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UNDERSTANDING THE TENETS OF JOHN DEWEY’S PRAGMATISM FOR IMPROVED EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education in Nigeria needs to be more practical, functional, comprehensive and learner-centred. This forms the thrust of John Dewey’s pragmatism and educational ideas which the study explored. There is need for synergy between learning experiences and real life situation which, the researcher observed, is lacking in Nigerian education. Hence, the researcher’s interest in understanding the tenets of John Dewey’s pragmatism for improved education in Nigeria. Dewey suggests that education should be practical, functional and learner-centered, it should not be the teaching of mere dead facts but that skills and knowledge which the child has learnt should be integrated into his life as a person, citizen and human being. His views on important factors in education were highlighted, namely: curriculum, the teacher, the learner, teaching method, learning environment and the child’s integration into the society, leading to their juxtaposition with Nigerian education system. It is believed that Dewey’s pragmatism could provide better

insights on how to ensure a more functional education in Nigeria. The study recommends among other things that, the students should be allowed to take active part in the learning process by providing them with the enabling environments to explore new knowledge and by adopting practical and learner-centered approach to learning.

Key words: Pragmatism, Tenets, John Dewey, Education

Introduction

Pragmatism has in it a force that drives not only education but all facets of human enterprise where its tenets are applied. What are these tenets? The tenets are action, work, application, experience, experiment, reflection, critical thinking among others. In a clearer terms, the language of pragmatism is the language of 'do it yourself,' 'you can do it,' 'put in practice what you have learnt,' 'the more you work it out, the more experience you gather,' 'do not just accumulate knowledge but start utilizing the accumulated'. These pragmatic languages were spoken harder in the 20th century American education by the loud voice of John Dewey and Americans heard the voice and embraced the language. Today, America is regarded at least for now, as the most powerful country in the world. Did America become a powerful nation just by hearing the language of pragmatism? No! She became powerful by, among other reasons, translating the pragmatic language in all its national life and by incorporating it into her educational practices; the result of which is that America can boast of expertise in almost all fields of life. The emergence of these experts in all spheres of American life helped in building the nation into a politically stabilized, economically viable, socio-culturally reformed and technologically advanced country.

This same language of pragmatism is much needed in the search for improved education in Nigeria where there is high rate of examination malpractice among students. Most students are not confident in themselves probably due to lack of functional education. It is no news that employers of labour these days often complain that most products of Nigerian education are not employable. Most school graduates lack the requisite knowledge, skills and competence to perform when the need arises. There appears to be no synergy between theory and practice. In some schools, students offering science courses graduate without entering laboratory for experiment in most of their school days. Thus, teaching and learning appear not to be practical, functional and learner centred. This study explores Dewey's pragmatism in relation to Nigerian education system; and recommends some ways its tenets could improve education in Nigeria.

Who Is John Dewey?

John Dewey was an American philosopher, a psychologist and a teacher of great repute. He was born on 20th October 1859 in Burlington, Vermont in the USA. The experiences Dewey had in his early years brought him to the two convictions which directed the whole course of his educational works; a conviction that traditional methods of schooling were futile and the firmer conviction that the human contacts of everyday life provide unlimited natural and dynamic learning experiences.

He taught at university of Vermont and wrote a number of works. Dewey established himself as one of the leading philosophers in the field of pragmatism while teaching at the University of Chicago in the 1890s. He later rose to the rank of professor of philosophy, first at the University of Chicago. He equally taught for 47 years at the Teacher College, Columbia University in New York. While in Chicago, John Dewey and his wife Alice Chapman Dewey founded the University of Chicago Laboratory School where they tried to put in practice the tenets of pragmatism and its approach to education.

John Dewey's profile is indeed an unending episode that space will be minimal to write in this work. However, it must be re-emphasized that, during his lifetime, his educational theories which were practiced in the United States of America contributed to a large extent in developing America from a frontier agricultural society to a more complex and industrialized nation. He later died in New York City in 1952 (Stumpf & Fiesher, 1994).

What Is Pragmatism?

