

# **FACTORS AFFECTING THE AFRICAN CHILD'S RIGHT TO INQUIRE**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*In the 18th century the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau echoing Plato asseverated that children should be free to express their energies in order to develop their special talents. His view suggests that normal development occurs best in a nonrestrictive, supportive environment. According to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, a child is a person under the age of 18 years. Inquiry, which is subsumed in freedom of self-expression, is a basic right of the African child. The African child is a potential inquirer, from all indications. However, language development, intelligence and learning, the three gunas or modes of material nature, family relations, social relationships, a parent's involvement in secret cult and socialization affect the right of the African child to inquire. The study views the foregoing amongst others and maintains that if availed to anti-material inquiry, the African child can better the lots of understanding of his/her pristine identity, environment, and control of his/her passion and thus improve human relations.*

## **Introduction**

Both Plato and Aristotle wrote about children. Plato believed that children are born with special talents and that their training should stress those talents. His views are consistent with modern thinking about individual differences and education. Aristotle proposed methods for observing children's behaviour that were forerunners of modern methods. For many centuries thereafter, little interest was shown in the development of children because they were regarded only as miniature adults.

In the 18th century the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau seemed to echo Plato when he stated that children should be free to express their energies in order to develop their special talents. His view suggests that normal development occurs best in a nonrestrictive, supportive environment. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (Encarta 2002). Inquiry, subsumed in freedom of self-expression is a basic right of the child. According to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, a child is a person under the age of 18 years (Vasudev 2001<sup>K</sup>). Inquire literarily means to ask to be told something by somebody (Encarta 2002; Microsoft 1999). “The right of the child to inquire” implies the moral justification as required by law or duty of a young person to ask to be told something. Inquire is verb derivative of the noun, inquiry.

From the point of view of Critical and Creative Thinking (CACT), inquiry is an eight fold process which begins when difficulties crop up concerning things or issues, which prior to that time had been taken for granted (Anih 2003). When inquiry is initiated it is not supposed to end until a more acceptable or satisfactory solution substitutes the one that has become unsatisfactory. Characteristically, the stages of the inquiry process are:

1. Feeling of difficulty or frustration
2. Doubt (what went wrong)?

3. Formulation of the problem (or defining the problem)
4. Hypothesis (making up a theory)
5. First efforts to test hypothesis (figuring out logical consequences)
6. Discovery of evidence which contradicts hypothesis (counter-instance)
7. Revising the hypothesis to account for contradictory evidence
8. Application of revised hypothesis to life situation (finding practical consequences) (Anih 2003).

Inquiry, or the act of seeking information, is a thinking skill. Inquiry skills enable children to:

- ask relevant questions
- pose and define problems
- plan what to do and how to research
- predict outcomes, test conclusions and improve ideas (Fisher 1995)

Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education asseverates that one of the objectives of pre-primary education is inculcating spirit of inquiry and creativity in the child (FGN 1998)

### **What Constitutes a Right?**

Denotatively, right implies behavior, actions, etc, morally good or justified; required by law or duty (Microsoft 2002). From the point of view of law (Fawehinmi 1990:375), "A right is an interest recognized and protected by the law." Every right involves a threefold relation in which the owner of it stands, namely:

- (a) It is a right against some person or persons;
- (b) It is a right to some act or omission of such person or persons;
- (c) It is a right over or to something to which the act or omission relates.

A situation where respondents are claiming the right to determine whether appellants or another chief can wear a crown. This is a right in respect of the act over the right to wear a crown which appellants purports to claim. This is native law and custom and protected by the constitution. This is the characteristic mark. It is therefore a legal right accompanied by the power of enforceability by the instituting of legal proceedings (Fawehinmi 1990).

The foregoing ratiocination of the nature of interests of the respondents in the claim of the appellant to wear a crown, and of recognition and protection of such interest by the law, the respondents have a legally enforceable interest which confers upon them the right to bring the action (Fawehinmi 1990).

In a civilized state, every man, woman and child must have equal and rapid access to fair system of laws. In the present dispensation we sometime refer to this as human rights. Obviously human rights are some of the more conspicuous causalities of the present era of hypocrisy, quarrels/fighting and anxieties (Radha 1998).

