

EDUCATION FOR A BETTER NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM THE EDUCATIONAL AIMS OF PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

David Unekwu Ocheje

Department of Educational Foundations, FCT College of Education, Zuba – Abuja

Abstract

Nigeria's education system faces enduring challenges, including inadequate funding, insecurity leading to school closures, high numbers of out-of-school children, infrastructure deficits, rote learning dominance, skill mismatches, teacher shortages, and low learning outcomes, hindering relevance, equity, and national development. This article revisits the timeless educational philosophies of Plato and Aristotle to propose reforms. Plato's idealistic framework advocates functional education aligned with natural abilities through a merit-based tripartite structure: vocational training for the appetitive class, physical/moral discipline for soldier class, and philosophical lifelong learning for the rulers. It promotes equal educational opportunity, rigorous assessment, non-hereditary classes, and holistic development to foster justice, harmony, and societal functionality. Aristotle's realistic approach prioritizes happiness via virtue cultivation through three balanced stages, early physical health and fitness as foundation, moral habituation for ethical character, and intellectual development for critical reasoning, practical wisdom, and inquiry-based learning. Applying these principles, the article argues for shifting Nigeria's system from exam-centric rote memorization to ability-tailored functional/vocational training, integrating critical thinking, STEM, inquiry methods, and logic, embedding moral/civic education to combat corruption and disunity, prioritizing physical/moral well-being amid malnutrition and insecurity, and enacting policies for inclusivity, teacher training, digital/entrepreneurial skills, and student-centered practices. By embracing Plato's meritocratic functionality and Aristotle's pursuit of virtuous flourishing, Nigeria can transform education into a catalyst for holistic citizen development, economic relevance, civic responsibility, unity, and sustainable prosperity.

Keywords: Plato, Aristotle, Nigeria education, functional education and virtue cultivation

Introduction

The pursuit of quality education has remained a persistent and complex challenge in Nigeria. Despite various policy interventions, the nation's educational system continues to struggle with issues of relevance, equity, and functionality. In seeking lasting solutions, it is worthwhile to revisit the foundational ideas of classical philosophers whose insights into education remain timeless. Among these are Plato and Aristotle - two of the most influential figures in Western philosophy. This article explores their educational aims and identifies how their ideas can inform reforms in Nigeria's contemporary educational system.

Plato (427 – 347B.C)

Plato, a student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, was a central figure in the development of Western thought. He belonged to the school of Idealism and founded the Academy, one of the earliest institutions of higher learning. Plato wrote extensively on various subjects including politics, ethics, mathematics, and education.

Plato's Educational Aims

Plato envisioned education as a tool for the perfection of the individual and the state (Okafor, 2006). His belief in functional education underscored the idea that every individual should be trained according to their natural ability to contribute meaningfully to society. Education, in his view, was not merely the accumulation of knowledge but a transformative process aimed at achieving justice, both within the individual and the state. In *The Republic*, Plato articulates his educational philosophy that education should lead to the all-round development of the individual - physically, morally, and intellectually (Boyd and King, 1981). In other words, education must aim to create good citizens who strive for personal and societal perfection. Plato posited that only through education can both individuals and the state achieve true harmony and functionality (Nkokelonye, 2005).

Plato's Tripartite Educational Structure

As the father of functional education, Plato categorized society - and consequently, education - into three distinct classes based on individuals' abilities, the first group he called the Appetitive Class (Artisans). These include farmers, traders, and craftsmen responsible for economic production. Education for this group should focus on vocational skills and practical knowledge. The second group is the Soldiers, (Guardians) tasked with maintaining peace and order, this group requires rigorous physical and moral training. Plato emphasized courage, discipline, and philosophical grounding to ensure wise use of power. The third class he called the Rulers (Philosopher - Kings). They are characterized by wisdom and rationality; this elite class should govern the state. Their education must be lifelong and deeply rooted in philosophy, literature, mathematics, and history. Plato also advocated equal educational opportunity for all, regardless of birth or social status. He opposed elitism and believed that every child should be given the chance to discover their potential and be trained accordingly (Nkokelonye, 2005). Hence, the class to which one belongs was to be determined by one's educational level. No class is self-perpetuating, that is, not hereditary but entered on the basis of ability determined through rigorous educational processes which Plato set forth thus: Generally, there is a common education for all from the age of six up to the age of twenty, and then there will be a common examination for the purpose of sorting out the candidates. Thereafter; each person will start getting the education suited for his duty in the class. Those who fell below the cut – off mark will form the Appetitive Class - the farmers who labour and produce the food that the rest of the society consume, the craft men, the merchants, wood breakers, cleaners and so on, these are the class of people who belong to the Appetitive Class. These ones who dropped now are into these areas and their intellects are enlightened the more along those lines through which they will contribute towards the society moving forward.

