

John Dewey's Pragmatic Education: A Veritable Tool for Nation Building in Nigeria

Sylvanus P. Idiong, PhD

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty Of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University Of Education, Port Harcourt
spidiong@gmail.com

DOI: 10.56201/ijee.v9.no1.2023.pg21.30

Abstract

This paper “John Dewey’s pragmatic education: A veritable tool for nation building in Nigeria” seeks to examine John Dewey’s Educational ideas – learners’ active role and experimental based learning approach to improve productivity and a sustainable nation building. The paper employs the philosophical methods of critical analysis. The findings of this study would be relevant to education policy makers by encouraging them to consider making policies that will favour inclusion of pragmatic approach in Nigerian education system. It is recommended among others that if a pragmatic approach is encouraged in Nigeria education system, there would be quality maximum and versatile productivity as effective tools for nation building.

Introduction

Education is imperative for any meaning development and building up of any country. Thus the significant progress in education of so many countries is possible through the wings of their intellectual capacity. John Dewey in his credible intellectual capacity through his notion of democracy and education has played a significant role in the liberation of Americans from her intellectual dogmatism and backwardness to the present status quo. With John Dewey’s pragmatic approach to education, the upsurge of unemployable graduates as a result of poor productivity of Nigerian education system could be looked into. It will bring about stability and sustainable development in Nigeria. It will go a long way to improve Nigerian technological sector, agricultural, economic, scientific sector, etc. As a vital seed for nation building, pragmatic approach to education would recognize all the divergent nature of man for integral human development and nation building. In line with scientific spirit, it would bring about openness, exploration and creativity which Nigeria needs in her developmental stage.

Objectives of the Study

This work intends to investigate John Dewey’s Pragmatic Education as a veritable tool for Nation Building in Nigeria. Specifically, the work seeks to examine the following:

- i. The relevance of Pragmatism to education
- ii. John Dewey’s practical approach to learning and teaching processes
- iii. The philosophical relevance of pragmatic education
- iv. John Dewey’s pragmatism and its impact to education
- v. John Dewey’s pragmatism and its impact to nation building in Nigeria

Significance of the Study

The study would be of immense benefits to all teachers and students. Information derived from the study would provide a deeper insight and encouragement to problem solving method of learning. The study would contribute to the body of knowledge in education and researchers stand to benefit as the study would serve as a resource materials for further studies in other related areas.

Conceptual Clarifications

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is philosophical school of thought that stresses that an idea or proposition is real only if it satisfies the demands for practical applicability, functionality and workability. It is a philosophy that seeks after breaking from unnecessary dogmatism and traditionalism and cherishes or concerns itself with philosophies that recognize workability and utility as the core matter of their tenet. Etymologically, pragmatism comes from the Greek word “pragma” meaning “action”. Action of course is all about being practical. Hence, action is the practicality of human thought or putting human thought into action. According to Peters (1966), it is a theory of logical analysis or true definitions having utility and practicality as its components of truth. As a reliable philosophy of change, it hooks unto the scientific methods. And these no doubt are result oriented as against the uncreative and unproductive systems of dogmatism and traditionalism. With its scientific spirit of progressivism as against dogmatism, pragmatism makes use of words like experimentalism and instrumentalism just because there are more of descriptive in approach to knowledge and situations. In its strict sense, Dewey (1916) opines that it is that which judges a belief by its practical consequences by defining whether it produce results which are useful or not. Pragmatists believe that scientific theories are instruments or tools for coping with reality. For them, the relevance of a theory lies in its problem – solving power.

Nation Building

The term “Nation building” is used almost synonymously with the expression national development. Nevertheless, we are concerned with the term nation building as an apparatus in any human society. Thus, it is defined as an individual’s or “groups” contributions towards solving the divers and complex problems facing a state. That is, an effort made in bringing about positive changes and contributions to the overall progress of the nation. Hence, it stands that nation building or national development implies that individuals have to collectively mobilize their talents and skills in order to put the nation in a good shape. Therefore, it involves a continuous attempt by individuals and government to make the society better. Education also aims in the preservation of a people, their history and cultural heritage which gears towards the development of society and humanity in general. Education of citizens in various fields of knowledge with their various areas of specialization is a veritable tool for nation building. By implication, the process of improving society in all its ramifications is therefore nation building.

