Introducing Character Education: A Proposed Strategy for Developing Anti-Corruption Culture in Liberia

Dr. Ambrues Monboe Nebo Sr. (D.Scs.)

University of Liberia, Liberia

Abstract: Corruption continues to be one of the key challenges to the governance and development of many African countries. In Liberia, despite the existence of innumerable anti-corruption strategies, the menace of corruption remains ubiquitous or prevalent. This clearly suggests that the strategies introduced do not explain the fundamental cause(s) of corruption but are rather secondary explanations.

Using the qualitative descriptive method with a main emphasis on conceptual normative approach, this paper grounded on a virtue ethics theoretical stance seeks to address the problem of widespread corruption in Liberia. Guided by Tabula rasa and the theory of change as the theoretical framework, the paper conceptually proposed the introduction of character education as the essential strategy for developing an anti-corruption culture. The finding reveals that the main reason for the persistence of corruption in Liberia is a lack of a comprehensive moral value system that can sustainably socialize the rising generation into integrity through character education. The paper concludes that though character education is a long-term solution to the fight against corruption. However, facts have proven its efficacy in other societies as mentioned in this paper. So, if introduce and practice in Liberia accordingly, it is likely to produce similar effects.

Keywords: Anti-corruption Culture, Corruption, Character Education, Theory of Change, Tabula Rasa

I. Introduction

Inarguably, corruption, in all its manifestations has extremely ruined Liberia's pathway to national development. Since its inception, it has become the breeding ground for poverty and a real threat not only to the growing democracy but also to the already termed "fragile peace".

Cognizant of the obvious devastating implications of corruption on all aspects of life, namely the economic system, the democratic system, the political system, the legal system, and the social order, the government has demonstrated political will by adopting institutional, normative frameworks through legislation, and comprehensive anti-corruption strategies to help combat the menace of corruption. Despite these initiatives or efforts, corruption remains pervasive. This is evidenced by the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) Report for 2022 which ranked Liberia 136 with a score of 29 out of the 180 countries. Regrettably, the report ranks Liberia fifth among Africa's 10 most corrupt countries.

On the flip side of the same coin, the CPI characterization of Liberia's position clearly speaks to an imperative research need to explore other alternatives or strategies that would have a long-term positive impact on Liberian society. This is because all the counter-corruption measures do not explain the fundamental cause(s) of persistent corruption in Liberia but are rather secondary explanations.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to propose the introduction of character education as a long-term strategy for developing an anti-corruption culture in Liberia. The proposal is premised on research revealing that one of the long-term solutions to fighting corruption is implementing character education critical to developing an anti-corruption culture for the rising generation expected to be domiciled in both the public and private sectors. For example, Singapore ranked as the fifth least corrupt country is one of the outstanding countries in Asia that have since 1959 embarked on character education (UN, 2018, p.13) that greatly help to influence its phenomenal success (Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, 2022).

Indonesia still struggling with rampant corruption despite several anti-corruption legislations and measures have through extensive research embarked on the introduction of character education as the only effective tool for developing an anti-corruption culture (Sofwan, et al, 2018, Aksinudin, et al, 2022, Indriyani & Rudiyanto, 2023).

In exploring the proposal, this paper is structured into four segments. The first provides relevant theoretical frameworks relating to character education. The segment clarifies anti-corruption culture and character education with a specific context. The third segment put Liberia in context. Specifically, it provides general information about corruption in Liberia. Thereafter, it presents the rationale behind the proposal. And finally, the fourth segment concludes the paper with a recommendation.

II. Method and Materials

This qualitative descriptive study employed the conceptual normative approach. The data were collected by reviewing literature in the form of articles, journals, magazines, and news in print or electronic media. The purpose of adopting this method is to help the researcher draw a logical conclusion. The materials or data triangulated and verified were sourced from the internet through the Google Scholar Search Engine and Bielefeld Academic Search Engine.

