

## CRITICAL THINKING AS A CORE AIM OF EDUCATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Abstract

The growing recognition of critical thinking as an essential skill for navigating complex contemporary challenges has prompted educational systems worldwide to reconsider their pedagogical priorities and learning outcomes. This paper explores critical thinking as a core aim of education through philosophical analysis, examining its theoretical foundations and practical implications for educational practice. It utilizes philosophical inquiry to analyze the conceptual nature of critical thinking, tracing its intellectual heritage from ancient Socratic methods through Enlightenment rationality to contemporary educational philosophy. Based on relevant findings from philosophical literature, this study discusses how critical thinking facilitates intellectual development, moral reasoning, democratic citizenship, and effective problem-solving, and the impact this has on both individual learners and society. The paper examines the Nigerian educational context, analyzing current challenges including curriculum emphasis on memorization, teacher preparation inadequacies, examination-driven learning approaches, and socio-political factors that influence educational practice. Additionally, the paper addresses the philosophical challenges between promoting critical inquiry and maintaining respect for cultural values and established authority. It concludes by asserting that critical thinking, properly understood and implemented, can serve as a transformative educational goal that prepares students to be intellectually independent and socially responsible citizens while respecting cultural foundations.

**Keywords:** *critical thinking, philosophy, educational reform, Nigerian education, Socratic questioning, curriculum reform, teacher education, rote learning*

### Introduction

The ability to think clearly and question ideas has become increasingly important in contemporary society. Countries around the globe are recognizing that students need more than just facts and formulas, they need to know how to analyze information, make good decisions, and solve complex problems. This growing demand for critical thinking in education reflects the understanding that the challenges of the 21st century require minds that can adapt, question, and reason effectively (Pauzi, 2024). However, many educational systems still focus heavily on memorizing information rather than teaching students how to think about that information. This problem is particularly evident in Nigeria, where the educational system often emphasizes rote learning and passing examinations over developing thinking skills. Students are frequently taught to repeat what they have learned without questioning or analyzing it deeply. The purpose of this paper is to examine critical thinking from a philosophical perspective and argue for its place as a central goal of education. By looking at the philosophical foundations and practical implications of critical thinking, one can better understand why it should be at the heart of educational practice (Raj et al., 2022). This study is significant because the future of any society depends on citizens who can think independently, solve problems creatively, and make informed decisions. For Nigeria specifically, developing critical thinking skills could help

address many social, economic, and political challenges by producing graduates who are not just knowledgeable but also thoughtful and capable of innovation.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Critical thinking can be understood as the ability to analyze information carefully, evaluate different viewpoints, and reach reasonable conclusions based on evidence and logic. It is not simply about being negative or finding fault with everything, but rather about approaching ideas with a healthy curiosity and willingness to examine them thoroughly (Miller, 2023). Various scholars have provided important definitions that help clarify the nature of critical thinking. Robert Ennis (1985), one of the most influential researchers in this field, defines critical thinking as reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. This definition emphasizes the practical nature of critical thinking as a tool for making decisions and forming beliefs based on careful consideration rather than impulse or tradition. Peter Facione (1990), through his work with the American Philosophical Association, describes critical thinking as purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. This comprehensive definition highlights the systematic and deliberate nature of critical thinking processes. Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2006) offer another perspective, defining critical thinking as the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it. Their definition emphasizes the self-improving aspect of critical thinking, suggesting that the goal is not just to think about external problems but to continuously develop one's own thinking capabilities. They stress that critical thinking involves both intellectual skills and intellectual traits such as intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and intellectual empathy. Matthew Lipman (1991) describes critical thinking as thinking that facilitates judgment because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context. This definition emphasizes the importance of standards in evaluation and the adaptive nature of critical thinking as it responds to different situations and circumstances. Diane Halpern (2003) defines critical thinking as the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. This definition focuses on the practical effectiveness of critical thinking as a means of achieving better results in various situations (Pauzi, 2024). The core features of critical thinking include several interconnected skills. Analysis involves breaking down complex ideas into smaller parts to understand them better. Evaluation means judging the quality and reliability of information or arguments. Logical reasoning helps individuals connect ideas in ways that make sense and follow clear patterns of thought. Creativity allows individuals to generate new solutions and see problems from different angles. Critical thinking involves being aware of one's own thinking processes and biases, which helps in making better judgments. It is important to distinguish critical thinking from rote learning, which has dominated many educational systems. Rote learning focuses on memorizing facts, formulas, and procedures without necessarily understanding their meaning or application. Students learn to repeat information exactly as they received it. Critical thinking, on the other hand, encourages students to understand, question, and apply knowledge in new situations. While memorization has its place in education, it should not be the primary focus if the Nations aim is to develop thinking citizens (Favero et al., 2025).

