

Dewey's Philosophy of Education as Growth: Implications on Formal Education in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian governments and other stake holders over the years have made continuous efforts, through different avenues, to make the purpose of education feasible and practically relevant. However, such efforts seem unproductive in view of the chaotic situation of the educational system and schooling in Nigeria as there are several complaints and agitations on the relevance of school education to real – life problem and needs of individual persons and the society. This is evident in the rate of dropouts, unemployment, underemployment and poor level of self – reliance and relevant entrepreneurship skills of most of the products of the Nigerian schools.

This study examined Dewey's conception of education as growth and its implication on formal education in Nigeria using the philosophical methods of speculation, analysis and prescription.

The key concept in education, for John Dewey, is growth. This is understood in the sense of mental and intellectual growth, having to do with the continuous and infinite enrichment of experience and transfer of learning.

The study therefore suggests that the school must be integrated into the larger realm of the community through directed and aim – driven occupational learning where students will develop the kind of critical sensibilities that will lead them not to simply accept the given structure of society, but alter it. Education should aim at developing the ability to learn from experience what is useful to cope with the difficulties of a later situation and the capability to transfer this to solve subsequent problems. Emphasis therefore, should be on functional and entrepreneurial education.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Issues of purpose and relevance are always very crucial to education. Virtually all definitions of education can be observed to be expressions of the purposes and aims which education is expected to achieve. Therefore, the relevance of education is measured by the extent to which it achieves these purposes. As Akinpelu (2005) posited, “a genuine system of education when critically studied and analysed should yield some distinctive value-system which must be identical with that of the society to describe that educational system as relevant” (p.159). Every society has certain goals and values which its education is designed to achieve and inculcate respectively. In Nigeria, there are certain goals and values which education is expected to meet. As presented in the National Policy on Education (2013), the quality of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria is expected to be oriented towards inculcating certain values. The extent to which education meets these demands obviously becomes the concern of all stake holders. These values are:

- a. Respect for the worth and dignity of the individual
- b. Faith in man's ability to make rational decision
- c. Moral and spiritual principle in interpersonal and human relations
- d. Shared responsibility for the common good of society

- e. Promotion of the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children and
- f. Acquisition of competencies necessary for self-reliance (Sec. 1:3)

In addition, the National Policy on Education also presented the following as the aims and objectives of education in Nigeria:

1. The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity
2. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society
3. The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around
4. The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competence – both mental and physical – as equipment for the individual to live in, and contribute to, the development of his society. (Sec. 1:1)

For many developing countries of the world, education remains an important instrument through which national development could be achieved. Educational systems have paradoxically been expected to act as a catalyst in the process of development or play an important role in the encouragement and implementation of change. This, according to Avoseh (2001), is expected to be achieved in two ways; firstly, by developing problem-solving capabilities and secondly, through the discovery of knowledge (p. 123).

In Nigeria, government has intensified efforts, through different avenues, to achieve education for all. “Several programmes including the Universal Basic Education (UBE), Nomadic and fishermen education as well as long vacation and continuing education programmes are provided in various educational institutions. In some cases, in-service training, scholarships, bursaries and loans are also provided”. (Okeke, 2004, p. 305). It is not surprising then to read from the Nigerian *National Policy on Education* (2013) the Federal Government’ position that:

Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change, as any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution (sec. 1:7).

To this end, ‘school programmes are planned to be relevant, practical and comprehensive; while interest and ability should determine the individual’s direction in education’.

However, such commitment of government as expressed in the national policy on education as well as the several efforts made by government and other stake holders to provide functional and relevant education seem unproductive in view of the chaotic situation of the educational system and schooling in Nigeria. This has been attested to by several authors like Ajeyalemi and Ejiogu (1987, p. 1), Azeke (2002, p. 23), Eheasu and Ivowi, (2004, p. XV) and Madumere – Obike (2004, pp. 57 – 58).