III. Theoretical Framework

Tabula Rasa (Blank Slate) Theory

This paper adopts Tabula Rasa (Blank Slate) to theorize character education. It was popularized by John Locke who eloquently lectured that the human mind receives knowledge and forms itself based on experience alone, without any pre-existing innate ideas that would serve as a starting point (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.) since Locke's popularization, the theory remains one of the debatable concepts in educational psychology. Some scholars agree based on empirical evidence while others maintained a contrary view with supporting scientific evidence. However, that's one of the beauties of theory. It is always subjected to debate. So, let's look at the position of the behaviorists in the affirmative. Confined to the academic discipline of psychology, behaviorists who subscribe to this theory posit human beings are born with their mind as a "blank slate" and they learn all their behavior from the environment in which they live and interact (Fritscher, 2022). Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argued "Children are born as a blank slate" As children grow, they develop physically and cognitively. While physical development is solely based on the genes and eating habits of a child, his or her cognitive development is a mental process that according to Piaget is a result of biological maturation and environmental experience. These experiences include being exposed to a school environment. Teachers are one of the major state holders in a school because they are in a position to impart their knowledge to students by exposing them to the formal and informal curriculum that has serious implications for developing students' tabula rasa.

In the 11th century. Avicenna (980 – 1037 A.D.) an Islamic philosopher concurred with Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) that the human intellect at birth is rather like a tabula rasa or unscribed tablet, a pure potentiality that is actualized through education before it comes to know.

In a nutshell, tabula rasa, or blank slate suggests that we are solely the product of our upbringing and experiences. For example, no child was born to tell a lie. Instead, a child learns to tell a lie, no child was born to steal. Instead, a child learns to steal. So, it is with instilling virtue within a child at a very early age.

The Logic Behind the Theory (Tabula Rasa)

In sociology, education as one of the major and universal social institutions is saddled with the responsibility of socializing children and young adults by teaching them social norms, values, and cultural traditions. Education also provides people with the skills and knowledge they need to take part in society (Little & McGivern, 2016). Interestingly, it is through education that society learns to preserve cultural values. Or transmit cultural values. Therefore, the school, using curriculum becomes the theater to imprint cultural values on the minds of children and young adults. This would in other words suggest that the school, which is considered next to the family as the agent of socialization is under both moral and legal obligation to protect the tabula rasa of children against corruption. Therefore, if the tabula rasa of children beginning from an early age are taught or exposed to character education with teachers serving as role models, the likelihood of developing an anti-culture of corruption is theoretically or conceptually certain.

IV. Conceptual Clarifications

From a research perspective, concepts can be problematic. Therefore, clarifications are needed to help categorize and describe concepts relevant to the study or topic and outline a relationship between them, including relevant theory and empirical research (Frederiksen, et, al, n.d.). In short, conceptual clarifications remove ambiguity in research.

Anti-Corruption Culture

Premised on the fact that corruption is not only about the manifestation of people's misbehavior that harms national development but also about institutions that allow them to do so over time (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Graycar, 2015), it would be safe to conceptualize an anti-corruption culture as a broad concept that society employs to disapprove, reject, frown upon corrupt behavior and practices. As a long-term intervention, it endeavors not to eradicate or develop a corruption free society but create the least corrupt society.

The values internalized in anti-corruption culture encapsulate honesty, caring, independence, discipline, responsibility, hard work, integrity, bravery, and justice (Kemendikbud, 2011).

Traditionally, it captures activities, strategies, or measures opposed to corrupt behavior. These strategies include but are not limited to legislation of anti-corruption normative frameworks, institutional frameworks, enforcement, community sensitization through awareness, prosecution, etc. Given the prevalence of corruption as a global social problem, it is argued that these measures are not potent enough to create an anti-corruption culture. However, considering the least corrupt countries namely Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and Sweden (Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, 2022), it also suggests that creating an anti-corruption culture is possible. As you may be aware, the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is the most widely used global corruption ranking in the world. It measures how corrupt each country's public sector is perceived to be, according to experts and businesspeople (Transparency International, n.d.).

