elementary education and focused on the development of physical body and health of children. He also laid the role of abstract sciences in education in order to compel the soul to use pure intelligence in the search of pure health. According to Plato, the goal of education is to produce adults who can successfully fulfill the happiness of the whole community and they are enjoying happiness in their community. According to John Dewey, the main purpose of education is to bring about human freedom and to improve human capacity. Dewey said educating human heartedness is the first priority and professionalism comes later.

Moreover, the curriculum content of Plato's educational system differs from one level of education to the other. According to A.N. Whitehead, there must be three main curriculums in education: the first one is literature, the second is science and the third one is the practical technology. And for him, from the age of (0-14 years) is the level of mental youth, from (14 to 18 years) is the level of sharpness and the level of general ability is from (18 to 22 years). Based on the above-mentioned curriculum philosophy, we will have to choose a curriculum that suits our country.

Nowadays, it is said that the world is a village. It cannot be possible to be isolated from other countries. Everything is changing from time to time such as education, policy, economics and politics. Therefore, the Myanmar education system must strive to bring it closer to international education standards. The most important thing to bring this closer is to keep in

mind that kindergarten is a very important foundation activity. Myanmar's new education system, which is now in its infancy, is trying to transit to an international standard classification of education (ISCED) system.

According to Plato, human beings need society, the reflection of educated citizens to the society is a powerful way of living a good life. He says that if we educate citizens, society gets paid back. Education in one's society helps to create a noble character. Like society, education helps people to humanize themselves in their relations to one another. Moreover, Plato's scheme of education is deeply connected to his concept of the role and distribution of virtues in the society. Plato's view of education revolves more around creating the best model of a city-state based on specific social stratification, state-controlled education and producing the ideal rulers or philosopher kings.

As mentioned above, the most important factor for the development of a country is to promote the quality of the people. Education plays a crucial role in raising the quality of citizens. All citizens need to be involved in the development of the state. Likewise, it is the government's responsibility to raise the capacity of the people to improve the education system. In doing so, we need to look to the future and focus on improving our vocational skills. The process of improving is to value vocational education as much as university education. Therefore, everyone should be educated according to their various abilities and demonstrate abilities for the development of the state either as a ruler, security personnel or a producer. So, this research paper will contribute the face that education plays a vital role for not only to be a good citizen but also to create a virtuous society and an individual for the development of the state.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Dr Theingi Shwe (Rector, Hinthada University), Dr Yee Yee Than (Pro-Rector, Hinthada University) and Dr Cho Kyi Than (Pro-Rector, Hinthada University), for their encouragement to do this work. We are also grateful to Dr.Thinn Thinn Lei, Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for her encouragement, guidance, critical reading and suggestion for the research paper. And we are also grateful to Dr. Khin Myat Mar, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for her advice. Finally, we are grateful to our colleagues and staff of the Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for their understanding and support during the preparation of this paper.

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သန်းဦး၊ ဒေါက်တာ။ (၂၀၁၉)။ မြန်မာ့ပညာရေးအယူအဆ။ ရန်ကုန်၊ ဆုစာအုပ်တိုက်။

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