Tabula Rasa Theory: A Basis for Creativity and Inventions in Education

By

ARIKS SAMUEL BASHAYI
Department of Physics,
College of Education,
Akwanga

Abstract
The educational theory of tabula rasa is based on John Lock’s psychology. When the child is born he knows nothing, but he can do several things, he can smell, suck and move his head. He can feel comfortable and uncomfortable. The child inevitably grows into the man and should grow into a healthy man as possible. Locke suggested practice for child’s education in order to make what he learnt a habit, which is easy and natural. The argument of this research paper is anchored on the logic that, with the philosophy of tabula rasa education, the educator is to improve the child through his learning experience. Modern education places the child at the centre of the educational system. It is therefore the task of the educator to study the child born a tabula rasa as a psycho physical organism. The educator is to know the working of the child’s mind, and how to adapt his subject matter and method to suit the different stages of the child’s developments. The child’s experience forms the groundwork of his education.

A British educational philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704) in his philosophic inquiry concerning the development of human knowledge, propounded that the child’s mind is like a clean slate (tabula rasa), void of all characters upon which experience alone can subsequently write knowledge. Tabula rasa theory is to be understood as Abiogn (2001) contended in his study, as an empirical theory based on empirical observation of the development of human knowledge, which Locke attributed to the child’s frame of mind, before ideas are imprinted on it, by the reaction of the senses to the external world of objects. The tabula rasa theory laid great emphasis on experience,
on extra-mental realities, on things that can be seen, heard, tasted, touched, smelt and on quantification. The child learns through experience on how to cope with life and survive his environment which is often cruel and uncertain.

In this regard therefore, Axtell (1968) highlighted that the tabula rasa theory provides a system of education that would involve a general orientation of the whole individual and enable him develop a sound mind in a sound body. However, Locke maintained in Eliot (1910) and Mabbott (1973), that “tabula rasa theory calls for a new way of life for the child,” which is an educational reform. But how best to start than to raise the child’s standard of consciousness through education. The child has to use education for his self-build up, self-reliance, self-actualization and for victory over self, Acquiring knowledge, skills and technical-know-how alone, may not be all the child requires. The child who is the acting agent, needs to be fully and actively developed. This is education aimed at stimulating, developing and reforming the dormant child (tabula rasa) to think and to discover his potentials. Hence, Okaor (1992) adjudged that learning is an intimate transaction between the learner and his environment. This transaction takes place in specific context.

**The Child Born a Tabula Rasa Grows in His Environment**

At birth, a child has no ideas, no mind per se and no self. In other words, he is not aware that the world is made up of his own body on one hand, and everything else on the other hand. He cannot sustain complicated ideas about the world he lives in, until he can bring together in his brain, images or memories of sounds, sights, smells, feelings and movements that occurred at the same time. It is in the development of these ideas that one can see the humble beginning of the child’s mind and the self. Tin ‘mind’ as ‘Taylor (1982) and Nwachukwu (1995) concurred is a vague word with various meanings. However, in the context of our tabula rasa theory, it is being applied as the whole machinery of ideas and attitudes a person has learnt or constructed from experience, and which he uses to deal with new experiences.

Essentially, learning takes place through the experiences the child has acquired. The term “learning experience” as Tyler (1986) stated, refers to the interaction between the learner and the external conditions in the environment to which the learner can react to. In the light of tabula rasa theory, learning is to begin with the total experience of listening, speaking and acting. The child needs conducive environment in order to learn the correct things from the outset. This assertion correlated with the study of Abiogu (2001), which averred that the child’s educational programming cannot be left to chance, for the child’s life experience affects his life journey, and all human journeys have a terminus a quo and a *terminus ad quem* (a starting point and an end point). Between these two points lies nothing but what is not known, a mass area of uncertainty, an unknown known ones to the Author of life alone.
Consequently, to claim that the child knows nothing, or that he is a tabula rasa means that he does not know that there are different tastes, or different smells, or different sounds. He has no idea of space or time. He does not know how to listen attentively, how to think or how to see things in their exact perspective. The child learns slowly to discriminate between sounds. For instance, his eyes help him to learn about near and far-off sounds, and to see how sounds are made, so that with time a dog's bark comes to mean a dog, even if no dog is in sight. As the child begins to crawl, he gets more experience of moving through distances. Likewise, when he begins to walk, he learns even more about space and distance from his senses of touch and muscle feeling. It is through this type of experience that the child born a tabula rasa learns the meaning of what he sees. The child as a learner is not aware that all that is happening around him is learning. He just goes on enjoying doing things, and though he does not deliberately practice to improve in everything he tries to do, he does improve by enjoying what he does.

Certainly, the fact of the child learning in conducive environment transcends the school parameter. It encompasses the entire community and the nation. For example, the widespread of secret cult practice in the nation affects the behaviour of students in the schools, there is lack of respect for cultures and traditions; lack of will-power to avoid gangsterism and armed robbery; inability to control irrational appetites and inordinate as well as inability to apply logical approach to issues discussion; failure to be of frontier spirit, and to have the common good in mind. The child born a tabula rasa encounters his environment as a bundle of possibilities. Thus, there is need for his education to be organized, co-ordinated and guided with a high level of honesty and dedication.