Owing to the indisputable fact that culture is a learned process that can be transmitted from generation to generation, it is harmless to also conceptualize anti-corruption culture as not only a knowledge transfer process but also a process emphasizing character building, anti-corruption values, and moral awareness against corrupt acts. Its goal is to preserve society from rampant corruption. As a learning process, one of the most effective strategies or approaches to developing an anti-corruption culture is character education discussed as the second concept under the first segment of this paper.

Character Education

As an interventive tool for fighting corruption, character education has been the main agenda for the national movement in many advanced ASEAN countries where Singapore stands at the apex of the ladder (Istiningsih, 2016).

As a concept, character education is defined as education that can build character in people (Djohar & Istiningsih, 2013).

Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) broadly defined character education as a comprehensive school-based approach to fostering the moral development of students.

Thomas Lickona describes character education as "the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue. As used in this context, morality equated to virtue connotes positive meaning.

As it relates to fighting corruption, the ultimate goal of character education is to develop an anti-corruption culture in society. In other words, it endeavors to create the least corrupt society. In the words of (Cogan & Derricott, 1998; Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018), it is designed for the younger generation to become active, smart, and good citizens.

Shouldered by the Ministry of Education, character education can be included in the curricula and be integrated into a variety of existing subjects and concepts such as positive school culture, moral education, just communities, caring school communities, social-emotional learning, positive youth development, civic education, and service-learning. These approaches promote the intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development of young people and share a commitment to helping them become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens (Pala, 2011). Interestingly, character education helps students to develop important human qualities such as justice, diligence, compassion, respect, and courage, and to understand why it is important to live by them (Pala, 2011).

One of the subjects that can integrate character education is Civic Education. Civic Education is an important subject amid government efforts in building the nation's character from elementary to college levels (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018; Fearnley-Sander & Yulaelawati, 2008). This implies that in addition to the home that has the central role, schools have the moral obligation to create an anti-corruption culture through character education taught to learners or students expected to domicile leadership in both the public and private spheres. This is why Sergiovanni (1992) considers school as a learning society and at the same time a center to educate character. This could be one of the main reasons why Pala (2011) eloquently argued that it is important to set a strong foundation during the earlier grades and to reinforce and build upon that foundation during the later grades. To be effective, Pala (2011) further the argument that character education must include the entire school community and must be infused throughout the entire school curriculum and culture.

From an interventive perspective, character education is not a "quick fix." It provides a long-term remedy that addresses moral, ethical, and academic issues of growing concern to society (Character Education Partnership, 2010). By this assertion, it makes sense to employ character education as a long-term intervention in the fight against corruption seeing an overgrown concern impeding national development.

In a nutshell, character education is a long-term solution that may not have immediate results but can provide a lasting solution if successfully implemented.

The phenomenal success of Singapore as the fifth least corrupt country in the world (CPI, 2022) speaks to the efficacy of character education. Singapore embarked upon a few programs equated to character education used as therapy for corruption. They are Civics and Moral Education in 1992, National Education, Social, and Emotional Learning in 1997, Social and Emotional Learning in 2005,

and learning experience such as Co-Curricular Activities (Ministry of Education of Singapore, 2014). Of recent is Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) which embodies character education. The CCE aims to inculcate values in students so that they become civic-minded and responsible individuals and citizens. CCE emphasizes the interconnectedness of values, social and emotional competencies, civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills that are critical for character-building (UN, 2018, p.13). In what could be viewed as the preamble of the CCE, Singapore Minister for Education, Heng Swee Keat remarks "Our education system must... nurture Singapore citizens of good character so that everyone has the moral resolve to withstand an uncertain future, and a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to the success of Singapore and the well-being of fellow Singaporeans" (Ministry of Education of Singapore, 2014).