For the next ten years, those who were of outstanding performance in the first stage will busy themselves with the study of mathematics, geometry and the likes. At the age of thirty, another examination is taken. Those who did not meet up the cut off mark will form or belong to the Soldier class that is, people who are in charge of order, defence and security. This means that our military men should be educated, not for riff – raff, or not to satisfy sectional interest. Those of them again that showed exceptional brilliance proceeded to study dialectics that is philosophy, exposure to this is to incardinate them in pure reasoning, broad mindedness, logical acuity, people who can seat down and reflect on the society and evolve principles for the way forward. This was the education meant for

potential rulers and it terminates at the age of thirty five, by this time they could be trusted with minor political and administrative posts. But as soon as they reach 50 years of age, they can take up more involving responsibilities. All along the various stages, development of sound mind and character was emphasized.

Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C)

Aristotle, a student of Plato, diverged from his teacher by embracing realism. Born in Stagira, he studied under Plato at the Academy and later tutored Alexander the Great. Aristotle contributed extensively to diverse fields such as biology, ethics, politics, and metaphysics.

Aristotle's Educational Aims

Aristotle laid out his theory of education in his seminal works, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Unlike Plato, Aristotle emphasized the empirical and experiential nature of learning. He believed that the ultimate aim of education is *eudaimonia* - a state of happiness and self-fulfillment achieved through the cultivation of virtue (Okafor, 2006). Education, according to Aristotle, should enable individuals to make informed choices that promote personal happiness and societal well-being. Ignorance, he argued, leads to poor decisions that negatively impact both the individual and the state.

Three Levels of Educational Development

Aristotle proposed that education should focus on the holistic development of the individual through:

Physical Development: Emphasis on health, fitness, and motor skills: Aristotle prioritized physical training early in education to build a healthy body as the foundation for moral and intellectual growth, recognizing that a sound body supports a sound mind. In Nigeria, where malnutrition, poor school facilities, and insecurity affect student well-being, integrating physical education, sports, and health programs could improve attendance and concentration. Lessons include prioritizing safe school environments and basic health infrastructure to combat dropout rates linked to poverty and threats. This aligns with calls for better funding to upgrade facilities and ensure student safety (ThisDayLive, 2026).

Moral Development: Formation of character and ethical behavior: For Aristotle, moral virtue develops through habituation - repeated practice guided by ethical instruction - to foster traits like justice, temperance, and courage. Education's goal is virtuous citizens who sustain the community. Nigeria's system often emphasizes rote learning over character building, contributing to ethical lapses, corruption perceptions, and social issues. Deducing from Aristotle, curricula should incorporate deliberate moral education, citizenship training, and values like integrity and empathy through extracurriculars, role modeling by teachers, and community involvement. This could mitigate societal challenges like insecurity and inequality by producing ethically grounded graduates (Carr & Harrison, 2015).

Intellectual Development: Cultivation of reasoning and critical thinking: Aristotle viewed intellectual virtues (e.g., practical wisdom, scientific knowledge) as developed through teaching and inquiry, aiming for rational autonomy. Nigeria grapples with low critical thinking skills, exam - focused rote memorization, and outdated curricula ill-suited to 21st-century demands. Adopting Aristotelian principles means shifting toward inquiry-

based learning, STEM integration, logic/philosophy elements, and skills for problem-solving. Recent curriculum reforms (e.g., reducing overload for relevance) echo this but need deeper emphasis on reasoning to tackle learning poverty and prepare citizens for national development (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2026). Any educational system that neglects these three dimensions is, by Aristotle's standards, incomplete. Therefore, the curriculum must balance these aspects, treating each as a means to holistic growth (Boyd & King, 1981).