Etymologically, the word pragmatism is derived from the Greek word '*pragma*' which means-*work*. The most common interpretation of the term is "what works", making it to be described as the philosophy or theory of *workability*. Pragmatism is a distinctive philosophical school of thought and its traces were notable even in the writings of the early Greek philosophers; so the concept is not so new. However, modern pragmatism developed in late 19th century as a revolt against what was considered sterile metaphysics which dominated philosophy of that time (Enoh 1995). Pragmatism is essentially a method of solving or evaluating intellectual problems and a theory about the sort of knowledge man is capable of acquiring.

The major proponents of Pragmatism were William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey. The ideology received its initial formulation by Charles Sanders Peirce; got widely portrayed and popularly circulated through the brilliant essays of William James and was methodically implemented into the daily affairs of American educational institutions by John Dewey. The three Philosophers believed that theories should have practical results. Pragmatism is based on the principle that, the usefulness, workability, and practical application of ideas, policies and proposals are the mark of a result-oriented society. It is an ideology that opposes dogmatism (rigidity). It emerged as the most original contribution of American thought to the enterprise of philosophy. Central message by the pragmatists is that, there is little value in theories that do not somehow make a difference in daily life. Hence, they perceive pragmatism as more of a method of solving problems of humanity and the world.

Furthermore, the pragmatists perceived the use of intelligence, reflective thinking and scientific method, in which an individual learns by doing it for himself as the most reliable sources of knowledge. There is no absolute truth as far as pragmatism is concerned because truth is always changing as the world itself changes; so there is no such thing as genuine knowledge and fruitful understanding except as the offspring of doing (Enoh, 1995).

Pragmatism does not lay much emphasis on metaphysical issues as was emphasized by philosophers of Idealism and Realism neither is it interested in abstraction and speculation; rather its emphasis is on all reality which should be established only in terms of experiential and verifiable dimensions (Okpara, 2022).

Pragmatism As It Relates to Education

Education has been described differently by different scholars. Okpara (2022) described it as transmission of worthwhile knowledge for the betterment of individual and society. While Appraising Dewey's pragmatic ideas, Akinpelu (1981) concluded that Pragmatism led to the development of progressive education which holds that learning must involve action. He noted that one of the relevance of Dewey's version of pragmatism is the evolution or introduction of problem solving or activity technique that places emphasis on the activity of the pupils rather than that of the teacher. Akinpelu seems to be right because the traditional method of teaching emphasized the authority of the teacher and the importance of the teacher's function and activity in the selection, organization and presentation of the subject matter to the pupils in sequential format. With problem-solving approach, the pragmatists posited that the teacher must no longer assume a super-eminent position in the classroom situation; rather becomes a member of the class (although a more mature and more experienced member) in a problem solving arena.

Pragmatism as a philosophical ideology is very much concerned with the application of knowledge in tackling life challenges. Thus, the pragmatists' aim of education is for knowledge acquired to have relevance to the need of the society. Some of the tenets of the pragmatism in relation to education could be highlighted in the following order:

Man's ability to utilize acquired knowledge: For knowledge to become useful, the pragmatists are of the opinion that such knowledge must be practically applicable and capable of overcoming the problems of the environment.

Learning by doing: Pragmatism as a philosophical school emphasized the inherent relationship between action and knowledge. The pragmatists believe that knowledge is relevant when in our various interactions, we experience the consequences of our actions and note the action-consequence relationship of different experiences and as well use it to solve subsequent problems.

Life-long learning: The entire universe in the pragmatists' view is in a state of continuous flux. Therefore, what works now may not work in a different situation; hence, the pragmatists proposed the type of education that continues till adulthood. In other words, their idea is that life-long education is a solution to the changing world. So, knowledge should continually be updated so as to take care of the problems arising from the changes in the universe.

Teaching to be related to child's interest and experience: Another aim of education in the Pragmatists' view is that, teaching should be related to the child's interest and experience. Hence, the pragmatists' educational ideas favour a diversified curriculum in order to take care of differences and needs of the learners; such that the uniqueness of every individual would be identified and developed.