A Brief History Of John Dewey

John Dewey has always been seen or considered as one of the America’s most influential philosopher educators of the 20th century. He had a strong influence on the educational polities of America as well as many other countries of the world. Dewey really influenced the method of

imparting knowledge of formal education. This feat was achieved in his attempt to relate “thinking with doing”, the “mental’ and the “physical”. As a matter of fact, his much celebrated philosophy was named, “philosophy of instrumentalism” otherwise known as “pragmatism” because of this operational mindset.

Birth and Educational Career

John Dewey was born in Vermont in the United State of America on October 20, 1859, to a middle class American family. He attended the university of Burlington-Vermont and graduated there in 1897 bagging a Bachelors of Arts degree in Philosophy. He taught in various universities and later founded the Chicago school of Pragmatism. Dewey obtained his Ph.D at the John Hopkins University in 1884. As an educationist, he based his philosophy of education on his practical experience in the USA. Dewey lived in the age of rapid technological, commercial, industrial and individualistic struggles where all activities were directed towards achieving personal success disregarding the interest of the society. Hence, he felt that education should be used as a practical instrument for re-integration which aim at the growth and development of intelligence. Before his retirement in 1929, he was a member of the Columbia University family.

Family Life

Groomed under the control of his parents; Archibald Dewey and Mrs. Lucina Artemiba Rich, John Dewey did not make a wrong choice of getting married to Miss Alice Chipman in 1886. Before, her death in 1927 and indeed all through her martial life with Dewey, she displayed a high sense of intellectual influence on her husband. They were blessed with six children.

His Work

It is indeed an undoubtable fact that John Dewey has to his credit a great number of works which have in no small measure made lasting impression on the intellectual arena. As an intellectual giant he was a prolific writer, an author of about 40 books and about 200 journal articles. Nevertheless, his expression of pragmatism were rather in social realm, relating to ethics, religion, democracy, art, psychology, philosophy and most importantly education.

Some of these writings include:

- I. The school and society (Chicago, 1900)
- II. The child and the curriculum (Chicago, 1902)
- III. Studies in logical theory (Chicago, 1903)
- IV. Schools of tomorrow Essays (Chicago, 1915)
- V. Democracy and Education (New York, 1916)
- VI. Reconstruction in Philosophy (Boston, 1920)
- VII. The Experience and Education ((Chicago, 1938)

John Dewey displayed some degree of interest in Public affairs during his lifetime. Thus, as a layman, he was actively involved in politics. And that goes to explain his manner of approach and view of democracy in the light of education. After a ripe old age of 93, John Dewey passed on to eternity in 1952.

The Philosophical Relevance Of Pragmatic Education

In the annals of history, education has remained the framework and the main stay of the economy of any nation. It has been regarded as the machinery for the interaction of the

individual in the society in order that they may achieve self-realization, develop national consciousness, promotes national unity and harness the resources (human and natural) within their environment to make for social economic, political, cultural, scientifically and technological progress towards a nation building. Certainly, education is important and relevance since it serves as a catalyst both for individual self-actualization, national development, and for international relation (Okafor, 1984, p. 225). As a means, education aid in the elimination of illiteracy. It facilitates the involvement of individuals in the teaching-learning processes. However, Dewey saw education as that which formed character and in act, it is capable of raising up trustworthy and public-spirited leaders. He therefore promoted the advancement of their country as a whole-agriculturally and economically, local and native industries, and healthcare services, etc. In the sense of pragmatic education (in its progressive nature), education is capable of promoting the evolution of any given community/nation as an integral whole. It involves the usefulness, workability and practicability of ideas whereby young graduate can have something doing (taking care of themselves) after schooling without waiting for government's work. Education is a verifiable tool in every society because as a dynamic instrument of change, it is an instrument par excellence of effecting national development and a sure-fire process for sustained nation building (Olu, 1989, p. 90).

