

## RELEVANCE OF JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM TO 21ST-CENTURY NIGERIAN EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The philosophy of John Dewey continues to hold significant relevance in addressing contemporary educational challenges, particularly within the Nigerian context. This study examines Dewey's pragmatism, emphasizing its implications for transforming an education system that remains heavily dominated by rote learning and examination-focused practices. The objectives of the paper are to analyze Dewey's central ideas of experiential learning, problem-solving, democratic participation, and social relevance, and to assess their applicability to Nigeria's current educational needs. The study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on philosophical analysis and a critical review of literature on educational reforms in Nigeria. The findings indicate that Dewey's pragmatic orientation offers a practical framework for fostering creativity, adaptability, and responsible citizenship among Nigerian learners. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and limited policy support hinder effective application. It concludes that integrating Dewey's pragmatism into Nigerian education requires deliberate policy action, pedagogical reforms, and a paradigm shift toward learner-centered practices.

**Keywords:** Education, Pragmatism, Experiential Learning, Nigeria Education Reform, Reflective Thinking.

### Introduction

Education has always been at the centre of human civilisation, shaping individuals and societies and serving as the foundation upon which nations develop. Among the many thinkers who have contributed to theories of education, John Dewey remains one of the most influential. As a philosopher and educational reformer, Dewey advanced the philosophy of pragmatism, a system of thought that emphasised the value of experience, adaptation, and action as the basis of genuine knowledge. Unlike traditional views which often reduced education to the memorisation of facts or preparation for examinations,

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Dewey's position was that education should reflect life itself, offering learners the opportunity to engage with real experiences and problems that build critical capacity for living in society. His thought challenged rigid and authoritarian methods of teaching and laid the groundwork for modern progressive education (Ejimogu & Joseph, 2024). In the 21st century, education assumed new dimensions under the weight of globalisation, rapid technological advancement, and shifting labour market demands. In Nigeria, educational systems now face the dual challenge of addressing long-standing structural weaknesses while at the same time adjusting to the skills required in a knowledge-based economy. Nigerian education in particular has been criticised for being too examination-driven, underfunded, and detached from the practical realities of society. At the same time, global trends point toward the necessity of building education around skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy (Meroyi *et al.*, 2022). Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism remains relevant, the purpose of this paper is therefore to examine how Dewey's educational ideas can be applied to the Nigerian education in the 21st century, assessing the points of convergence between his principles and the nation's educational needs, while also acknowledging the challenges that stand in the way of their implementation.

### **John Dewey's Pragmatism: An Overview**

John Dewey's pragmatism was grounded in the conviction that knowledge is not fixed or static, but an evolving reality shaped continuously by human experience and interaction with the environment. Unlike traditional conceptions of education that regarded learning as the memorisation of established facts or the passive reception of truths transmitted by authority figures, Dewey emphasised the dynamic relationship between the learner and the world. For him, education was inseparable from experience, since every genuine act of learning arises out of an individual's engagement with the

challenges and possibilities presented by the environment. This orientation reflects Dewey's broader philosophical pragmatism, which conceives ideas not as immutable doctrines but as instruments for navigating and reshaping reality in practical ways (Okpara, 2023). Knowledge, in this framework, is always provisional and subject to revision as new experiences generate fresh insights. Education, therefore, is not the attainment of a final body of truth but an ongoing process of growth and reconstruction. Dewey argued that learning should not be reduced to the passive reception of information, as such an approach produces learners who may recall answers but lack the ability to apply their understanding in real contexts. Instead, he maintained that education is an active and participatory process in which learners confront problems, test solutions, and arrive at conclusions through reflective inquiry. This principle is most clearly articulated in his notion of "learning by doing," which remains one of the defining features of his educational thought. In Dewey's view, education acquires meaning when learners engage in tasks that connect with their experiences, interests, and aspirations. Scientific concepts, for instance, should not be restricted to textbooks but explored through experiments, projects, and hands-on activities that demonstrate their relevance to everyday life. Such engagement fosters not only deeper understanding but also habits of curiosity, persistence, and critical reflection that extend beyond the classroom (Anuoluwapo, 2025). Closely related to this pedagogical emphasis was Dewey's conviction that education and democracy are inseparable. He conceived of the school as a miniature society in which the values and practices essential for democratic life, cooperation, dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, could be cultivated. For Dewey, democracy was not merely a political system but a way of life that required active participation and moral responsibility. Accordingly, the classroom should not function as an authoritarian space where obedience to hierarchy is prioritised. Rather, it should be a community in which

learners collaborate, deliberate, resolve conflicts constructively, and assume responsibility for both their own learning and the welfare of others. Education, in this sense, becomes a means of intellectual, moral, and social formation, equipping learners to participate meaningfully in the wider democratic community (Meroyi *et al.*, 2022).