### **Universal Declaration of Rights**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the resolution adopted unanimously in December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations (Encarta 2004). The objective of the 30-article declaration is to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The declaration proclaims the personal, civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of humans, which are limited only by recognition for the rights and freedoms of others and the requirements of morality, public order, and general welfare (Encarta 2004). Among the rights cited by the declaration are the rights to life, liberty, and security of person; to freedom from arbitrary arrest; to a fair trial; to be presumed innocent until proved guilty; to freedom from interference with the privacy of one's home and correspondence; to freedom of movement and residence; to asylum, nationality, and ownership of property; to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion, and expression; to association, peaceful assembly, and participation in government; to social security, work, rest, and a standard of living adequate for health and well-being; to education; and to participation in the social life of one's community (Encarta 2004). The declaration was conceived as the first part of an international bill of rights. The UN Commission on Human Rights directed its efforts to the incorporation of the main principles of the declaration into various international agreements. The General Assembly in 1955 authorized two human rights covenants, one relating to civil and political rights, and the other to economic, social, and cultural rights. After a long struggle for ratification, both of these covenants became effective in January 1976 (Encarta 2004).

## **Inquiry: Intrinsic Function of the Child**

I was in Accra-Ghana (Africa) in swinging January 2003 and was scheduled to return to Nigeria on the 31st of January 2003. So, I went to Tudu Street, where I could board a Lagos-bound taxi. When I boarded a Volvo saloon cab and sat at the rear right seat, a primary school age boy was sitting in the front right seat of the said car. I initiated a dialogue: “Who are you traveling with?” And he responded, “I am traveling with my father.” “Where is your father?” “I don’t know where he has gone,” he said. So, I asked, “What is your name?” “My name is Richardson,” he answered. “What is your age?” “I’m 9 years.” “Thanks,” I said, and closed the “dialogue box.” I began perusing through a book I had titled *Leadership for an Age of Higher Consciousness*, authored by Swami Krishnapada. Afterwards, Richardson opened up another segment of a “dialogue box.”

“Uncle, can I come to sit by you?” My little friend Richardson (2003) inquired. “You’re free to do so,” I said. So, he came and sat down by my left hand side in the car. “Wow, look at that one,” pointing his right hand to a lady passing by. Out of curiosity I asked, “What is it?” “Look at her bottom,” he said. She was lady with heavy duty buttocks. “What is wrong with her bottom?” Bowing his head, Richardson did not respond to my question. Afterwards, he raised his head. “Uncle, look at that tall house,” he pointed to a structure few kilometers away. And he inquired, “How did the people climb it when they were making that house?” “The builders used scaffold to climb to different heights when they were constructing that house,” I posited.

Next, my little friend pointed to his left hand side of the Tudu Street and inquired, “Uncle, which place is this?” “It is part and parcel of Tudu Street, here in Accra.” Then Richardson’s dad came and he relapsed into quietness. His father noticed that he has left his front seat in the car where he was supposed to be sitting and was now sitting with a “stranger”, Richardson’s father immediately chastised him, and ordered him to go back to his front seat. “You stubborn boy, why don’t you remain where I asked you to stay?” Richardson never uttered a word. “Come on, go to your seat,” the father ordered. He left quietly to his front seat.

Govinda (2003), a three years old boy questioned his father: “Daddy, we were dancing in the temple but you were not there, why?” Atmarama (2003) responded, “I was in a meeting with some devotees.”

Inquiry is very common scenario in our every day dealings: questions are posed for clarification or with the expectation of some clarification. Of course, answers have to be proffered to the questions raised by members of the dialogue group. This process of asking to be told something by an individual is what constitutes inquiry. This inquiring spirit is inherent even in children.

When unmarried girls converge they inquire from each other about their exploits with men. Also, when young men come together they make inquiries from one another about their exploits with members of the opposite sex. When merchants meet they discuss and make inquiries about their explorations in the world of business and trade; similarly, when aristocrats get together they inquire from each other about the welfare of their kingdoms. When *sadhus* or transcendentalists congregate they make humble submissions and inquiries that would elicit responses that would be of benefit to humankind.

According to applied Vedic science (Prabhupada 2000) human life is distinguished from animal life by supramundane inquiry: *athato brahma jijnasa*, or now as humans, let us inquire about the anti-material. This is a basic principle that can help the child in understanding his pristine identity and environment in a wholesome way, which ultimately leads to better human relations and extrication from the shackles of mundane inebriety.