Lessons for Nigeria's Educational System

Drawing on the educational aims of Plato and Aristotle, several lessons emerge that can enhance Nigeria's educational system. In Nigeria, education has been criticized for its emphasis on rote learning and memorization, rather than critical thinking and problem-solving (Okeke, 2018). Nigeria's educational system can benefit from the philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle in several ways. The educational aims of Plato and Aristotle offer a framework for reforming education in Nigeria to focus on the development of functional education, education according to ability, and the pursuit of happiness. Plato's emphasis on functional education and education according to ability is particularly relevant to education in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is a need for education to focus on developing the skills and knowledge necessary for individuals to contribute to the good of society. This can be achieved through the development of functional education and education according to ability.

Aristotle's emphasis on happiness and ethical living suggests that education should go beyond exams and certificates. Nigerian schools should inculcate values, ethics, and life skills that promote well-being and responsible citizenship, as well as the good of society. This can be achieved through the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as moral character and civic responsibility, this promotes happiness, well-being, and informed decision-making. Aristotle's holistic, staged approach - starting with physical foundations, progressing to moral habituation, and culminating in intellectual excellence - offers Nigeria a framework for balanced reform. By making education a state priority for citizen virtue and flourishing, rather than mere access or certification, Nigeria could address systemic fragmentation. Increased funding, inclusive policies, and teacher training in these areas would align with Aristotelian ideals, fostering well-rounded individuals and a stronger society. Both Plato and Aristotle underscore the role of education in promoting the welfare of the state. Nigeria must aim to produce civic-minded individuals who contribute positively to national development and unity.

Implications of the educational aims of Plato and Aristotle for Nigeria

Implications for Educational Policy

Plato's vision in *The Republic* advocates for an education system that aligns with individuals' natural abilities and societal roles, ensuring that each person is trained to contribute effectively to the community (Plato, 2004). Similarly, Aristotle, in *Politics*, emphasizes education that prepares individuals for practical life while nurturing their unique talents (Aristotle, 1996). For Nigeria, this suggests a need for policies that prioritize functional education - curricula designed to impart practical skills relevant to the nation's economic and social demands. In a country grappling with high unemployment and skill gaps, policies should integrate vocational training, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy into the education system. The Universal Basic Education program, for instance, could be expanded to offer diverse learning pathways, such as technical training for

students inclined toward practical trades and advanced academic tracks for those suited to intellectual pursuits (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Additionally, policies should ensure inclusivity by accommodating diverse abilities, such as through specialized programs for students with disabilities or accelerated curricula for gifted learners, reflecting Plato's stratified yet equitable approach. Both philosophers also highlight the importance of intellectual virtues for personal and societal development. Plato's dialectical method encourages critical inquiry and the pursuit of truth, while Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) emphasizes reasoned decision-making (Aristotle, 2009; Plato, 2004). In Nigeria, where rote memorization often overshadows analytical skills, educational policies should promote teaching methods that foster critical thinking and problem-solving. This could involve revising the National Policy on Education to prioritize inquiry - based learning, project - based assessments, and interdisciplinary approaches that mirror global 21st - century skills frameworks (World Bank, 2020). Teacher training programs should be reformed to equip educators with strategies to nurture analytical thinking, and subjects like philosophy or logic could be introduced to secondary curricula to cultivate ethical reasoning and intellectual curiosity.

Moral character and civic responsibility are central to both Plato's and Aristotle's educational aims. Plato viewed education as a means to instill justice and virtue, creating harmonious societies, while Aristotle saw it as a tool for developing virtuous citizens who contribute to the common good (Aristotle, 1996; Plato, 2004). In Nigeria, where issues like corruption and ethnic tensions challenge national cohesion, policies should embed character education and civic engagement in the curriculum. This could include mandatory civic education programs that teach values like integrity, empathy, and social justice, drawing on Nigeria's rich cultural diversity. Community service initiatives or participatory learning projects, such as local governance simulations, could further instill a sense of civic duty, aligning with Aristotle's vision of education for the *polis* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* - a state of flourishing and well-being - positions education as a pathway to personal fulfillment, a view echoed by Plato's emphasis on societal harmony (Aristotle, 2009; Plato, 2004). In Nigeria, where socio - economic stressors and mental health challenges are significant, educational policies should prioritize student well - being. This could involve establishing school - based counseling services, promoting extracurricular activities that build emotional resilience, and ensuring safe, inclusive learning environments. Drawing on global best practices, such as the World Health Organization's guidelines for mental health in schools, policies could integrate mindfulness programs or stress management workshops to support students' holistic development (World Health Organization, 2021).