In fact, Akinpelu (2005b) summed up the problem of irrelevance in the Nigerian educational system with the claim that:

The Nigerian educational system is in dire trouble. Perhaps, that is the only statement on Nigerian education that one can safely make in these times without much controversy. Any other statement on the cause(s) and the extent of the trouble or its remediation will at best be controversial and most probably reflective of the ideological and political position of the person making the statement. (p. vii).

One can infer from Akinpelu’s position, an indication of consensus among stake holders on the failure of education in Nigeria, especially schooling, to meet societal expectations in recent times. The problems of unemployment, poverty, armed robbery, larceny, harlotry, kidnapping and other corrupt practices appear to have created threats to the purpose and relevance of the educational system in Nigeria. For instance, Azeke

(2002) wondered “how well education in Nigeria has accomplished its objectives given the spate of the contemporary social problems now prevalent in the society” (p. 209). He listed corruption and joblessness of school graduates among these ills.

Moreover, western formal education in Nigeria has often been criticized as being elitist, too bookish, too theoretical and non – functional as majority of its products have no marketable skills that would fit them into the world of employment and therefore cannot contribute meaningfully to national development. Also, the 6-3-3-4 system of education which proposed curricular emphasised functionalism and self – reliance did not appear to have produced the desired results as its products were still found roaming around searching for jobs.

Therefore, owing to these problems which have threatened the purpose and relevance of the educational system in Nigeria, there have been calls from several authors and stakeholders in education for a more purposeful and dynamic education which will be more relevant to the needs of Nigerian society. In the same vein, there have been calls from some quarters for the adoption of some features of the indigenous education which had been described as functional, purposeful and pragmatic by scholars like Majasan (1967, p.37), Fafunwa (1982, p. 10) and Akinpelu (2005, p. 23). Meanwhile, dynamism and functionalism are basic features of Dewey’s education as growth.

John Dewey was one of America’s foremost pragmatists. Pragmatism is a philosophical school of thought that attaches importance to the workability of an idea. It asserts that an idea has an ultimate meaning when it is put into practice. The feasibility of an idea was also a major ideal in African indigenous education. This was evident in the emphasis placed on practice, on learning by doing, on imitation and on transfer of learning.

Pragmatism, as a philosophy, signifies the insistence on usefulness or practical consequences as a test of truth. Pragmatists contend that “the only reason we have for asserting that anything is true is that it works” (Popkin, 1993, p. 277). “Pragmatists do not rely on intuitive knowledge, but rather, they emphasize functional knowledge and understanding. The meaning of an idea is its influence on practice” (Seetharumu, 2004, p. 38).

Pragmatist’s theory of knowledge advocates the idea that truth is determined by function or consequences. Knowledge is arrived at by scientific inquiry, testing, questioning and retesting. To the pragmatists, what is ethically or morally good is that which works or which leads to a desirable consequence. The focus on consequences does not imply that the pragmatists are only concerned with what works for the self. Rather, they are concerned with social consequences. What works is that which works for the larger community, not just the self.

John Dewey’s philosophy of education focused on learning by doing rather than rote learning and dogmatic instruction. The key concept in education, for Dewey, is growth. This is understood in the sense of mental and intellectual growth, having to do with the continuous and infinite enrichment of experience. Dewey (1916) argued that:

Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact. (p. 53)

Dewey’s philosophy of education as growth emphasises relevance and continuity in education.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian governments, at various levels and times, have made several frantic efforts to make education functional and relevant to national needs. However, in spite of the attempts made to put in place functional and productive education through school programmes that are practical, relevant and comprehensive, many still doubt if any success has been made going by the rate of unemployment, and other social problem in the Nigerian society. The current system of education in Nigeria is still found to be too academic, too bookish and too theoretical. The question of relevance and demonstrated ability to apply theoretical information to solving concrete problems encountered in the realities of the natural environment has brought great concern to stake holders in education.

The modern age is one in which most people are interested more in the material benefits or practical usefulness of any activity and this forms one of the foundations on which the pragmatists' philosophy is built.

