

Review

The school and contemporary education in Nigeria: Lessons from John Dewey

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Education and development are dialectically intertwined, but the current approach to education in Nigeria does not really portray this dialectics. Education tends to be tailored towards paper certification. This has fostered a wrong epistemology where people see schooling as an adventure to be given degrees. This mainly theoretical research faults the Nigerian educational process and radically exposes the gulf between education and self-reliance. The educational thought of John Dewey is explored with a view to developing a curriculum structure that makes intelligence essentially this instrumental. In line with this, the idea of education is theoretically appraised and fundamental points in Dewey's pragmatism are explored.

Key words: John Dewey, education, school, pragmatism, philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

When a system of education deteriorates to such an extent that a graduate cannot write his/her name and quite a lot of them are unemployable, then such a system needs urgent attention. The system is so troubled that people are after certificate to enhance white-collar job whereas the intellectual power to defend the paper qualification is not there. This simply captures some aspects of the Nigerian situation. This paper argues that there is a 'disconnect' between the school and educational system in Nigeria and if the system will work, there are fundamental points that must be quickly appropriated from Dewey's philosophy of education whose aim of education is for the development of a child's powers and ability. Education to him must aim at creating social efficiency, skill and installing democratic values and ideals in the individuals.

ON THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

The Concept of Education has become a marketing niche

in the present world. In the name of progress, the whole concept of education is misinterpreted and constrained into a small term of schooling.

Is attending school the full-length concept of education? Let us plunge into the various concepts of education constructed in its evolution. What is Education? To begin with, education is not a 'thing'. It is not a substance that can be pointed out or sold. Instead, it is a method; a method that polishes the human mind, improves and trains it to be better. The root of the term Education is as deceptive as the concept of education. Education is derived from the Latin words *Educare* and *Educatum*. The former means to bring up and the latter denotes the art of teaching and training. The concept of education is a very broad one. As such, it has enjoyed considerable attention both in the humanities and the science disciplines. It will be expedient to quickly say that education is not just literacy as believed by some people. The ability to read and write does not translate to education. Of course, "the ability to read and write is a

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fundamental aspect of the educational institution. Illiteracy shuts a person almost completely out of the goings-on in his society (Gboyega, 2000:128). The explanation on illiteracy as Gboyega mentioned above is critical to an overall understanding of education. That a person can read and write does not imply that he has clear comprehension and possesses the ability to apply what he has read. That a person can speak his lingua franca effortlessly does not mean that he is educated in a pragmatic sense. Then, what is education?

It has become increasingly difficult to define education. As remarked by Babarinde (1995), the difficulty in proffering a univocal definition stems from the fact "all definitions that have been offered tended to be inadequate because they always leave some vital information out" (Babarinde 1995:36). Writing from the same perspective, R. S. Peters notes that:

It is no longer necessary nor desirable to define education. Education forms a family of ideas united by a complicated network of similarities which overlap and criss-cross. Due to this, philosophers of education simply suggest some criteria or conditions that should be present before an activity or programme could legitimately attract the label of education (Peter, 1967:82).

Thus, in simple terms, education can be defined as a method or practice that aims at teaching an individual a new skill or new principles (Cole, 2018:10). This practice sharpens the minds and builds moral principles in an individual. We can thus conclude that the current concept of education is the art of teaching and training. Unfortunately, at present education is no more provided with the aim of bringing up an individual and cultivating moral values in him/her. The environment in which we live has reduced the concept of education to a narrow pathway towards success and a sophisticated life. It has become an object. The object is used by educational institutions to gulp money and undeniably by the learners to secure a wealthy living. However in the real sense, it is a tool to magnify one's ability to reason and make sensible judgments. Education is the creation of sound mind and sound body. It invigorates man's innate powers.