Implications for Educational Practice

In the classroom, educators should align their practices with Plato's and Aristotle's emphasis on education tailored to individual abilities. Differentiated instruction, where teachers adapt lessons to students' unique needs and strengths, can ensure that all learners are challenged appropriately. For instance, rural schools might incorporate agricultural training to prepare students for local economies, while urban schools could emphasize digital skills like coding. Partnerships with local industries can provide practical learning experiences, such as internships or apprenticeships, ensuring that education remains relevant to Nigeria's socio - economic context (Aristotle, 1996). To foster critical thinking, educators should shift from traditional lecture - based methods to student-centered approaches. Techniques like Socratic seminars, where students engage in dialogue to

explore complex ideas, or problem - based learning, where they tackle real - world challenges, can stimulate intellectual growth. For example, science teachers could use environmental issues like climate change to teach critical analysis, while mathematics instructors might incorporate budgeting exercises to develop practical problem-solving skills (Plato, 2004). Continuous professional development is essential to equip teachers with the tools to facilitate such approaches, ensuring that classrooms become spaces for intellectual exploration (World Bank, 2020).

Educators also have a responsibility to nurture moral character and civic engagement. By integrating ethical discussions into lessons - such as exploring Nigeria's historical struggles for democracy in social studies classes - teachers can help students develop a sense of justice and responsibility. Extracurricular activities like debate clubs, community clean - up projects, or student councils can provide practical avenues for civic participation. Teachers themselves should model ethical behavior, as Aristotle emphasized the role of exemplars in shaping moral character (Aristotle, 2009). Promoting happiness and well - being in the classroom requires creating supportive, inclusive environments where students feel valued. Educators can foster positive relationships through open communication and empathy, addressing issues like bullying or discrimination promptly. Incorporating activities like music, sports, or mindfulness exercises can enhance students' emotional well - being, aligning with Aristotle's vision of *eudaimonia* (World Health Organization, 2021). Teachers should also be trained to identify mental health concerns and connect students with counseling resources, ensuring that education supports both academic and personal growth.

Challenges and Opportunities

Nigeria's educational system is grappling with significant obstacles that hinder its ability to deliver quality education and contribute to national development. One of the most pressing challenges is inadequate funding, which limits the government's capacity to invest in essential resources, such as textbooks, learning materials, and modern facilities. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, suffer from dilapidated infrastructure, including overcrowded classrooms, lack of electricity, and insufficient sanitation facilities, which create un conducive learning environments. Additionally, teacher training remains a critical issue, as many educators lack access to continuous professional development or are not qualified, impacting the quality of instruction. These challenges reflect systemic issues that require comprehensive reforms to align Nigeria's education system with global standards and the philosophical ideals of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, who emphasized education as a tool for personal and societal transformation. Despite these challenges, Nigeria has significant opportunities to reform and innovate its educational system, drawing inspiration from the holistic and purpose-driven educational frameworks proposed by Plato and Aristotle. One promising avenue is the integration of technology to enhance access to quality education. By leveraging digital tools, such as e-learning platforms, mobile applications, and virtual classrooms, Nigeria can bridge the gap between urban and rural education, providing students in remote areas with access to high-quality resources and instruction. Technology can also facilitate personalized learning experiences, enabling students to learn at their own pace and engage with interactive content. For example, initiatives like online learning portals and educational apps have shown promise in other developing nations and could be adapted to Nigeria's context, provided there is investment in digital infrastructure and teacher training to support technology adoption (Olaniran & Agnello, 2023).