Dewey as one of the major proponents of pragmatism has described education as growth. He perceived education as mental growth where emphasis is on the transfer and application of learning. This is expected to be achieved through reflective thinking which Dewey regards as the most scientific and most effective method of solving problems.

This study examined the meaning of Dewey's concept of education as growth, how it can be interpreted in modern education and its implications on formal education in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

This study employed the philosophical approach to achieve the following purposes. The study therefore aims to:

1. Critically examine the pragmatic concept of 'education as growth' by subjecting it to philosophical analysis.
2. Analyse the ideals of Dewey's concept of education as growth in order to explore its relevance to maintaining proper balance in intellectual and socio – economic relevance of formal educational practice in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method is philosophical. The philosophical methods of speculation, prescription and analysis are adopted for this study. The analytic approach was employed to clarify the rationale behind the uses of the concept of "education as growth" in given or hypothetical situations; the speculative approach was used to examine and establish the ideal of the concept of education as growth to modern educational theory and practice while the prescriptive method was adopted to recommend measures based on the implications from the activities of analysis and speculation.

Significance of the Study

The study will be of great benefit to philosophers/philosophers of education, educators and curriculum planners in making an appraisal or assessment of the feasibility or relevance of modern Education in Nigeria. It is also hoped that this study will serve as a useful guide to policy makers and also as a basis for future researches.

The Concept of Education as Growth

The main perception of education by Dewey is growth. However, growth in this context is not understood by Dewey in a purely biological sense, but as mental and intellectual growth, having to do with the continuous and infinite enrichment of experience. Dewey (1916) argued that:

Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact. (p. 53)

Growth, to Dewey, is the cumulative movement of action towards a later result. In this sense, growth could be seen as continuous or chain of activities where the latter aided by the former increases the strength and enhances the importance of the former. In other words, it is an all-rounded-physical intellectual, social and emotional-development of the potentialities of an individual. Such a development must be, inter-related, interdependent, organized, harmonious and a product of directed activities.

Dewey (1916) describes the primary condition necessary for growth as immaturity. Immaturity makes growth possible. The meaning of immaturity as used by Dewey is stipulative. Immaturity, to Dewey, does not imply the absence of power to grow but means the ability to develop, the power to grow and the possibility for growth. It represents a positive quality in the child. He explains that:

...when we say that immaturity means the possibility of growth, we are not referring to absence of powers which may exist at a later time; we express a force positively present, the ability to develop. Our tendency to take immaturity as mere lack, and growth as something which fills up the gap between the immature and the mature is due to regarding childhood comparatively, instead of intrinsically. We treat it simply as a privation because we are measuring it by adulthood as a fixed standard. (pp. 41 -42).

Immaturity is characterized by dependence and plasticity. In other words, growth relies on dependence and plasticity. Also, these words as employed by Dewey convey stipulative meaning. That is, dependence is perceived by Dewey from a social stand point and it denotes a power rather than a weakness. It does not indicate absolute helplessness. Dewey (1916) argued that:

If helplessness were all there were in dependence, no development could ever take place. A merely impotent being has to be carried, forever, by others. The fact that dependence is accompanied by growth in ability, not by an ever-increasing lapse into parasitism suggests that it is already something constructive. Being mere sheltered by others would not promote growth. (pp.42-43)

One of the chief characteristics of growth is progress from dependence to self-reliance and development of a healthy attitude towards inter-dependent. Dewey's notion of dependence or immaturity does not connote absence or lack of innate endowments. As a matter of fact, growth or education is possible because of the presence of these qualities. It does not indicate absolute helplessness.

Dewey further explained that the infant has the advantage of the multitude of instinctive tentative reactions and of the experiences that accompany them, though he is at a temporary disadvantage because they cross one another. But a possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed which are good for use in other situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He 'learns to learn'.

Plasticity, the second feature of immaturity identified by Dewey, is described as the specific adaptability of an immature creature for growth. It is essentially the ability to learn from experience. Plasticity is "the capacity to retain and carry over from prior experience factors which modify subsequent activities." Dewey

described plasticity further as the capacity to acquire habits or develop definite dispositions.