In this framework, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator and guide rather than authoritarian instructor. Authority, Dewey argued, should emerge not from rigid hierarchy but from the mutual respect that develops in a context of shared inquiry. The teacher's responsibility is to design conditions that stimulate curiosity, structure experiences in ways that encourage reflective thinking, and create opportunities for learners to test ideas in practice. This does not imply the abandonment of expertise but rather its constructive use in supporting independent thought, fearless questioning, and responsible action among students. Dewey's insistence on experience as the foundation of knowledge placed him in direct opposition to educational models that emphasised abstract instruction detached from the learner's lived reality. He criticised rote memorisation of disconnected facts and rules, advocating instead for a form of education that emerges from the learner's engagement with the environment. In this way, knowledge is generated in response to the problems and opportunities that learners encounter, thereby encouraging the development of problem-solving skills and critical inquiry (Ejimogu & Joseph, 2024). Education, according to Dewey, should not provide a catalogue of predetermined answers but cultivate the intellectual flexibility and practical judgement required to confront new and complex situations responsibly. Dewey's vision was of an education that prepared individuals for the whole of life rather than one narrowly oriented toward examinations or credentials. Schooling, in his conception, should aim to develop the individual intellectually, morally, socially, and emotionally. Effective education cultivates imagination, empathy, civic responsibility, and

adaptability, enabling individuals to contribute constructively to both personal and collective growth. This philosophy of pragmatism, with its emphasis on experiential learning, democratic participation, and reflective problem-solving, provides a striking contrast to many of the challenges facing Nigerian education today. Whereas Dewey envisaged classrooms as spaces of active engagement and cooperation, the Nigerian system remains dominated by rote memorisation, rigid hierarchies, and an excessive focus on examinations (Okpokpo & Okorie, 2021). The contrast underscores both the continuing relevance of Dewey's ideas and the urgent need for reforms that can orient Nigerian education toward pragmatist principles, thereby preparing learners not only to succeed in assessments but also to think critically, act responsibly, and participate meaningfully in society.

### **The State of 21st-Century Nigerian Education**

The Nigerian educational system in the 21st century is characterised by a complex range of structural, pedagogical, and administrative challenges which continue to impede its capacity to fulfil its expected role in national development. A foremost problem is the persistent reliance on rote learning, where knowledge acquisition is reduced to memorisation and mechanical recall. This method of teaching has become entrenched at all levels of the system, from primary to tertiary education, with examination results serving as the principal indicator of success. While this approach may yield short-term outcomes in terms of test scores, it fails to cultivate deeper intellectual engagement or the capacity to transfer knowledge to new and unfamiliar contexts. Students are trained primarily to reproduce information as presented in textbooks and lectures, rather than to interrogate concepts, engage in inquiry, or apply learning to practical problem-solving (Oyelade, 2021). Consequently, education becomes a ritualised process of regurgitation, detached from the realities of life and work. The long-term implication is the production

of graduates who may possess certificates but lack the creative reasoning, critical analysis, and adaptive skills required to navigate the complexities of a dynamic society. In addition to pedagogical weaknesses, Nigeria's education system has been persistently underfunded. Budgetary allocations to the education sector have consistently fallen below the minimum benchmark recommended by UNESCO, leaving institutions at all levels unable to meet fundamental requirements. In public schools, especially at the basic and secondary levels, inadequate infrastructure is a pervasive reality. Many classrooms are overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and lacking in basic furniture. Laboratories are either non-functional or completely absent, and libraries, where they exist, are understocked with outdated materials. Teachers, who are central to the process of education, often contend with poor remuneration and irregular payment of salaries, conditions that reduce morale and discourage dedication. Opportunities for professional development remain limited, with training workshops, seminars, and refresher courses organised infrequently (Ormerod, 2025). This stagnates the capacity of teachers to adopt modern pedagogical strategies, thereby perpetuating outdated and ineffective teaching practices. The problem is further compounded by the unfavourable pupil-teacher ratio, particularly in urban public schools, where large class sizes make interactive learning and individualised instruction nearly impossible.