Dewey's Notion of Education

Like Haraclitus' doctrine of change, pragmatism is a philosophy of change. It arose because traditional philosophical systems were at the central point, concerned with permanent realities and truths that were said to be underneath the flux of appearance. Pragmatism originated in the United States between the 19th and 20th centuries and has the following as its major proponents; Charles P. Sanders (1839 – 1914), Williams James (1842 – 1910), and John Dewey (1859 – 1952). It is closely associated with “positivism”, a movement which was founded by the French Philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). Thus, the philosophy of pragmatism is based on scientism and it is on the strength of this that it should be visualized and guided by the same precepts and methods of science. From the educational point of view, ‘scholarship’, during the reign of traditionalism as against progressivism was all about dumping or depositing some ready-made body of knowledge in the mind of the learner. And this was done in isolation from the learner's own experiences. Thus, the pragmatists observed that the curriculum of traditionalist is bookish and oriented towards higher levels of education which are beyond the reach of the majority of their pupils. Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of education out ridged the unnecessary dogmatism that was characteristic of traditionalism. According to Dewey (1916), there was an “abysmal collapse in learning”. It was such that down played the creative power of the mind which his newly found pragmatic philosophy of education would scarcely contain. Indeed, there was a metaphysical void created by traditionalism which needed to be filled. It was to this concern that Dewey stepped with his pragmatic system or “weltanschauung” (worldview). For him there should be integration between the child life, his activities and the subjects he studied. Thus, John Dewey became the leading and most influential exponent of this philosophy and practiced it in his school in Chicago with the purpose of training pupils who would be useful to themselves and to society at large.

The Deweyan Notion of Education; A Veritable Tool For Nation Building

Dewey (1916) defined education as intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience. In other words, all educational activities should be based on

practical experience. Education should lead to growth and development. He defines environment as whatever conditions interact with an individual's personal needs, desires, purpose and capacities to create experience. Accordingly, true knowledge is acquired through experience and any experience that works out well is true knowledge. Based on this, Dewey argued that a true educational system should have an experimental curriculum. The school curriculum should therefore represent the everyday experience of the students. It should be child-centred so as to address the individual child's problem. Hence, learning is realized by doing". The child should be allowed to participate in the selection of what he learns in response to his needs. And the teacher should do the job of supervising, directing and guiding, while the student becomes an active member of the class. Equally, his abilities, aptitudes, interests, talents and needs should be considered in the entire teaching and learning process. According to Dewey, knowledge is man's experience, which is acquired and refined (Dewey, 1916, p. 63). Since man interacts with other beings, he learns through interactions and experiences. He held that practices inspire theory and emphasized on a practical approach to learning. He further described education as a quality whose purpose is to effectively solve problems of living through the process of reflective thinking. Therefore, he advocated the problem solving (do it yourself) method of learning which indeed subjects everything to scientific studies (Peters, 1966 p. 81). Dewey (1916) opined that life is development and that developing or growing is life. Thus, he asserted that the educational process has no end beyond itself and that it is a continuous transformation.

Pragmatic Education And Nation Building

Pragmatic education just like 'perennialism' and the principles of 'reconstructionism' operates by the doctrine of the scientific method. Education according to the pragmatist must be pursued rationally and scientifically for the purpose of change and growth of a (Ohanado, 1997 p. 276). Thus, the main aim of pragmatic system of education is for nation building or national development, resulting from the creativity of the human mind. Pragmatic education as an impetus for nation building is a holistic approach to education whereby young adult are trained to be versatile in all fields of human endeavors. It is a process whereby learning does not only end in the classroom but extends beyond the classroom (where it can be put into practice). Pragmatic education is a system rich in science and technology that produces a "colony" of employment generator(s) and not job seekers. In the light of pragmatic education Olu (1989) opines that nation building or national development is identified by Economic growth, rapid and sustained rise. Thus, the original goal of pragmatic education calls for a sort of realistic, scientific thinking and pragmatization. Thus, the pragmatist belief cannot be achieved given 'perennialism' or 'traditionalism'.

Scientism; A Magna Carta For Education And National Building

Scientism is a term, which has come to mean the same thing as "pragmatism" in the philosophy of Dewey. In a sense, according to Morris (1970) it means a logical inquiry as the resolution of an indeterminate situation into a determinate situation. As a scientific method Robert (1965) opines that it focuses on "workability", it is hinged on the following sequential procedure: Instituting the problem; projecting and testing hypotheses and checking the consequences. All these are arguments that favoures Dewey's distinction between progressivism and traditionalism. Pragmatism is based on scientism as against traditionalism and dogmatism, which retards development.