Indonesia is another country in Asia that also embarked upon teaching character education as the only long-term approach to fighting corruption. The reason for adopting this approach is due to the inability of the laws and other anti-corruption measures to decisively deal with corruption. Research about character education in Indonesia is copiously documented. It has taken center stage in the national debate. For instance, Komalas and Saripudin (2015), articulated the integration of anti-corruption education in school activities in Junior and Senior High Schools in Bandung West Java Indonesia. The reason stems from their research findings that revealed punitive action or penal sanction against the corruptors as a fundamental mistake in the eradication of corruption. Meaning, it was not impacting anti-corruption culture in Indonesia. Therefore, the idea to include anti-corruption material into the curriculum got a positive response from the 2008 polling of 400 respondents conducted. 87% of the respondents stated the need to put anti-corruption material into the curriculum. The reliance of the community was quite higher. Almost 200 respondents stated their reliance that anti-corruption education could be effective in Indonesia to control corruption attitudes (Komalas & Saripudin, 2015).

Another research finding concluded that the prevention of corruption in Indonesia can be done by building the minds and morals of individuals, through anti-corruption education and counseling in the fields of religion, ethics, and law (Dirwan, 2019).

Finally, (Sofwan, et al, 2018) research finding shows that character education is important for tackling corrupt behaviors from early ages, shaping students' minds towards the danger of corruption, producing excellent students with good morals and behavior, and influencing teachers' perception towards corruption in Indonesia.

Uganda is another classic example. Okok and Ssentongo (2020) recommended the introduction of character education as an alternative approach to fighting corruption considered immoral behavior in Uganda. Their recommendation stems from the claim that all the anti-corruption strategies including the Anti-Corruption Strategy are not helping to substantially tackle corruption. In other words, none of these strategies address corruption as an immoral behavior that must be solved through character education.

Reflecting on the current CIP 2022 report in which both Indonesia and Uganda rankings explain the prevalence of corruption, it suggests that the introduction of character education is still evolving. This does not necessarily mean that character education is a miscalculated intervention. Bear in mind that the concept is a long-term solution that may not have immediate results but can provide a lasting solution if successfully implemented.

In these countries, it can be inferred that character education provides the fundamental causes for the practice of widespread corruption. It suggests that the causes of widespread corruption are traceable to the lack of a comprehensive moral value system that can sustainably socialize people into integrity.

Character Education Theory of Change

Originated from the early work of Paolo Freire (1960s) that is used by development planners and practitioners, the theory of change explains why we think certain actions such as a project, program, initiative, intervention, or an organizational strategy likely will lead to the desired change in society (An inspirational guide for Development CSOs, 2015). Similarly, (Retolaza Inigo, 2011) posits "A Theory of change allows us to organize our thoughts and configure abstractly - based on our knowledge and experience - those conditions needed to achieve the desired change in a given context."

The two definitions suggest that the theory of change is context-driven and cannot be a one size fits all concept. This is because it is an assumption about how an intervention, initiative, program, or strategy is likely to produce the desired results in a given society. However, it can be customized or tailored to a given context. As a concept, the theory of change is based on critical research backed by empirical findings. Meaning, it helps researchers to explore or unpack the secrets behind positive social change. It also takes into consideration both the merits and demerits or the implications the change will likely have in a given context.

As it relates to character education, the theory of change seems to work well for many reasons. In the first place, character education is a concept that is now used as an intervention, initiative, or strategy to fight corruption. As mentioned in this article, countries that have introduced character education see it as the best remedy to fight corruption on the grounds that anti-corruption measures are not working so well to produce a least corrupt society. Therefore, the case of Singapore's phenomenal success as the fifth least corrupt country in the world qualifies as one of the empirical pieces of evidence of character education fitting the theory of change.

By this, it would mean that countries that desire change from rampant corruption could learn and replicate or customize the Singaporean experience that has over the years combine character education with other anti-corruption measures to attain its status as the fifth least corrupt country in the world. Indonesia and Uganda have through empirical research think that character education is now the best prescription for rampant corruption.