Nigerian education is also shaped by the wider global context of the 21st century. The rapid forces of globalisation, technological innovation, and shifts in labour market demands have fundamentally altered the competencies required for individual and national success. In the present century, skills such as digital literacy, creativity, collaboration, communication, and adaptability have become indispensable. Advanced economies are already restructuring their curricula and investing in educational reforms to prepare young people for a knowledge-driven economy. In contrast, the Nigerian

system remains largely static, still focused on conventional methods and traditional subject delivery. This disjuncture has resulted in a significant gap between what schools and universities teach and what industries require. Employers in diverse sectors repeatedly express dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates, noting deficiencies in practical competencies such as problem-solving, teamwork, technological application, and innovative thinking (Jeko *et al.*, 2023). The frequent complaints about the unemployability of graduates underscore the urgency of reform, as the nation risks producing an entire generation ill-equipped to meet both local and global economic challenges. It is within this context that Dewey's pragmatism becomes particularly relevant as a framework for reform. Dewey's philosophy emphasises the interconnection between education and lived experience, proposing that learning should be dynamic, experiential, and directed toward problem-solving within real contexts. For Nigeria, this philosophy offers an alternative to the current examination-driven orientation, providing a pathway toward an education system that cultivates critical thinkers, adaptive innovators, and responsible citizens. Pragmatism directs attention to the need for schools to become laboratories of democracy and creativity, where students actively participate in knowledge construction and practical experimentation. Adopting this approach would not only align Nigeria with global educational trends but would also address the long-standing internal weaknesses of the system. Therefore, in rethinking the state of 21st-century Nigerian education, Dewey's ideas provide both a diagnostic lens for understanding existing shortcomings and a prescriptive guide for envisioning meaningful transformation (Felix & Oladele, 2022).

### **Points of Convergence: Dewey's Pragmatism and Nigerian Education Needs**

The principles of Dewey's pragmatism align significantly with the critical issues confronting the Nigerian educational system. Dewey's advocacy for experiential learning

directly challenges the dominance of rote memorisation in Nigerian schools. In the present system, students are often trained to reproduce information for the sake of examinations without necessarily understanding or applying it. This practice results in learners who are theoretically knowledgeable but practically deficient in addressing real-world challenges. Dewey's framework emphasises active engagement with the environment, experimentation, and reflection. Applying such an approach within Nigerian schools would not only make learning more relevant to students' everyday lives but also encourage curiosity, innovation, and the development of practical skills that extend beyond the classroom context (Maduabuchi, 2022). In this sense, Dewey's perspective provides an alternative pathway for addressing the disconnect between academic content and practical application that has long characterised Nigerian education. Dewey's concept of democratic education also converges with Nigeria's pressing need for reform in classroom interaction and pedagogy. The current system often reflects authoritarian structures where teachers dominate the learning space and learners are relegated to passive roles. Such a structure stifles the cultivation of independent reasoning, limits creativity, and undermines the possibility of dialogue in the learning process. Dewey proposes a model where education functions as a cooperative enterprise, enabling learners to participate actively in knowledge construction and decision-making. Adopting such a framework in Nigeria would shift the focus of schooling from obedience and conformity to collaboration, critical inquiry, and shared responsibility. This would not only improve classroom engagement but would also prepare students for participation in democratic practices within the larger society, fostering civic responsibility and social accountability. Another significant convergence between Dewey's philosophy and Nigerian educational challenges is the emphasis on problem-solving. The Nigerian school system remains highly exam-oriented, with success measured primarily by students'

ability to reproduce memorised content under time constraints (John-Okpa, 2024). This orientation sidelines the cultivation of analytical skills, creativity, and adaptability, qualities required to navigate the complexities of modern social, economic, and political life. Dewey's insistence that education must prioritise the development of problem-solving skills directly addresses this deficiency. By embedding problem-solving approaches into curriculum design, Nigerian schools would equip students to handle uncertainties, engage productively with societal challenges, and contribute meaningfully to innovation and national development. Dewey's insistence on the integration of education with the needs of society corresponds with Nigeria's long-standing struggle with graduate unemployment and the mismatch between academic training and labour market requirements. Many graduates leave tertiary institutions without the competencies required by employers, thereby intensifying the problem of underemployment. Dewey argues that education should be relevant to the social and economic realities of a community. In the Nigerian, this means tailoring curricula to reflect industrial needs, entrepreneurship, technological development, and community advancement. If implemented, this alignment would reduce the disconnect between education and employability while ensuring that learning contributes directly to national progress (Oyenuga & Idowu, 2022).