**Educators’ Role-perspective in the Child Born a Tabula Rasa**

In the educative enterprises, it is arguable that the child born a tabula rasa could be reformed through the practice of habit and character formation at his early age. The child is first fanned in the habit of communication, such as how to exchange greetings with people. This is communication based on language which has been defined by Edwards (1972) and Angeles (1981), as a means of bringing to the mind of another person an idea which is in your own mind.

In other words, when the child is being formed in the habit of exchanging greetings with people, he would according to Mills (1970), learn the appropriate greetings for different periods of the day. This would enable the child born a tabula rasa to develop a time concept, cultivate manners which the society considers as basic to organized life, besides he would become a well integrated child of his society. Similarly, the educator is to form the child born a tabula rasa in the habit of politeness, kindness, responsibility, obedience, modesty, eating, sitting, sleeping, walking, talking and yawning as well as telling the truth without fear of the consequence. As regards the
situation of the child born a tabula rasa, Byrne (1977) stated that without the ability of the educator to form habits, no child could profit by experience alone, and learning would be impossible.

The educational theory of tabula rasa tends to evoke learning-practice for the child, in order to make what he learnt a habit. Such earning-practice is by no way different from the Ethics of Aristotle (38’1- 322B.C), as cited in Thomson (1974:56), which stated that:

The craftsman has to learn how to make things, but he learns in the process of making them. So, men become builders by building, harp players by playing the harps, by similar process, we become just by performing just actions temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions.

Following Aristotle’s angle of thought, man becomes a bricklayer by laying bricks (Faber fabricando fit). The import of the above statement is that, the educator is to enable the child born a tabula rasa to practice what he has learnt, and to make a habit of it when he is grown.

From the foregoing account, the educator is to consider the child born a tabula rasa in his learning practice, like the deaf who depends much on his senses of sight and taste, or like the blind who depends much on his senses of touch, taste and hearing on the acquisition of knowledge. The educator is to appeal to many senses of the child as possible. This research paper therefore re-affirms the study of Obi (1992), which maintained that multi-media approach is an effective means of generating the learners’ active involvement, achievement gains and retention in learning. In a nutshell, the educator is to use instructional aid to save the child from wandering in imagination; to help his understanding and perception of the thing to be known; to bring permanence to knowledge; to bring clarity and undistorted recognition; to allow the child whose mind is a tabula rasa have a realistic or firsthand or a total knowledge of the things to be known.

Implications of Educational Theory of Tabula Rasa

Something is known by description when it is known by inference from what is already known. The educator is to use organized teaching materials to lead the child whose mind is a tabula rasa from his world of ideas and imagination to the world of concrete reality.

The educational theory focuses on the child as a learner, who by virtue of his basic dynamism remains a reformable human person, which tends by his very nature to social life and communion. This implies that his task of educating the child born tabula rasa is to be treated with intense seriousness and undiluted patriotism.
Any given knowledge has various levels of abstraction. It implied that if the child is to be reformed through the educational theory of tabula rasa, the educator is to concern himself with the level of the child’s mental development.

Without the capacity to learn or to modify human behaviour through learning, human adaptability to his environment and survival capacity would be impaired. This implies that the concepts to inform the learning content of the child, whose mind is a tabula rasa, have to include personality development and self-knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Effort has been made in this research paper to articulate how the philosophy of tabula rasa theory could be adopted as basis for childhood educational reform. The researcher likened the child born a tabula rasa to a fertile piece of ground, the educator to the cultivator, and the budding habits to the seeds in the ground. The careful cultivator clears the ground well, chooses only the very best seeds for planting and tends them daily. He conscientiously plucks out the weeds which appear from nowhere, before they become firmly rooted and more numerous than his good seeds. His seeds grow into tall and strong plants, standing in the wind, and his piece of ground is admired by all. Accordingly, the child born a tabula rasa is the product of his environment, for he makes his mind and body what they should be from experience. Thus, the educator should not know less that conducive environment is a condition sine quo non for the child in his educational process.

**Recommendations**

Based on the discussion of this research paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. The theory of tabula rasa is to be adopted for childhood educational reform at the preprimary and primary school levels. The adoption will enable the child realize that to understand or to have knowledge of anything is largely a situation of perceiving how and why, a thing is in any one of its parts related to something else, and to what extent it differs from other things that are similar to it.

2. On the basis of tabula rasa educational theory, there should be regular school supervision to ensure appropriate use of the school curriculum, and the quality of teaching being imparted to the child. Furthermore, worthwhile societal or cultural values are to be injected into the school experience as it when due.

3. The child born a tabula rasa is to be educated by the society (societas humani generis) In view of this: the state as far as possible is to avoid monopoly in the educative enterprise. Other human agencies or associations such as ‘the church and other social organizations within the national framework are to be allowed to participate in the education of the child, In the light of this reason there
should be co-operation and dialogue between the leadership of the various human agencies as regards the progress of the child’s education. Such dialogue and co-operation will in no small measure forestall a kind of dog in the manger attitudinal approach to child’s education.

References


Tabula Rasa Theory: A Basis for Creativity and Inventions in Education