Dewey's Components Of Education – The School, Curriculum, The Child, The Teacher And The Methodology

For a deeper grasp of John Dewey's concept of education, we have to know and understand some of the constitutive elements of education as a formal institution. In this regard, we have the following:

I. The school

The “school” and the “curriculum” are two important phenomena that have significant bearing on the role and nature of education as well as national development. For Dewey the school is a miniature society which should not only reflect society but a powerful representative of institutions. The school could be used in two senses: as an institution and as a machine. As an institution it forms that community life in which all those agencies are concentrated with the view of bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and also used as an agent for social ends. As a machine it helps in developing the set of intelligent habits required for the growth of any society.

ii. The Curriculum

Curriculum refers to those learning experiences that are organized by such formal educational agents as schools. Similarly, Okafor (1984) defines it as all the experiences which are provided to the students under the directions of the school. In the above definitions, “experience” significantly stands out, and this Dewey translates into another phenomena called “experiential curriculum” whose aim, for the pragmatist, is the “ends” of education – growth (Umeh,2000, p. 69). Thus, it must be one that accommodates some sort of open-mindedness. Hence, for the pragmatists, it should embrace all the activities which make for holistic formation of the child. Hence it should embrace all experiences of living be it psychological, social and the logical.

iii. The Child

Dewey sees the child as the centre and significant factor of education. For him, all educational activities should revolve around the child for whose reason schools are organized. He is of the opinion that a child is a developing person who is naturally imbued with four fundamental impulses, viz, conversation, inquiry, making things and geriatric expression. Hence, authentic education should not be ignored for the development of the child as he passes through these levels of interest if the child is to be fully effective.

iv. The Teacher

In Dewey's philosophy of education the teacher is seen as a trail-blazer; a pathfinder. He is a guide or a director. Thus, the teacher is not the point of focus. His obligation is not the impartation of already made knowledge to the child, but meticulously guiding the child through series of educative experiences as he passes through the various level of interest. The teacher must apply various methods of teaching which will enhance active participation of the child in the learning process. Therefore, the teacher's role in the learning process is to give the child proper direction and guidance.

v. The Methodology

The “child” according to Okafor, (1984) is guided to discover his own truth and to test its validity in the vast domain of experience. Logically, it implies that, the child needs to be guided

based on a particular pattern called methodology. Methodology in other world is a planned way of doing something. It is a systematic and orderly arrangement of instructions and instructional materials. In Dewey's view, it is a consideration of the ways in which the subject matter may be best presented to and impressed upon the mind. Thus, it becomes necessary that they be taught properly, especially at the initial stage. Hence, the primary importance of education as stated by Lockhead and Vespoor (1991) Education is a cornerstone of economic and social development; primary education is its foundation. For them, it is a general process of presentation or the approach the teacher adopts in presenting a lesson to the student. Hence, it focuses not basically on the activity of the teacher and his authority but on the activity of the pupil. With this the child will enjoy as well as find satisfaction in the learning process. Thus, it should allow creativity – experimentation/laboratory method-that is, “learning by doing”.

Democratic Education; A Means For Nation Building

In treating the concepts of democracy, Dewey paid a considerable attention to the special role of pragmatic education, as a means of national building. For him, both democracy and education are two concepts that are inter-woven, with an un-rigid, and a rather preconceived ideology aimed at educational and political progressivism. According to Dewey, education on the one hand, seeks to reform man by developing his potentials and equipping him to live a meaningful, productive and responsible life in the society. While democracy on the other hand, empowers the individual citizen with the knowledge and sense of national unity, integration and development which will subsequently culminate in his being loyal to the state; from which will accrue equal right to socio-political amenities. Thus, exposing the twin nature of democracy and education, Dewey writes:

I said that democracy and education bear a reciprocal relation, for it is not merely that democracy is itself an educational principle, but that democracy cannot endure, much less develop without education... so that school in a democracy is contributing... to the democratic idea of making knowledge and understanding, a part of the intrinsic intelligence and character of the individual (Dewey, 1916 p. 38).

By way of analysis, Dewey puts forward the significance of democracy to education and vice versa in the following ways; full education comes only when there is responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity in shaping the aims and policies of the social groups to which he belongs (Dewey, 1916, p. 209). He therefore opted for the participation of every one facet of the school, especially in the area of administration which involved the teachers. For any deviation from this would bring about some misgivings in the running of the school system and by extension the society. Peters (1966) opines that any school in a democratic society must therefore consider realistically what it can do to develop a democratically minded citizen. Proposing therefore a democratic system of education, Dewey perceives the worth of a social life to be the extent to which the interest of a group is shared by all its members. Finally, he opines that democratic education should be extolled because it is solely interested in the realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustments abound for the common good.