### **Practical Relevance of Dewey's Pragmatism to Nigerian Education**

The practical implications of Dewey's philosophy for Nigerian education are wide-ranging and touch upon curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, and the broader social functions of education. At the level of curriculum, Dewey's pragmatism suggests a fundamental departure from the long-established tradition of content-heavy syllabi dominated by rote learning and memorisation. In many Nigerian schools, learners are expected to reproduce information delivered by the teacher or contained in textbooks,

with success measured primarily by performance in standardised examinations (Oyelade, 2021). Dewey's thought would redirect emphasis from memorisation to the cultivation of skills that enable learners to confront real-life challenges. This does not entail the outright rejection of factual knowledge, but it requires that knowledge be structured and presented in ways that encourage learners to apply it in practical situations. In science education, instead of focusing exclusively on definitions and laws, learners could be engaged in experiments and problem-solving activities that demonstrate how scientific principles operate in their everyday environment. Similarly, in social studies and civic education, learners could be encouraged to address community-based problems such as sanitation, conflict resolution, or environmental conservation. Such adjustments to the curriculum would ensure that knowledge becomes an instrument for critical engagement with social reality rather than a body of static information (Ormerod, 2025). In terms of pedagogy, Dewey's learner-centred orientation would mark a significant break from entrenched teacher-dominated practices. The Nigerian classroom has historically been characterised by a hierarchical relationship in which the teacher assumes an authoritative role while students are positioned as passive recipients. Dewey's philosophy calls for a reversal of this orientation by promoting active participation of learners in the process of inquiry. Classrooms organised along Deweyan lines would prioritise activities, projects, and group work, with learners encouraged to ask questions, seek solutions, and collaborate with peers. This approach, while challenging the authoritarian tradition, has the potential to develop in students the skills of critical reasoning, creativity, and cooperative problem-solving. The growing availability of digital technology in Nigeria, though uneven in its distribution, offers practical tools to support this transition. Through access to computers, mobile devices, and the internet, learners can be introduced to research, simulations, and digital collaboration platforms. Even in resource-constrained

schools, low-cost technologies such as mobile phones and radio broadcasts can provide interactive channels that shift learning from mere recitation to active engagement. Thus, Dewey's pedagogical vision aligns with the pressing need to modernise Nigerian classrooms in ways that equip learners with twenty-first century competencies (Jeko *et al.*, 2023).

Teacher training constitutes another critical area where Dewey's philosophy has direct implications. Dewey conceived the role of the teacher not as a transmitter of pre-packaged knowledge but as a facilitator of meaningful experiences that enable learners to grow intellectually and socially. Applying this to the Nigerian education would require a fundamental reorientation in teacher preparation programmes. Many teachers enter the profession with limited exposure to student-centred methodologies and tend to replicate the authoritarian practices that dominate their own schooling experience. To operationalise Dewey's ideas, teacher education institutions would need to design training modules that emphasise facilitation, guidance, and scaffolding rather than domination. Teachers should be exposed to techniques such as project-based learning, inquiry methods, and collaborative classroom management. Moreover, continuous professional development would be necessary to ensure that in-service teachers adapt to changing demands. Beyond training, however, there are structural issues that must be addressed (Maduabuchi, 2022). Teachers require adequate remuneration, improved working conditions, and professional recognition to motivate them to adopt new practices. Without such incentives, the transformation envisaged by Dewey is unlikely to take root in Nigerian schools. Beyond the level of pedagogy and teacher training, Dewey's broader conception of education as preparation for democratic life carries significant relevance for Nigeria's socio-political environment. Nigeria's democracy remains fragile, often undermined by ethnic divisions, electoral malpractice, and weak

civic participation. Schools, through the application of Deweyan principles, could serve as incubators of democratic culture by instilling in learners values such as tolerance, cooperation, respect for diversity, and civic responsibility. Classroom activities that encourage deliberation, debate, and group decision-making can provide learners with practical exposure to democratic processes. Furthermore, school governance structures that allow for student participation in decision-making could reinforce these values in a concrete way. By aligning education with the broader goals of social cohesion and democratic stability, Nigerian schools would not merely produce graduates with cognitive skills but also citizens equipped to contribute constructively to the nation's political life. In this sense, Dewey's pragmatism underscores the function of education not only as preparation for work but also as a mechanism for strengthening national unity and democratic practice (Ormerod, 2025).