Promotion of democracy: Democracy and education have a symbiotic relationship in the pragmatists' philosophy. The school of pragmatism believes that while the business of education should necessarily be democratic, the democratic ideals on the other hand should also be strengthened by education. Thus, Pragmatists especially, those of Dewey's blend have been attracted by the idea of democracy because they believe that in a democratic community, where there is give and take as well as free interaction between individuals and social groups, it is easier for human freedom, character, intelligence and other potentialities to be developed.

Dewey's Pragmatism as It Applies to Vital Factors in Education

Dewey's philosophy of education as expressed in his pragmatism throws more light on these vital factors in education, namely: curriculum, teaching method, the learner, the teacher, teaching and learning environment and integrating the child into the society.

On curriculum, he advocated a child centered and community centered curriculum. Curriculum should consider the interest and the ability of the child so that it will be meaningful to him. Society around the child should be the basis of the curriculum.

On methods, he believed that an acceptable method should be activity oriented. He developed and recommended these methods: scientific or experimental method, play way or excursion method, project method and inductive method. He advocated for the practical method of "learning by doing".

On the learner and the teacher, he believed that education is meant to develop the learner into a functional member of the society and as such he should be exposed to the realities in the society. The task of the teacher is purely to guide and direct the learner. He insisted that adequate training should be given to the teacher and that the learner should be allowed to learn through problem solving.

On the teaching and learning environment, for Dewey physical environment should involve facilities and equipment and should be conducive for teaching and learning. The necessary materials must be readily available, adequate and suitable for effective education. With the enabling environment, the child can manifest his naturally endowed powers.

On integrating the child into the society, he noted that education should aim at fostering, nurturing and cultivating in the recipient, the needed skills, knowledge and competencies which the society needs in order to grow.

Juxtaposition of Dewey's Pragmatism with Nigerian Education System

The work of educators in Dewey's view is that of guidance and directing, hence, he insisted that guidance should be the watchword of the educator. Contrary to this view, the task of teachers in Nigerian schools shows emphasis on routine impartation of knowledge in line with already set syllabus, with less emphasis on the freedom for the learner to explore; a situation where learners are often compelled to memorize what the teacher has given to them in the name of education. The result of this type of education is usually dormancy of the natural capacities or potentialities. In this regard, Dewey's idea on methodology is relevant for teaching and learning in Nigerian schools and should be applied.

On curriculum, Dewey's ideas are that, it must be centered on the child and the community; the curriculum should consist of subjects and learning experiences that foster occupational freedom that would provide for the learner's future needs; the curriculum should provide for learning experiences and activities that would arouse learner's curiosity and interest; curriculum should capture activities that would guarantee the overall development of the learner and that the curriculum content should be reviewed regularly in line with the current realities and the needs of the contemporary society. Curriculum contents may not actually be the problem with the current Nigeria education; rather, the problem lies in inability to implement the tenets of the curriculum in practical ways which has hampered the actualization of its essence; hence, the need to strengthen Nigerian education system by ensuring adequate implementation of defined educational policies and programmes.

With regard to the teacher, Dewey emphasized adequate training of the educator to acquaint him/her with the required knowledge, skills, and techniques of imparting knowledge as well as his duty in the child's education. In Nigeria, the training of teachers appears to be below Dewey's advocacy because the needed facilities, enabling environment and funding for effective teacher education in Nigeria are in most cases unavailable or grossly inadequate. It is common to find that most Nigerian teachers lack the motivation and will to do a thorough job, due to poor remuneration and incentives and such have resulted in a situation where the teachers commit more time and energy to alternative means of livelihood than they commit to the discharge of their responsibilities as teachers. This is worsened by inadequate and often compromised internal and external supervision.

With regard to the place of the learner, Dewey noted that the child must be allowed to take active part in the teaching and learning process; learning should be directly related to the interest of the learner; and that learning by doing should take precedence over the inculcation of subject matter in the school. Most Nigerian schools appear to mainly provide the learners with heavy books to read concentrating more on theoretical aspects of learning and doing little or no practical. Again, poor funding of the Nigerian education system is evident in the inability of most schools to provide functional laboratories for practicals and to organize frequent field-trip (excursion) for learners as the case may be, which is part of the ways to expose them to real life experiences that would guarantee lasting knowledge.