### **Philosophical Foundations of Critical Thinking in Education**

The emphasis on critical thinking in education has deep historical roots that stretch back to ancient times. The Greek philosopher Socrates, who lived over 2,000 years ago, developed a method of questioning that challenged people to examine their beliefs and assumptions. Through what is now called Socratic questioning, Socrates showed that many ideas people accepted without thought were actually unclear or contradictory (Abdulaziz, 2023). This approach demonstrated that real knowledge comes not from accepting what one is told, but from carefully examining and testing ideas. The Socratic method involved asking probing questions that revealed inconsistencies in thinking and forced individuals to clarify their reasoning. The Socratic approach established several principles that remain central to critical thinking education. It emphasized the importance of intellectual humility, recognizing the limits of one's knowledge and being open to learning. It demonstrated that questioning is not an attack on authority but a path to deeper understanding. It showed that genuine knowledge requires active participation from the learner rather than passive reception of information. The Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th centuries further strengthened the philosophical foundation for critical thinking in education. Philosophers during this time believed strongly in the power of human reason and argued that people should use logic and evidence rather than tradition or authority alone to understand the world. Thinkers like René Descartes emphasized systematic doubt as a method for arriving at certain knowledge, while John Locke argued that the mind begins as a blank slate and that knowledge comes through

experience and reflection. This emphasis on rationality and empirical investigation laid the groundwork for educational approaches that value questioning and independent thought (Matta, 2021).

John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator who worked in the early 20th century, made particularly important contributions to understanding critical thinking in education. Dewey argued that education should center on reflective inquiry, the process of identifying problems, gathering information, considering different solutions, and testing ideas through experience. The philosopher believed that students learn best when they are actively engaged in solving real problems rather than passively receiving information. Dewey's pragmatic approach emphasized that thinking should be connected to action and that educational experiences should mirror the kinds of problem-solving that students will encounter in life. Contemporary philosophers of education have continued to develop these ideas, arguing that critical thinking is essential for both individual development and social progress. Richard Paul and Linda Elder have emphasized the importance of intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, and fairness in evaluating thinking. Matthew Lipman developed the Philosophy for Children movement, which introduces young students to philosophical thinking through structured discussions and questioning (Hassan et al., 2022). These modern approaches emphasize that in a democratic society, citizens must be able to evaluate political arguments, assess media claims, and participate thoughtfully in public debates.

### **Critical Thinking as a Core Aim of Education**

Critical thinking plays a fundamental role in intellectual development by helping students move beyond simple acceptance of information to deeper understanding and wisdom. When students learn to analyze and evaluate ideas, they develop the mental tools needed for lifelong learning. They become capable of updating their knowledge as new information becomes available and of recognizing when previous understanding was incomplete or incorrect. This intellectual flexibility is particularly important in fields where knowledge evolves rapidly, such as science, technology, and social sciences. The development of critical thinking skills also enhances metacognition, the ability to think about thinking itself. Students who develop these capabilities become more aware of their own learning processes, can identify their strengths and weaknesses as learners, and can adapt their approaches to different types of problems. This self-awareness contributes to more effective learning and greater intellectual independence. The ethical and moral dimensions of critical reasoning are equally important and often overlooked in discussions of educational goals (Okpara & Ezeador, 2024). Critical thinking helps students develop moral judgment by teaching them to consider the consequences of actions, examine different ethical perspectives, and make decisions based on principles rather than impulse or pressure. When students learn to analyze ethical dilemmas systematically, they become better equipped to navigate complex moral situations in both personal and professional contexts. Furthermore, critical thinking contributes to the development of intellectual virtues such as honesty, courage, and humility. Students learn to acknowledge when they do not know something, to change their minds when presented with better evidence, and to consider viewpoints that challenge their existing beliefs. These qualities are essential for moral development and for maintaining relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

Critical thinking also serves as a foundation for democratic citizenship in ways that extend beyond simple political participation. In a democracy, citizens must evaluate political candidates, assess policy proposals, and participate in public discussions about important issues. Without critical thinking skills, people may be swayed by emotional appeals or false information rather than making decisions based on careful consideration of evidence and arguments. Democratic societies therefore have a strong interest in ensuring that their educational systems develop these thinking capabilities. The relationship between critical thinking and democratic participation becomes particularly important in the age of information abundance and rapid communication (Matta, 2021). Citizens are constantly exposed to competing claims about important issues, and they need the skills to sort through this information effectively. Critical thinking provides the tools necessary for distinguishing reliable sources from unreliable ones, for recognizing bias and propaganda, and for understanding the difference between opinion and evidence-based conclusions. Furthermore, critical thinking is closely connected to effective problem-solving in both individual and collective contexts. In personal situations, people face complex challenges that require them to gather information, consider multiple approaches, and develop creative solutions. In professional environments, workers increasingly need to adapt to changing circumstances, collaborate with others to solve problems, and innovate in response to new challenges. Students who have learned to think critically are better prepared to tackle these challenges because they have developed systematic approaches to understanding problems and generating solutions (Okolie et al., 2021).