Another critical opportunity lies in prioritizing skills development that aligns with the needs of Nigeria's labor market and global economy. Plato's emphasis on education as a means of preparing individuals for specific roles in society aligns with the need for vocational and technical training programs that equip students with practical, employable skills. Nigeria's economy, which is increasingly diversifying beyond oil, demands a workforce skilled in areas such as technology, agriculture, and entrepreneurship. By reforming curricula to include hands-on training in fields like coding, renewable energy, and agribusiness, the education system can better prepare students to contribute to economic growth and reduce unemployment rates. Programs like the National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) are steps in this direction, but broader implementation and partnerships with industries are needed to ensure relevance and scalability (Afolabi & Loto, 2024). Incorporating civic education into the curriculum presents another opportunity to foster a sense of citizenship, patriotism, and community service, echoing Aristotle's view of education as a means to cultivate virtuous citizens who contribute to the common good. Nigeria's diverse society, often marked by ethnic and religious tensions, could benefit from an education system that promotes unity, ethical leadership, and social responsibility. Civic education programs that teach students about democratic values, conflict resolution, and community engagement can empower them to address societal challenges and participate actively in nation-building. For instance, integrating service-learning projects into schools, where students work on community development initiatives, could instill a sense of duty and collective responsibility. Recent studies highlight the potential of civic education to reduce social fragmentation and promote national cohesion in diverse societies like Nigeria (Ibrahim & Musa, 2025). By addressing these challenges and seizing these opportunities, Nigeria can draw on the timeless educational philosophies of Plato and Aristotle to create a system that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters critical thinking, practical skills, and civic virtue. Such reforms would align with the broader goal of education as a catalyst for a better Nigeria, equipping citizens to navigate and shape a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

The educational aims of Plato and Aristotle offer valuable lessons that can guide meaningful reforms in Nigeria's educational system. Their emphasis on functional, ethical, and holistic education remains critical for national development. By integrating these classical principles into contemporary practice, Nigeria can cultivate well-rounded citizens capable of building a better society. Nigeria stands at a pivotal moment—by weaving Plato's merit-based functionality and Aristotle's pursuit of virtuous flourishing into ongoing reforms, the nation can transform education from a challenge into a catalyst for unity, prosperity, and national renewal.

Recommendations

- 1. Implementing Plato's Functional Education to Bridge Nigeria's Skill Gap:** Inspired by Plato's tripartite structure, clear, merit-based pathways for vocational, technical, and intellectual tracks should be created in our educational system. The high unemployment rate - affecting roughly **33.3%** of the labor force according to recent trends - can only be solved by aligning student training with their natural abilities and the actual needs of the economy.
- 2. Applying Aristotelian Virtue Ethics to Nigeria's Civic Education Curriculum:** This recommendation addresses the "moral development" stage of Aristotle's

philosophy. There should be a complete overhaul of the current Civic Education curriculum, replacing rote memorization of laws with Habituation. This involves practical, school - based community service and leadership simulations designed to foster integrity, empathy, and national unity as a direct strategy to combat long - term systemic corruption and ethnic disunity.

3. **Prioritizing School Nutrition and Safety as a Prerequisite for Learning:** Based on Aristotle's emphasis on physical health as the foundation for intellectual growth, this article would urge the government to treat school feeding programs and infrastructure security as educational priorities rather than social welfare. It would highlight that with over 10-18 million out-of-school children in Nigeria, improving the "physical" environment (health and safety) is the first necessary step to reduce dropout rates and improve cognitive performance.
4. **A Strategy for Integrating Socratic Inquiry and STEM in Teacher Training:** Drawing on Plato's "Dialectics" and Aristotle's "Inquiry-based learning," this piece focuses on the Implications for Practice. National reform of Teacher Training Institutes (NTI and Colleges of Education) to move educators away from lecture-based methods toward student-centered, problem-solving techniques is recommended. The inclusion of logic and critical thinking as mandatory subjects for all teaching candidates is also proposed.
5. **Democratizing Excellence: Plato's Meritocracy as a Tool for National Cohesion:** It suggests that by creating a truly rigorous, transparent, and merit-based national assessment system, the government can ensure that leadership roles (Philosopher-Kings) are filled by the most capable citizens regardless of their ethnic or social background. This would serve as a long-term solution to the challenges of "quota systems" and "godfatherism" in the Nigerian civil service.

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