## **Factors Affecting the Right of the African Child to Inquire**

### *Language Development and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

The aptitude to communicate and to comprehend language is one of the main achievements of human beings. An astonishing feature of language development is the speed with which it is acquired: The first word is spoken at about 12 months; by two years of age most children have vocabularies of about 270 words, and this increases to 2,600 words at the age of six (Encarta 2002; Microsoft 1999). It is almost impossible to determine the number of sentence constructions that can be generated within a single

language. Children, however, use syntactically correct sentences by the age of three and highly complex constructions by the age of five (Encarta 2002). This extraordinary phenomenon cannot be explained by means of simple learning theory. The American linguist Noam Chomsky postulated that the human brain is especially constructed to detect and reproduce language; the mental system does not require formal learning and will function perfectly when language is available to the child (Encarta 2004). Although developmental psycholinguists do not agree with all of Chomsky's concepts, they do accept the idea of special mental language systems. At the present dispensation theorists are concerned with the relationship between cognitive growth and language. It is now assumed that it reflects children's concepts and develops as their concepts expand. Inquiry skill is subsumed in language development since more often than not the power of inquiry is exercised in spoken language. A right is also prosecuted in spoken language. Thus, language development plays a role in the right of the child to inquire.

#### *Intelligence/Learning and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

Intelligence may be defined as the ability to manipulate abstract verbal concepts effectively (Microsoft 2002). This definition is reflected in the types of questions asked on intelligence tests for children (Encarta 2004). Two well-known tests—the Stanford-Binet and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Revised—are used to index children's mental growth and to predict learning performance (Encarta 2004). Since school learning seems to depend on the ability to reason verbally, the content of intelligence tests seems appropriate; some relationship does indeed exist between intelligence-test performance and school achievement. Predictions based on tests are imperfect, however, because intelligence tests do not measure motivation and because knowledge about the skills needed for school learning is incomplete (Encarta 2004). It has also been argued that intelligence tests are sometimes inappropriate when used with children from ethnic minorities, who may not understand or respond appropriately to certain items because of language difficulties or cultural differences (Encarta 2004). Thus, test scores must be interpreted with great care, as with all forms of psychological

testing. His/her level of intelligent disposition would determine the child's power of inquiry. Ultimately, intelligence does affect the right of the child to inquire.

Learning is a life-long process by which we profit from past experience, which engenders or brings about a relatively permanent change (Akinboye 1996; Vasudev 2001<sup>K</sup>). Akinboye (Vasudev 2001<sup>K</sup>) observes that learning is a process, which begins in the embryo and continues till death. Four principles of learning are derived from the above definition namely: (1) Life long process (2) Experience (3) Change in behaviour and (4) Permanence (Vasudev 2001<sup>K</sup>). Prabhupada (2000) asseverates that to be learned means that one is able to control the urges of his/her sensory modalities viz.: speech, the mind's demands, the actions of anger and the urges of the tongue, belly and genitals. His/her level of learning, more often than not, determines the level of speech articulation of the child. His/her level of learning also determines the degree of interest of the child in the prosecution of rights. Thus, learning plays a vital role in the right of the child to inquire. Intelligence and learning are therefore important elements, which affect the right of the child to inquire.

#### *Family Relationship and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

The attitudes and values of parents/close relatives and their behaviour towards their children/wards clearly influence children's patterns of development (Microsoft 1999). Likewise, children's characteristics influence parental attitudes and behaviors; disabled children, for example, require more attention and are likely to cause more parental anxiety than do children without disabilities (Microsoft 2002)

Researchers have established that parental behaviour towards children varies widely—ranging from restrictiveness to permissiveness, warmth to hostility, and anxious involvement to calm detachment (Encarta 2004). These attitudinal differences produce different patterns in family relationships (Microsoft 2002). Parental hostility and permissiveness, for example, are associated with highly aggressive, non-compliant children (Microsoft 2002) Warm, restrictive behaviour by parents is associated with dependent, polite, and obedient children. Punishment techniques also influence

behaviour. For example, parents who often use physical punishment tend to have children who rank above average in their use of physical aggression (Encarta 2004). It appears, then, that one of the ways children acquire patterns of behaviour is by imitating their parents. The limit of permissive variation of a parent has a great impact on the child's inquiry. More often than not, a parent overwhelmed by hostility and permissiveness towards the child would not stimulate the child's power of inquiry. This would have adverse effect on the child's aptitude of inquiry. Thus, family relationship has an effect on the right of the child to inquire.