### **Critical Thinking and the Nigerian Educational System**

The current state of education in Nigeria reveals significant challenges in developing critical thinking skills among students. Many schools continue to emphasize memorization and repetition, with success measured primarily by performance on standardized examinations. Students often learn to provide expected answers rather than to think independently about questions. This approach produces graduates who may possess extensive factual knowledge but struggle to apply their knowledge creatively or to think through new problems effectively. The examination-oriented system has created a culture where teaching to the test becomes the primary goal, leaving little room for activities that promote analytical thinking. Students become skilled at reproducing information but may lack the ability to synthesize knowledge from different sources, to evaluate conflicting claims, or to generate original solutions to problems (Okpara, 2024). This educational approach, while efficient for covering curriculum content, fails to prepare students for the complex challenges they will face in higher education, professional life, and civic participation. Several factors contribute to these challenges in embedding critical thinking in Nigerian education. Curriculum content often focuses on covering large amounts of information rather than developing thinking skills. The curriculum structure typically emphasizes breadth over depth, requiring teachers to move quickly through topics without allowing sufficient time for students to engage in deep analysis or extended reflection. This pressure to cover material leaves little opportunity for the kind of sustained inquiry that develops critical thinking abilities. Assessment methods also reinforce rote learning approaches. Standardized tests typically reward students for providing predetermined answers rather than for demonstrating thinking processes or creative problem-solving. This creates a mismatch between the goal of developing critical thinking and the methods used to evaluate student learning. Teachers, knowing that their effectiveness is often judged by student performance on these tests, naturally align their instruction with assessment demands rather than with broader educational goals (Sarkingobir & Bello, 2024).

Teacher preparation and pedagogy present another significant challenge to implementing critical thinking education. Many teachers received their own education in systems that emphasized memorization, and they may lack training in methods that promote critical thinking. Teaching students to think critically requires different skills than teaching them to memorize information. Teachers need to know how to ask probing questions, facilitate discussions, and create learning experiences that challenge students to analyze and evaluate ideas. They must also be comfortable with uncertainty and with allowing students to explore ideas that may not have clear-cut answers. The traditional teacher-centered approach common in many Nigerian classrooms can also inhibit critical thinking development. When teachers do most of the talking and students are expected primarily to listen and take notes, there are few opportunities for students to practice reasoning skills or to engage in the kind of dialogue that develops thinking abilities. Shifting to more student-centered approaches requires significant changes in both teacher beliefs about learning and classroom practices. Socio-political influences also shape educational practices in ways that may discourage critical thinking (Pauzi, 2024). In some contexts, questioning authority or challenging established ideas may be seen as disrespectful or potentially destabilizing. This can create pressure on schools to focus on compliance and conformity rather than independent thought. Additionally, economic pressures may lead families and schools to prioritize immediate practical outcomes, such as passing examinations for university admission, over longer-term goals like developing thinking skills. Cultural factors may also influence attitudes toward critical thinking in education. Some traditional educational philosophies emphasize respect for established knowledge and authority figures, which could be perceived as conflicting with the questioning attitude promoted by critical thinking education. Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for reform that could strengthen critical thinking in Nigerian classrooms. Schools could redesign curricula to include more opportunities for analysis, discussion, and creative problem-solving while maintaining coverage of essential content. This would involve reorganizing subjects to emphasize connections between different areas of knowledge and providing more time for students to explore topics in depth rather than superficially covering many topics. Assessment practices could also be reformed to better support critical thinking development. Alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio evaluation, project-based assessment, and performance tasks, could complement traditional testing while providing better measures of thinking skills. These approaches would require teachers to develop new evaluation methods but would also provide richer information about student learning and progress (Raj et al., 2022).