Corruption in Liberia

Doubtlessly, corruption in Liberia is so severe, deep-rooted, and even entrenched. It practices occur in almost every layer of the bureaucracy, both legislative, executive, and judicial, and have also spread to the business world. It is committed by government officials and other related parties. Realizing its devastating impact on Liberian society, various efforts have been made by the government in preventing and eradicating corruption in Liberia, but the efforts that have been made have not yet gotten optimal results. This is evidenced by the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) Report for 2022, out of the 180 countries, Liberia ranked 136 with a score of 29. Evidently, this report simply suggests that this latest ranking puts Liberia in fifth place among the 10 most corrupt countries in Africa.

In terms of solutions to the problem of corruption, a lot of Liberians have argued for the government to establish an anti-corruption court or specialized anti-corruption court, but this continues to be ignored. Of course, establishing a specialized anti-corruption court could help change the narrative. But what is yet to claim the attention of national leaders or national debate is that all the anti-corruption strategies do not explain the fundamental cause(s) of the widespread corruption but rather a secondary explanation. This is simply because if the strategies were fundamental to the causes of rampant corruption, they would have by now helped Liberia score significant marks in the fight against corruption.

Character Education in Liberia

As conceptualized in this paper, a lot of Liberians may want to arguably equate moral education or religious education to character education or even civic lessons. Arguably, the sad truth is character education specifically dealing with corruption has never been introduced or taught in Liberia. The focus of religious education, precisely the Holy Bible has been on events, stories, and memorization. For example, teaching students to memorize the 27 Books in the New Testament, the 39 Books in the Old Testament, the Twelve Disciples of Jesus Christ, teaching about the Ten Commandments in which stealing is mentioned, etc. All these are good but to what extent do they instill an anti-corruption culture in the young generation or future leaders? Not even "Thou shall not steal" from the Ten Commandments has never been emphasized as a form of corruption in the classroom. In the Holy Quorum, stealing is also forbidden. But it has never been emphasized as a form of corruption in the classroom of Islamic Schools in Liberia. Granted, these teachings have implications for honesty. However, it would have been better for explicit implications throughout.

Now civic education. This paper is of the opinion that prior to the 14 years of civil war in Liberia, the emphasis of the book "Civics for Liberian Schools" believed to have been authored by A Doris Bank was about government including its forms, functions, the significance of the flag as a symbol of Liberia, types of laws, duties, and responsibilities of citizenship, etc. Arguably, the book did offer any lesson that could have implied character education. As a young student in grade eight, it was from this book I learned about "Expo facto law" plaintiff rights, defendant rights, and complainant rights. It did not teach me anything about corruption. Perhaps one could argue that corruption was not prevalent during such a time. And, so, its relevance was not necessary for the book to have captured. Research confirmed that Civics was stopped from being taught in schools in the 1980s (Dodoo, 2022) even though it was not relevant as it relates to developing character education, the decision for whatever reason was also irrelevant.

After 30 years, the Ministry of Education, through a meticulous review approved the re-introduction of civics into the curriculum. The book captioned "LAW+YOU – Rights and Responsibilities of Liberian Citizens" was written by Civics and Service International (CSI), formerly Child Steps International is good educational material (Dodoo, 2022). However, it did not explicitly offer anything about character education as it relates to developing an anti-corruption culture in the younger generation believed to be the future leaders of Liberia.

Why the Proposal for Character Education

Reflecting on the theory of change, an intervention is needed when all efforts are not yielding the desired outcome. In the case of fighting corruption in Liberia, all the strategic interventions initiated by the government seem not to be working as expected. This is simply because they do not explain the fundamental cause(s) of persistent corruption but are rather secondary explanations that tackle not the core of corruption. So, it is against this backdrop that character education be experimented in Liberia. It is not a quick-fix intervention. But a long-term program that if tailored to the idiosyncrasies of corruption in Liberia could produce an anti-corruption culture. Bear in mind, it has worked for Singapore, China, introduced by Indonesia, and even propose or recommended to the government of Uganda.