#### *Social Relationships and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

Social relationships among infants involve mutual interest without interaction (Encarta 2004). This is known as parallel play (Encarta 2004). Beginning with the years before school, relationships among children of the same age and roughly equal status—the peer group—become increasingly sophisticated social systems influencing their values and behaviour. The transition to the adult social world is aided by the organization of peer groups with a leader, members with varying strengths and weaknesses, and recognition of the need for cooperative behaviour (Microsoft 2002). Peer-group conformity reaches a peak when children are about 12 years of age (Akinboye 1996). Conformity never disappears, but its manifestations among adults are less obvious.

The members of peer groups change with age. Pre-adolescent groups tend to be homogeneous—that is, members are usually of the same sex and come from the same area (Akinboye 1996). Among older children, social relationships are more likely to be based on shared interests and values. Peer-group orientation towards inquiry and rights would influence the life of members. Thus, social relationships play some role in shaping the child's power of inquiry and his/her prosecution/exercise of rights. It could be averred therefore that social relationships has a bearing on the right of the child to inquire.

#### *Socialization and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

The process by which children learn acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is called socialization (Microsoft 2002). Children are expected to learn, for example, that

extreme physical aggression, stealing, and cheating are unacceptable, and that cooperation, honesty, and sharing are acceptable. Some theories suggest that socialization is achieved only through imitation or through a process of rewards and punishments (Encarta 2004). Current theories, however, stress the role of cognition, or perceiving, thinking, and knowing; thus, mature socialization requires that a person explicitly or implicitly understand the rules of social behaviour that function in all situations (Encarta 2004).

Socialization also includes understanding concepts of morality. The American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg has demonstrated that moral thinking exists on three levels (Encarta 2004). At the lowest level, a rule is obeyed in order to avoid punishment. This level characterizes the thought of very young children. At the highest level, a person has a rational understanding of universal moral principles necessary for society's survival (Encarta 2004). Of course, the understanding of such concepts is often inconsistent with behaviour and research has shown that moral behaviour varies with each situation and is not predictable (Encarta 2004). Undoubtedly, socialization cannot be devoid of inquiring spirit. Inquiry and rights oriented socialization has an effect on the right of the child to inquire.

#### *The Three Gunas and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

The three *gunas* refers to the three “modes”, or qualities of the material world. (Prabhupada 2000; Wolf 1999). And they are *sattva* or goodness, *rajas* or passion and *tamas* or ignorance (Prabhupada 2000; Wolf 1999). Every embodied soul is inherently born with these qualities in different permutations. These gunas act on us at all times in different permutations while vying for supremacy (Vasudev 2001). The mode of goodness is characterized by illumination and free from all sinful reactions (Prabhupada 2000). Persons under the auspices of *sattva* or goodness are attracted to piety and are conditioned by a sense of happiness and knowledge. *Rajas* or the mode of passion is born of unlimited desires and longing or hankerings. *Tamas* or the mode of darkness is born of ignorance, and it is the delusion of all embodied living entities. The results of this mode are madness, indolence and sleep, which bind the conditioned soul

(Prabhupada 2000). Children under the modes of goodness and passion are more inquiry and rights oriented than children under the auspices of the mode of ignorance (Prabhupada 2000).

#### *Secret Cult Membership and Effect on the Right of the Child to Inquire*

According to Anih (2003<sup>B</sup>) some times a parent's involvement in secret cult could be detrimental to the power of inquiry of a child. This occurs when a parent pledges his/her first child to a deity of a cult. The child could be practically useless, a moron, even if he/she is alive, after delivery. A parent's secret cult membership could therefore impair the power of inquiry of the child and ultimately the right of the child to inquire is jettisoned.

#### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

The right of the child to inquire is an "open book" of objectivity. However, the right of the child to inquire is affected by certain factors outside and inside of the organism (child). Applied Vedic science (Prabhupada 2000) asseverates that human life is distinguished from animal life by supramundane inquiry: *athato brahma jijnasa*, or now as humans, let us inquire about the anti-material or transcendental knowledge. Children availed to the right of anti-material inquiry can better the lots of understanding of their pristine identity, control of their passions and improving human relations.

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