### **Philosophical Appraisal**

Positioning critical thinking as a central aim of education offers numerous strengths that make it an attractive educational goal for contemporary societies. Critical thinking develops students' intellectual independence, enabling them to continue learning throughout their lives rather than becoming dependent on others to interpret information for

them. This intellectual autonomy becomes increasingly important as the pace of change accelerates and as new information and technologies constantly emerge. Students who can think critically are better equipped to adapt to changing circumstances and to evaluate new ideas on their own merit. From a social perspective, critical thinking contributes to the development of informed citizens who can participate effectively in democratic processes and contribute to social progress. Societies benefit when their members can think through complex issues, evaluate competing claims, and work together to solve problems (Okpara & Ezeador, 2024). Critical thinking also supports economic development by producing workers who can adapt to changing circumstances, innovate, and solve problems creatively. In knowledge-based economies, the ability to analyze information, generate new ideas, and make sound decisions becomes a crucial competitive advantage. The emphasis on critical thinking also promotes intellectual honesty and reduces susceptibility to manipulation and propaganda. Students who learn to evaluate sources, recognize logical fallacies, and distinguish between evidence and opinion are less likely to be deceived by false claims or to make decisions based on incomplete or biased information. This protection against manipulation serves both individual and social interests (Favero et al., 2025). However, there are also legitimate limitations and criticisms to consider when positioning critical thinking as a central educational aim. Some argue that excessive emphasis on critical thinking might lead to skepticism about all forms of authority and tradition, potentially undermining social cohesion and respect for established knowledge. If students are constantly encouraged to question everything, they might develop an attitude of cynicism that prevents them from appreciating the wisdom embedded in cultural traditions or the expertise of legitimate authorities. Students need a solid foundation of factual knowledge before they can engage in meaningful analysis and evaluation. Without this foundation, critical thinking exercises might devolve into uninformed opinion-sharing rather than rigorous intellectual inquiry. This concern highlights the importance of balancing critical thinking instruction with systematic knowledge acquisition (Miller, 2023).

In the Nigerian, there are additional considerations about how to balance critical thinking with respect for cultural values and social harmony. Some traditional educational approaches emphasize respect for elders and acceptance of established wisdom, which might seem to conflict with the questioning attitude promoted by critical thinking education. Traditional African educational philosophies often emphasize community values, collective wisdom, and respect for ancestral knowledge, which could be perceived as incompatible with individual critical inquiry. Critical thinking, properly understood, can actually enhance appreciation for cultural wisdom by helping students understand the reasoning behind traditional practices and beliefs. The goal is not to reject all forms of authority or tradition, but to develop the ability to evaluate claims thoughtfully and to distinguish between wisdom worth preserving and practices that may need modification (Sarkingobir & Bello, 2024). A balanced perspective recognizes that critical thinking should be developed alongside other important educational goals rather than replacing them entirely. Students need both a solid foundation of knowledge and the skills to think about that knowledge critically. They need to learn respect for legitimate authority while also developing the ability to question and evaluate claims when appropriate. In Nigerian, this means finding ways to honor cultural values while also preparing students for the demands of a modern, interconnected world where the ability to think independently and adapt to change is increasingly important (Matta, 2021).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This examination of critical thinking from a philosophical perspective confirms its importance as a central aim of modern education. The historical development of ideas about critical thinking, from ancient Greek philosophy through contemporary educational theory, demonstrates a consistent recognition that the ability to think independently and rationally is fundamental to human flourishing and social progress. For Nigeria, developing critical thinking skills in students represents both a necessity and an opportunity. As the country faces complex challenges related to development, governance, and social change, it needs citizens who can think through problems creatively and make informed decisions. The educational system has the potential to contribute to national development by producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of independent thought and innovation. Several practical recommendations can help integrate critical thinking more effectively into Nigerian education. Curriculum restructuring should reduce the emphasis on memorization and create more opportunities for analysis, discussion, and creative problem-solving. Rather than simply covering vast amounts of content, curricula should focus on helping students understand key concepts deeply and learn to apply them in various contexts. Teacher education reforms are equally important. Training programs for teachers should include substantial preparation in pedagogical methods that promote critical thinking (Abdulaziz, 2023). Teachers need to learn how to ask questions that stimulate thought, how to facilitate productive discussions, and how to create learning experiences that challenge students to think



independently. This might require significant changes in how teacher preparation programs are designed and delivered. Schools should also work to create environments that encourage open dialogue and debate. Students need opportunities to express their ideas, question what they learn, and engage with different perspectives. This requires developing classroom cultures where intellectual curiosity is valued and where students feel safe to ask questions and explore ideas, even when those ideas challenge conventional thinking. From a philosophical standpoint, embracing critical thinking as a core educational aim reflects a commitment to human dignity and potential. It recognizes that each person has the capacity for rational thought and that education should develop this capacity rather than simply filling students with predetermined information (Hassan et al., 2022). This approach to education honors both individual growth and social responsibility, preparing students to contribute thoughtfully to their communities and to the broader human conversation about how to live well together. By making critical thinking a central focus of education, Nigeria can prepare individuals not just for the challenges they face today, but for the unknown challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

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