JOHN DEWEY PRAGMATISM AND EDUCATION

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform. Dewey was one of the acknowledged developers of the Philosophy of pragmatism. Dewey puts up a strong Philosophy on democracy in his advocacy of democracy. Dewey considered two fundamental elements - schools and the civil society as the major topics needing attention and reconstruction to encourage experimental intelligence and plurality. Though he referred to his Philosophy as

instrumentalism, rather than pragmatism, he was one of the three major figures in American pragmatism along with Charles Sanders Peirce who invented the term and William James who popularised it. Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer whose ideas have been influential. Dewey lived in a period characterized by social problems, technological change and dynamic political experience. Russell has this to say about Dewey "He has had a profound influence, not only among political philosophers, but on students of education, aesthetics and political theory. He is liberal in outlook, generous, kind in personal relations and indefatigable in work" (Russell, 1946:84). Pragmatism is an American Philosophy from the early 20th century. According to pragmatism, the truth or meaning of an idea or a proposition lies in its observable practical consequences rather than being metaphysical. That is to say, it involves "whatever works is likely to be true". Since reality changes, whatever works will also change. In the light of this, truth must be seen as capable of dynamism, no one can claim to possess any final or ultimate truth.

The term pragmatism was first used by Charles Peirce to refer to a kind of method of looking at reality. He was concerned with how we can discern what is true and what is false. Meanwhile, pragmatism really came to intellectual light through the work of William James while John Dewey gave intellectual touches that endeared it to people worldwide. E.A. Ruch made an illuminating pronouncement on this when he posits that - "in its pure and systematic form, pragmatism was formulated by William James and developed by John Dewey" (Ruch, 1977:206). James extends to truth, the principles which utilitarian had applied to goodness. Truth is what works. An idea is true if it is advantageous to our thought in the same way as an action is morally approved if it is advantageous to our conduct. Dewey strongly rejects any system of ideas that make experience less intelligible and takes the problem of men as the subject matter of Philosophy. In his understanding, philosophers did not recognize for so long a time that they have made the subject matter of Philosophy difficult and vague. His displeasure with classical traditions led him to re-evaluate and reconstruct the entire system of western tradition in Philosophy. The result of this as James Gounlock puts it "is one of the most seminal and fruitful of Philosophies of the twentieth century" (Gounlock, 1998; 44). The epistemological basis of Dewey's thought cannot be totally set aside. Dewey considers our knowledge of the world to be our experience of the world. Human cognition resides in interactive experience with the surrounding medium. In line with the nexus between knowledge and experience, one of Dewey's assumptions is that thought, mind, logical distinctions and approaches develop out of the problem solving activity. Whatever is known is known through human experience with nature. It is through this that we form logical theories and distinct concepts for

interpreting and reconstructing experience. This kind of theory that is germane to new theories of knowledge has to be necessarily connected to modern science. The logic of inquiry which passes for gnoseology should adhere to scientific methodology and common sense enquiry.

Dewey's pragmatic Philosophy drew some crucial lessons from earlier epistemologists. In his exposition, Dewey questioned the assumption of an ontological distinction between thought and its subject-matter. To Dewey 'reflective thought grows originally out of an experience which is already organized and its function within such an organism' (Dewey, 1897:333). This organization is done via system working of human intelligence. Dewey is of the view that solution to human problems involves critical thinking. It requires inquiry. According to him, "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is as determinate in its constituents distinction and relations as to convert the element of the original situation into a unified whole" (Dewey, 1950:104-105). The function of intelligence is not just to construct abstract theories but to help solve particular problems by formulating plans and hypothesis and testing them through their consequences in practice. It is Dewey's belief that until men recognizes the need to apply the method of experimental intelligence to all domains of human affairs, the problem of man will persist. Every domain of human life is amenable to this logic of inquiry.

John Dewey is firmly of the opinion that education when germane to experience helps man to shape and re-shape the society. Using Dewey's pragmatism as the conceptual basis of analysis, true education comes through the stimulation of the child's power by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself (Dewey, 1937: 49). Thus, it involves the acquisition and application of ideas to solve social problems. Real education is instrumental and experimental. It is not mere cramming or storage of socially irrelevant or unapplied facts. Education is a process of discovery where students would study what they are interested in at their own pace, as they are gradually becoming aware of their areas of expertise. Mere absorption of facts and truth is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends to naturally pass into selfishness. "There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning; there is no clear social gain in success there at. Memorizing and regulation of notes do not bring about social transformation (Dewey, 1909:30). Dewey tends to be saying that education and schooling are not exact synonyms. As amplified by Akinyemi Onigbinde:

Education does not necessarily mean going to school for the rest of one's life and taking more and more courses and acquiring more and more degrees. Education should be thought of literally as a matter of leading out from a less rich, less informed, less skilled stage to one that is more informed, more skilled and more enriched in

whatever directions of interests and need an individual freely choose (Onigbinde, 1996:187).