Again, Dewey prescribed activity oriented methods where the students learn by doing. This ensures that the learner develops intuitive, reflective and critical thinking as well as sense of problem solving. On the contrary, problem based, context based, and fieldwork teaching methods which were significant predictors of technical skills among learners are not being applied in most Nigerian schools. This tends to make one agree that continual update of teachers' knowledge on new methodology and teaching skills is compromised.

On the learning environment, Dewey's prescriptions are that learning environment should be organized to encourage the learner towards active participation in experimental studies; adequate instructional facilities should be provided; school environment is such that will not expose the students to any form of hazards and that classroom organization should strictly reflect appropriate teacher-student ratio. Adeyemo (2014) posited that the school environment has significant influence on the students' academic achievement but frowned that the learning environment obtainable in most Nigerian schools leaves much to be desired. This is no longer news as evidences abound on dilapidated and unfavourable school environment in most states across Nigeria.

With regard to the integration of the child into the society, Dewey's opined that the school must ensure among other things that, the children are trained to develop self-confidence to face the realities of life; instill in the child the desired leadership characteristics and love for his society; groomed to take responsibilities in the larger society and impact in the children, the needed creative skills and abilities with which they would proffer solutions to societal problems. In Nigerian contest, even though her National Policy on Education states that "efforts shall be made to relate education to the overall community needs" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013:9), much is yet to be done to ensure the full realization of these Dewey's recommendations. The leadership of Nigeria, especially the political class, has rather introduced a type of Nigeria where people get rich without providing services or products; where insecurity abound, where collective responsibility is no longer the order; where the child as a future leader is beginning to think that corruption and irresponsibility of all sorts are the new norms; where provisions are grossly inadequate or not available in schools for the development of the child's skills and creative abilities. It is therefore a sine qua non for Nigeria to incorporate these prescriptions of Dewey in order to successfully integrate the Nigerian child into the Nigerian society.

Recommendations for Improved Education in Nigeria

Having explored the tenets of pragmatism as expressed by John Dewey as well as juxtaposing them with the Nigerian situation, the following are recommended for repositioning Nigerian education for better outputs:

1. The Nigerian government through its appropriate agencies should ensure that the school curriculum is reviewed at frequent intervals in line with the current needs of the Nigerian child and the society in general.
2. The welfare of teachers should be taken serious by the Nigerian government. In addition, comprehensive training of the trainee school teachers and regular in-

service training for the practicing school teachers should be promoted. This will help equip and update them with requisite knowledge and teaching skills needed for effective performance.

3. The Nigerian school system should adopt fully the practice of allowing the learners to take active part in the learning process. Learning by doing should be encouraged and laboratories for practical should be fully equipped.
4. Teachers should always adopt teaching methods that would develop problem-solving skills among pupils; such methods as field trip and group study methods; and project methods where experimentation should be emphasized in Nigerian schools,
5. The Nigerian government and relevant agencies should increase funding for education. This will aid the upgrade of the physical and social environment of the Nigerian schools including adequate school infrastructural facilities such as well-equipped libraries and laboratories as well as required instructional materials to enhance effective instructional delivery.
6. The Nigerian schools through its stakeholders should device workable strategies probably through community services to ensure that each Nigerian child is integrated early enough into the society, by providing avenues for them to channel the knowledge and skills they have acquired toward meeting the societal needs and aspirations.

Conclusion

Having explored the pragmatism of John Dewey, and highlighted its relevant aspects, there is no gainsaying the fact that John Dewey's ideas on curriculum, teaching method, the teacher, the learner, learning environment and school-child-community relationship, is worthwhile and should be incorporated in the course of repositioning education in Nigeria. Specifically, the teaching methods which Dewey prescribed are effective enough for the training of skilled, competent, knowledgeable and functional Nigerians and should be incorporated in teaching and learning in the present day Nigerian schools. Again, absence of learning by doing (practical learning) is not healthy enough for a developing nation like Nigeria; hence, learning by doing should be adopted in the contemporary schools in Nigeria and in a sufficiently child-centered atmosphere, so as to maximize the inborn potentials of the Nigerian student. With the adoption of tenets of Dewey's pragmatism, Nigerian education system will no doubt become more functional, practical and learner-centered.

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