Habits, from Dewey's perception, means the ability to use natural conditions as means to ends; an active control of the environment through control of the organs of action. He described it as the formation of intellectual and emotional disposition as well as an increase in ease, economy and efficiency of action. Habits bring about an adjustment of an individual and his environment. Adjustment, according to Dewey, is not a change wrought in the organism without reference to ability to modify surrounding but the control of means for achieving ends. Dewey used the word adjustment with regard to people adjusting objective conditions to themselves as much as the other way around. He pointed out that in order to reconstruct and re-orient the society, people first have to interact with existing conditions. In this sense, they have to adjust like any other organism, but they do it for the purpose of strengthening some conditions and changing others, not simply to conform to status quo authority and power relations.

Dewey's belief in evolutionary growth makes him to reject the older views of psychology, which held that the mind comprised a series of faculties concerned with mental operations. The view that education was the training of those mental faculties was also considered inconsistent with his theory of growth. Stumpf (1982) makes useful clarification of the concepts of mind, intelligence and thinking. He explains:

The mind, or more specifically intelligence, is for Dewey not a fixed substance and knowledge is not a set of static concepts. Intelligence is the power man possesses to cope with the environment. Thinking is not an individual act carried on in private, in isolation from practical problems. Thinking, or active intelligence, arises in 'problem situation'; thinking and doing are intimately related. (p. 394)

Thinking as a mental operation includes both intellect and intelligence. Though they have the same linguistic root, their connotations are not exactly the same. Intellect is conservative associating with abstractions and forms and holding on to old habits. Intelligence, on the other hand, is dynamic and a powerful instrument in man's struggle to liberate himself and to master and control his environment.

Dewey (1916) defines education in a way that makes it synonymous with growth. Education to Dewey is the "reconstruction and re-organization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases the ability to direct the cause of subsequent experience". (p. 286).

Perceiving education as growth has various major implications on the process of education. Dewey stressed that the perception of education as development or growth implies first, "that the educational process has no end beyond itself. It is its own end, and secondly, that the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing and transforming. But when growth or development is falsely conceived as the merely privative nature of immaturity, static adjustment to a fixed environment, and rigidity of habit, that is, as a movement toward a fixed goal regarding growth as having an end instead of being an end, it could have adverse implications on education. Firstly, the instinctive or native powers of the young will not be taken into account, secondly, there will be failure to develop initiative in coping with novel situations and thirdly there will be undue emphasis upon drill and other devices which secure automatic skills at the expense of personal perception.

The pillar on which Dewey's philosophy of education rests is based on his belief that education has no end beyond itself but it is a series of growth leading to further growth. He contended the relativity of ends to means, subordinated the ends to the means and abolished the distinction between them. The end, for him, was merely a series of acts viewed at an earlier one.

Dewey was very careful to say that the belief that all genuine education springs from experience does not involve the view that all experiences are educative in the true sense. In fact, an experience can be mis – educative when it arrests or distorts the growth of further experience. It may be restrictive by leading the

subject into a groove or rut and there are many ways in which experiences may lead to habits which the educator would deem undesirable. The pupil in the traditional type of school certainly had experiences but they were defective because they led to little of value. In many cases they cause the pupil to look upon learning as drudgery and to want to forget his knowledge and discard his books as soon as he finished his schooling. An experience which is educative is both agreeable and will lead to other fruitful and creative experience. This is termed by Dewey as the *continuity of experience* or the *experiential continuum*. This can also be seen as what Dewey described as growth.

Dewey's educational recommendations are vast, ranging from broad philosophical questions down to technical issues of curriculum development. The bottom line of these recommendations is that education must be made relevant and applicable to life in a democratic and industrial society. The school must be integrated into the larger realm of the community through directed and aim – driven occupational learning. In this kind of active learning environment, students will develop the kind of critical sensibilities that will lead them not to simply accept the given structure of society, but alter it. Education is neither a preparation for some pre- determined future nor the mystical unfolding of latent potentialities. Instead, education must be understood as a continuous re – construction of experience that captures and hones the child's critical sense of the world, with a view for further education.