### **Challenges of Applying Dewey's Pragmatism in Nigeria**

Despite its potential, the application of Dewey's pragmatism in Nigeria faces considerable challenges. One major challenge is cultural and structural resistance to change. Both teachers and policymakers are accustomed to an authoritarian and examination-driven model, and shifting toward more participatory and experiential methods may be met with scepticism or outright opposition. Another significant challenge is the inadequacy of facilities. Many schools lack laboratories, libraries, and technological infrastructure that are essential for experiential and inquiry-based learning. In addition, overcrowded classrooms further reduce the feasibility of interactive pedagogy, as teachers are forced to focus on control and discipline rather than innovation in teaching (John-Okpa, 2024). Teachers, who are often poorly motivated and underpaid, may also find it difficult to embrace new approaches that demand more preparation, patience, and creativity. Where teachers are not given opportunities for continuous

professional development, introducing pragmatist pedagogy becomes even more difficult. Another pressing concern is that government policies in Nigeria are frequently inconsistent, subject to political interference, and poorly implemented. Reforms are often announced with enthusiasm but rarely followed through with sustained funding, training, and monitoring. This policy instability undermines the long-term adoption of Deweyan principles in the education system. These challenges suggest that while Dewey's philosophy is highly relevant to the Nigerian context, its implementation must be carefully adapted to local realities. Rather than attempting to impose Deweyan principles in their entirety, there is a need for pragmatic adjustments that take into account Nigeria's socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions. Strategies could involve gradual integration of learner-centred practices into existing curricula, provision of context-appropriate training for teachers, and development of policies that prioritize consistency and long-term sustainability over short-term political gains (Oyenuga & Idowu, 2022). Only with such context-sensitive adaptations can the Nigerian education system hope to benefit fully from the practical insights of Dewey's pragmatism.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the identified challenges, it is essential to establish practical strategies through which Dewey's pragmatism can be systematically integrated into the Nigerian educational framework. Policy reforms should be carefully articulated to align with Deweyan principles, with particular emphasis on skill acquisition, problem-solving abilities, and the promotion of democratic participation within the learning environment. Teacher retraining initiatives should also be prioritized, ensuring that educators are adequately equipped with the knowledge and resources required to implement learner-centred pedagogy and foster experiential learning. Furthermore, substantial investment in educational infrastructure is indispensable. The provision of functional laboratories,

workshops, and digital learning facilities is critical to operationalizing Dewey's principle of learning by doing. Schools should also be encouraged to cultivate democratic practices within their governance structures, thereby enabling students to actively engage in decision-making processes and problem-solving activities within the school community. Beyond the immediate classroom context, collaboration between schools, industries, and local communities should be strengthened (Okpara, 2023). Such partnerships would ensure that education remains socially relevant, responsive to labour market demands, and capable of producing graduates who are adaptable, innovative, and competent in addressing real-world challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The relevance of John Dewey's pragmatism to 21st century Nigerian education lies in its capacity to address persistent structural and pedagogical challenges. Dewey's conviction that education is not merely preparation for life but life itself remains profoundly significant in Nigerian education, where traditional models of rote memorization and examination-driven assessment continue to dominate. His advocacy for experiential learning, problem-solving, and democratic participation offers a coherent framework for rethinking educational practice in a way that prioritizes the holistic development of learners. Dewey's philosophy underscores the necessity of linking education with the lived realities of students and the socio-economic demands of the wider society. In Nigeria, where education often remains disconnected from practical needs and community engagement, such a paradigm provides a pathway for producing learners who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of applying knowledge to solve real-world problems. By fostering creativity, adaptability, and civic responsibility, Dewey's approach can help cultivate citizens equipped to contribute meaningfully to national development. While significant challenges exist, ranging from inadequate

infrastructure to insufficient teacher training, the potential advantages of adopting Deweyan principles outweigh these challenges. A commitment to experiential pedagogy, democratic school governance, and stronger connections between education and society would gradually shift the system away from its current limitations. Conclusively, if Nigeria seeks to transform its educational sector into one that is dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to global and local realities, the adoption of Dewey's pragmatism is not merely desirable but imperative.

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