Education prepares student to be self-reliant. It involves intellectual training to understand or appreciate social challenges and proffer solution. Basically, "education is initiated whenever a teacher (human, material or self) is fostering in a human learner, certain content in the form of skills, attitude or competence through an ethically defensible method" (Frankena, 1973:731). This means that teaching, learning, literacy, numeracy and vocations are aspects of education but acquiring all these does not translate to education. A good educational system must facilitate self-reliance and moral well-being. It involves learning a giving concept and applying what is learnt in social situation. The object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth (Dewey, 1916:12). Dewey vision of education is thus directly connected with the question of preparing people for active citizenship in a participatory order. Good education should have a social purpose and meaning for the individual student. Educators are saddled with the task of providing students with experiences that are immediately valuable and which rightly position the student to handle social exigency. Thus, the school does not only import knowledge and skill but it furnishes environment to balance the ingenuity in human and apply this to social problem. Education is a lifelong process, but this does not mean going to school for the rest of one's life and offering more and more courses or amassing more degrees. It renders its subject capable of further education, more sensitive to growth and more able to take advantage of them (Onigbinde, 1996:188). Hence, acquisition of skill, possession of knowledge, attainment of cultures is not ends: they are marks of growth and means to its continuing (Dewey, 1966:184). Education is synonymous with growth and it is co-extensive with the whole domain of moral experience. In this sense, all social and cultural establishment schools, government business, religion, science and art to be from a moral perspective (Onigbinde, 1996:171).

SOME PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is blessed with policy and programme that facilitate development through education. But, a second look at the system shows systemic deterioration. One of the palpable reasons for this is a prevailing epistemology of education that is abysmally wrong. Education is interpreted as possession of certificate. Babaoluwa Timothy explains this in the following language:

There is a systemic but wrong orientation and outlook on the essence and dynamics of the educational life. Though in a subtle rendition, education is seen as paper certification that qualifies one for job placement. This is a suffusing ideological error that has permeated the fibre of

our national life (Babaoluwa, 2017:94).

In line with the above many graduates are employed on the templates of certificate and government connection far beyond the necessity of intellectual fitness. Plato in his book *“The Republic”* canvassed vehemently on the fundamentality of natural aptitude and intellectual fitness. Humans must be placed according to their natural capacity and they must grow in this dimension. This is enshrined in his concept of justice. He writes:

Justice is the requirement we laid down at the beginning of universal application when we founded our state, or else some form of it...if you remember and have often repeated that in our state, one man was to do one job, he was naturally most suited for...justice consists in minding your own business and not interfering with other people (Plato, 1974:204).

To Plato, humans have an innate faculty of ideas which education will prime out for effective usage. Thus, it is expedient for humans to function, strictly, in life with this area of special fitness and natural comparative advantage. The above line of thinking is bound to challenge the empiricist who sees the mind of man as *tabula rasa* to be filled via experience and sensation. Although, the empiricist theory of mind was and to some extent still is, extremely influential. It has long been realized that it is completely bankrupt both as a theory of action and as a theory of perception. The empiricist account of action and perception completely misrepresents the relationship between thinking about objects and thinking about ideas (Jonathan, 1974:68). Suffice to note that empiricism and rationalism can be harmonized: but that is not the focus of this work. In appendage to the above, when the political structure misconstrues the synergy between certification and education, education and literacy education and self-reliance etc. then intellectual misfits are bound to occupy positions that are meant for the able-bodied and cerebrally endowed. This means that wrong peg will be put in square hole. Another fundamental challenge within the system is the final mode of assessment to determine undergraduate's competency especially in the humanities where the students merely download projects from the internet libraries and appropriate it as theirs. In fact, the system is being debased in Nigeria and it calls for urgent review. Besides, there are series of not-well monitored programme where even an unlettered person can be awarded with university degree in Nigeria. This ought not to be so.