In Liberia, through empirical research, the Ministry of Education should see the reasons to update the current textbook on civics education to factor in explicit lessons on character education to build an anti-corruption culture. Students must learn about how corruption destroys society, and about other least corrupt societies' development. It must be taught from primary education to senior high education. And if possible, as a required course for all undergraduate students.

The Implications for Schools in Liberia

Introducing character education means a lot for schools in Liberia. Teachers must stand up as role models. The school itself must be aloof from any practices that have implications for corruption. If not, it will defeat the purpose of the intervention. The government must also ponder the need to upgrade the salaries of teachers and if possible, provide incentives. This will help to reduce if not remove the temptation and inclination for corruption in the classroom. The Ministry of Education must tighten its stance on monitoring and supervision of schools as it relates to compliance.

V. Conclusion

This article's central focus has been on providing an ethical critique of Liberia's anti-corruption strategies and explaining why the menace of corruption has persisted despite several anti-corruption interventions. The article contended that the reasons that led to the legislation of anti-corruption measures of the persistence of corruption do not explain the fundamental cause(s) of this menace but are rather secondary explanations. If these interventions were fundamental, by now Liberia would have scored significant marks in the fight against corruption.

The analysis shows that the main reason for rampant corruption in Liberia is a lack of a comprehensive moral value system that can sustainably socialize the rising generation into integrity through character education.

To confront this problem, grounded on a virtue ethics theoretical stance, the article calls for government efforts to develop a deliberate, comprehensive strategy for habituating virtue. Central to this strategy, the paper proposes character education through the school system by innovatively taught content designed to cultivate positive character, and also ensuring that such character training is made a part of the entire school socialization process and exercised in all areas of learning to gradually foster an anti-corruption culture in Liberia.

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About the Author

Ambrues Monboe Nebo Sr.

Ambrues Monboe Nebo Sr. is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Political Science, University of Liberia. Department of Sociology, African Methodist Episcopal University, Criminal Justice Department, Adventist University of West Africa. He is also a reviewer for the International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS). He has excelled in academics with a wealth of experience.

Doctorate of Sociology (D.Scs.) with a major in Sociology from Atlantic International University (AIU), Hawaii, USA.

MSc in the top 5 % of the graduating Class in Peace and Conflict Studies with an emphasis on Humanitarian and Refugee Studies from the prestigious University of Ibadan, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Post Graduate Certificate with distinction in Public Administration from Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration Ghana.

Bachelor of Arts (Magna Cum Laude) in Sociology from African Methodist Episcopal Zion University College in Liberia,

A graduate of Liberia National Police Academy and Training School formerly National Police Training Academy and obtained various Certificates in peacekeeping operations from the Kofi Anna

International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Ghana.

Professionally, he is a senior police officer of the Liberia National Police with 18 years of experience in Training and Administration.

He has authored four books namely:

1. The Politicization of the Criminal Justice System: A Liberian Perspective" available at https://www.amazon.com/Politicization-Criminal-JusticeSystem-Socio-Political/dp/6139445337 and Morebooks shop.

2. The Wave of Protests Leading to Regimes Change in Africa: A Sociological Perspective available at https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/9975153461

3. Introduction to Liberia Criminal Justice System: A Concise Edition available at https://www.morebooks.de/store/us/book/introduction-toliberia-criminal-justice-system/isbn/978-620-3-04123-1

4. Liberian Society in Focus: An Introduction to Sociology available at: https://www.amazon.fr/LIBERIAN-SOCIETY-FOCUS-INTRODUCTION-SOCIOLOGY/dp/1639024425https://libroterra.com/shop/social-science/liberian-society-in-focus-an-introduction-to-sociology/

He has authored a dozen of articles dealing with contemporary issues in Africa and Liberia that can be accessed online at https://neboambrues.academia.edu and ResearchGate.