Education is not simply a period of training spent in a formal school. While the aims, organization and methods of such schooling are clearly an important part of education, education must be viewed as a life-long process. In this process, the educative agencies of society and workplace rank as equally important as that of the school. Given this broad concept of education, it comes as no surprise that Dewey's pedagogical theories are intimately connected to the realm of economics. Education is meant to serve the dual purposes of social adjustment and transformation, thus the prevailing economic conditions in society must be assessed and transformed if education is to meet the challenge of growth.

Growth for Dewey, includes several ideas including forming an understanding of the world where its different parts and aspects hang together, forming a desire to go on learning and having educational experiences that allow us to make connections and explore further experiences. What appears to be central in Dewey's idea of growth is experience.

Dewey's definition of growth can be summarised in the following manner: it is essentially the ability to learn from experience, the power to retain from one experience something which is useful in coping with the difficulties of a later situation and the capability to transfer this to solve subsequent problems. This means the power to modify actions on the basis of the result of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions. Without it, the acquisition of a constructive set of educational habits is impossible.

To be educated, a person must immerse himself in experiences that will lead to intellectual growth. The experiences are new opportunities that provide a learner with skills and tools to explore ideas and provoke critical thinking. An educated person is curious and seeks new opportunities for intellectual growth. This process of growth remains continuous as long as people have problems to solve. As long as people live, they are exposed to opportunities that will add to their existing knowledge. Dewey (1963) believes that "education is part of life and is not just a theory. Rather, education springs from interaction. As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world or his environment expands or contracts" (p. 31 – 32).

Thus, a possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods that can be used in other situations are developed. In this case, the learner has obtained a more nuanced understanding of his or her skill. In the process the learner acquires a better habit of learning. He 'learns to learn' and achieves a certain level of growth in the process which can be transferred to other situations.

Individuals grow out of their own experiences and interactions with their surroundings. Educators need to provide educational experiences which will connect to real-life experiences. Thus, Dewey argues that education must engage the learners with real-life material that encourages experimentation and independent thinking. The role of society is to train the new generation to become creative, independent, active members of society. The classroom environment must correlate with the real world in order to support intellectual growth. Thus, the educational system must be organically connected to life, work and the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their society. Emphasis should not be purely on abstract thinking with the excuse of promoting critical thinking. This should be supported or illustrated with concrete evidence. There will be no harm in inviting artisans or other professionals to the classroom to teach and demonstrate their skills.

Dewey's link of education with growth is an attempt to completely change the essence of education and the role of the educator. It has several implications ranging from those on curriculum, the role of the school, the teacher and the students.

Implication on the Role of the School

The basic principle of Dewey's concept of education as growth is functionality as well as relevance to needs of individual and the society. Therefore, the aim of education must not be divorced from that of the society. There must be a strong connection between the home of the child and the school. The school must be an extension of the home so that the experience of the child both at school and in the home can be related and continuous. According to Dewey (1963):

The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of their race, and to use his own powers for social ends (p. 22)

The school cannot therefore be isolated from the community. The school should also not remove the child from the community. The school is a community itself and not only a part of the community. As Akinpelu explained (1981):

The school is only to simplify the existing complex social life so as to make it easy for the child to absorb. The school cannot direct change the society, but it can reform it by equipping the children with social intelligence, and by holding p the ideals of the life in that society. (p. 150)

In the Nigerian National policy on education, the goals of education are stated in relation to the five main national goals of Nigeria but how these are fully implemented in reality is the major issue.

Implications on the Curriculum

The curriculum is the social life of the community simplified and translated into the classroom. The curriculum content is selected by the school based on three criteria namely the psychological, the sociological and the logical criteria. The psychological criterion relates to the interest, the problems and the needs of the child which serve to determine what the child should be exposed to. Those needs are not just what he feels he needs but also what he needs as a participating member of the society. The sociological criterion involves what will promote the harmony and welfare of the society while the forms into which the required experiences are cast, and the arrangements of the learning task in each form constitute the logical dimension. In other words the curriculum content is designed in such a way as to enable exploration self – discovery of knowledge by the child while he is only aided by the teacher.