SCHOOL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: THE JOHN DEWEY'S OPTION

John Dewey's Philosophy covered different aspects of human endeavors. One area where his influence is very

pronounced is in the area of education. According to him all that the society has accomplished for itself can be traced to the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members (Dewey, 1916:44). Education, culture and the community must be inseparably connected. A proper education of the individual is essential to the functioning and growth of that individual and the society individual occupies. This means that there is a dialectical interaction and inseparable synergy between education and social development. Education is not cramming or mere memorization and regurgitation of theoretical points. If it has no bearing with the people's social life; it is apparently useless. Basically, the syllabus/curriculum of the school must be promised on the problems and solutions of the society; so students must be trained in such a way that they would be able to solve societal problem. Besides, students must be encouraged to study courses of their choice or interest, not what the parents desired. This interest of the student would make them to perform well in those courses of their choice. Education could only be valuable if it equips students with what they can apply to solve social problems. True education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situation in which he finds himself (Dewey, 1897:54).

Dewey wants us to note that education must not just be based on mere absorption of formula, laws and principles. When the intelligence is not instrumentally deployed any education that is obtained is like a bird in a cage. Such cannot cope with the challenge of a rapidly changing world. Dewey substantiates this point thus:

The mere absorption of facts and truth is so exclusively individual an affairs that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness. There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat... a comparison of result in the recitation or in examination to see which child has succeeded in getting ahead of others, in storing up, in accumulation the maximum of information... where the school work consists in simply learning lessons, mutual assistance instead of teaching, the most natural form of cooperation and association becomes a clandestine effort to relieve one's neighbor of his proper duties (Dewey, 1907:30).

It will be expedient to let education have a sort of practical dimension in Nigeria, in all ramifications, across disciplines. Thus, theoretical success must be practically reviewed. We now live in a nation where some university graduates cannot correctly write their names. There are students that score excellent grades in external examination in literature in English, but cannot even name the textbooks that they read. How did they pass? Dewey's pragmatism shows that knowledge does not exist separately from action, "there is no such thing as genuine knowledge and truthful understanding except as

the offspring of doing.” (Dewey 1916:321) “Schools should be viewed not only as institutions that impart certain knowledge and skill to students, but also as environment that socialize them” (Gajda and Koliba, 2008:41). Education must be transformative and the content of the curriculum must be in tandem with cultural reality.

Basically, Dewey is of the view that it is the educator’s responsibility to enhance that knowledge stems from the conditions or social experience that fuel the learning capacity of the learner. Besides, “the problem must be tangible enough to induce learners’ interest in seeking more information and engender new ideas. (Oyenuga, 2015:80)

Education must be based on experience if it is to achieve its end. Dewey reinforces this idea in the *Pedagogic Creed*. He writes:

I believe that knowledge of social condition or the present state of civilization is necessary in order properly to interpret the child’s power. The child has its own instinct and tendencies, but we do not know what these means until we can translate them into their social equivalent... I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s power by the demand of the social situation in which he finds himself. Through these demands, he is stimulated to act as a member of a unit... (Dewey, 1938:110).

In all simplicity, the child’s interest, natural mental fitness and habit must be well considered. It is not a case where a parent will force a person who ought to study Yoruba Language to become a surgeon. This is one of the reasons why student cannot cope with the academic activities because he/she was not interested in the course not to talk of acquiring knowledge that will benefit humanity. Scholarship is a social phenomenon. It is not an abstract adventure. Humans must experimentally invest their intellect to tackle social reality and exigency. Schooling and education is not the same thing. Akinyemi Onigbinde expatiates this through Dewey’s perspective. He writes:

Education and school are not synonymous.... It doesn’t necessarily mean going to school for the rest of one’s life and taking more and more degrees. Education should be thought of as leading out from a less rich, less informed, less skilled stage to one that is more informed, more skilled and more enriched in whatever direction of interest and need an individual freely chooses (Onigbinde, 1996:187).

CONCLUSION

The educational system in Nigeria leaves a lot to be

done. The system tends to misconstrue schooling with education but radical adoption of Dewey’s Pragmatic thought will go a long way to addressing this problem. Then the systems will clearly impress it on the learners that scholarship is a social phenomenon. What matter is not the colour of the degree of the paper qualification but the social relevance of the training both for the person and the society. Thus, there is a need to re-order our value system, so that competence, even when not formally certificated will be given due recognition.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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