Implications on the Role of the Teacher

The teacher is perceived as an organiser and a moderator of the learning of the child. The principal role of the teacher is that of guiding the child's learning activities. The teacher is expected to be familiar with the psychological development of the child, with the needs and interest of the individual child and with the type of experiences which are of greatest use to him. The teacher is expected to select the learning task on the basis of these and then arrange them in logical order according to the developing ability of the child. The child is expected to refer those problems which he cannot personally solve to the teacher as a resource person who is expected to foster the child problem – solving abilities and promote the development of their intelligence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This research work is borne out of the several agitations and probes from various interest groups on the practical relevance of education in Nigeria. There are several complaints and agitations on the purpose of school education and its relevance to real – life problem and needs of individual persons and the society. Government has severally introduced programmes that are expected to make the purpose of education feasible and practically relevant. In addition, the National Policy on Education has made several attestations to this effort of government in emphasizing relevance and functionality in education.

It was however, discovered that there exists inconsistent and ambiguous perceptions of this concept of practical relevance in education. Besides, the several programmes introduced did not seem to address the issues and problems accurately.

The exploration of the practical purpose and relevance of education through our analysis of the concept of education as growth has revealed that purpose and aims in education can be applied to individual persons as well as the society and growth in education can be categorized into psychological or mental growth and physical or material growth. The major concern, which forms the major crux of this study, is growth in terms of mental or intellectual growth.

It has been argued that whenever we employ education as a programme of action, its effectiveness depends on a number of factors often outside the direct control of education. Therefore, conscious efforts to bring these factors under control are pre- requisite for achievement of aims in education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purpose of practical significance of the study, the following recommendations are proposed.

Teacher Education

Teacher education should be made more functional and the teachers should be educated to put more emphasis on practical utilization or transfer of knowledge imparted in learners.

Curriculum of the teacher education should be designed in a way that teacher would be educated to show concern not just for transmitting knowledge of facts and ideas to students but to show concern for how such knowledge can be used to developed the innate capability of learners for knowledge transfer or to solve real life problems.

Salaries and conditions of teachers should be made attractive in order to draw brilliant and talented youths to the teaching profession.

Curriculum Content

At all levels of education, learners should be exposed to aspects of education that are functional, related to real life experience and needs of the society. Consequently, it should be ensured that there is a link between school education and the society by drawing parts of its curriculum contents from the immediate community. This ensures relevance of school education to immediate society.

The type of knowledge offered in the curriculum should be such that allows learners to have an immediate and direct participation in learning activities.

There should be adequate provision of relevant instructional aids or materials in order to make teaching close to life. Most of these materials can be improvised or produced locally either by the ministries of education, the school, the subject teachers, or jointly by the students. Textbooks should be produced locally with illustrations drawn from experience relevant to the immediate environments of learners. Emphasis in all teaching activities should be more on enhancing the reasoning ability or critical thinking of the learner rather than on memorization or regurgitation of facts.

Though, there is formal division in subject areas, curriculum should be designed, especially at the secondary education level, such that only a thin deviation exists among the humanities, the sciences and the social sciences. A student in the humanities should also still be introduced to some basic skills in science necessary for his survival.

Policy Formulation

The primary and the lower arm of the secondary education (basic education) should be identified more closely with the community so that all the human and material resources of the community become the educational resources for the children. Organize competent craftsmen like the tailors, mechanics, carpenters, electricians, caterers and so on around the school in such a way that the child will be motivated to cultivate the proper attitude to working with ones hands and to acquire pre-vocational skills.

Similarly, the Federal Government should mandate all industries, financial houses, commercial ventures, medical, agricultural institutions and all ministries and their agencies to become an extension of the school system under training- on-job and apprentice scheme.

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