The Relevance Of Dewey's Pragmatic Education

Primarily, education is important because it renders the individuals more efficient in their condition of life. Thus, it could be deduced that, the training of individuals collectively in the management of their private affairs would bring about the installation of true ideologies of

citizenship and service for nation building. Therefore, education serves as a catalyst both for the individual's self-actualization, Natural development, and International relations (Okafor, 1984, p. 225). However, many have pointed out some of its relevance as far as human knowledge is concerned in all his endeavour. Dewey pragmatic education therefore, may be visualized as a process of self-realization. Hence education is an all round drawing of the best in the child and man-body, mind and spirit. In other words, it means leading out the inborn powers and potentials and enabling the child to become what he is capable of becoming. Therefore, self-realization implies development of individuality in the child. Dewey directed his attention at harmonizing the school and the community. He saw the school as an extension of the society and therefore stressed that teachers should help to discover how the children learn and help them. Education for Dewey is a life process. Hence the educated person should be able to apply his/her experiences in future life encounters. This continuation or application of experiences acquired in the process of education to future experiences makes education a dynamic phenomenon. Dewey's philosophy and educational ideas have provided guidance to schools, societies, teachers, learners, curriculum planners, the aim, method and techniques of teaching. Dewey's pragmatic education has much relevance in the innovation and initiation of child-centred education, the role of the environment on the child's education, the school as part of the socializing institutions, integrated education policy, broad curriculum, introduction of core subjects, skill acquisition, learning from known to unknown (simplification method) etc.

Factors That Militate Against Pragmatic Education

Certainly, pragmatic education (especially in developing nations) is still caught up in the web of some reasonable problems which are both incoherent with and antithetical to its growth as well as to the fostering of nation building. It is very obvious that most countries' educational system suffer from epileptic fits, characterized by rather half-hearted implementation strategies and followed by lack of political will and sustainable strategies for providing qualitative education. Such facts and factors that strongly militate against pragmatic education and nation building include: economic/poverty factor, lack of well-trained teachers, the influence of tribalism and gender Inequality

Critical Evaluation

The study of philosophy is not to know what men have said, but what the truth of a thing is. Therefore, it would be an unpardonable and a colossal oversight to undertake an interpretation of any philosophical idea or phenomenon without some sort of critical evaluation and appraisal. It is based on this fact that I set out to critically evaluate the major themes in Dewey's philosophy of education that were raised and treated in this work. John Dewey, an American Philosopher, educator, gave recourse to the concept of pragmatism which in his view, was and has always remained the most effective means of solving man's numerous and multifaceted problems. According to him, the problems of man have always emanated from life's situations that have bedeviled the human society. Basically, Dewey undertook to solve the teething problem of the poor standard of education engendered by the traditionalist mode, both of imparting knowledge and of learning. This he did through the instrumentality of pragmatism, while enunciating and implementing it under the following sub-topics.

- 1) Democracy and Education: Welding one to the other, Dewey made a powerful thrust into the filed of learning with both concept. Thus, under the aegis of pragmatism as his "terminus ad quo" as well as the "magna carta" for development in the society,

- Dewey perceptively viewed democracy not only as a form of government but also as a way of life. With this in mind therefore, he advocated the introduction of democracy into every sector of the society (one of which is the educational sphere) in order to enhance maximum development. Systematically, Dewey envisioned his system of education as norms for human development. Hence, he noted that education is the mechanism for reconstructing and reorganizing the society as well as realizing the talents and potentialities that lie latent in the child as an individual. Thus, education is “life itself”. Consequent upon this, it must be acquired in an atmosphere that is most suitable and beneficial to the educant. This however, explains his emphasis on the maximization of the curriculum for the enhancement of the proposed child-centred progressive system of education.
- 2) The role of the teacher and the importance of the curriculum: Although he recognized the indispensable role of the teacher in the education process, Dewey strongly de-emphasized all forms of authoritarianism. Thus, for him, any form of authoritarianism would most certainly not give room for creativity, which the progressive system of education signifies. Therefore, he advocated an activity packed curriculum which would involve flexibility both in method and in style. This, he called “open-ends and needs curriculum”. This sort of curriculum he affirmed would enable the child to explore and discover knowledge by himself albeit under the tutelage and direction of the teacher. Finally, Dewey noted that the child having acquired this knowledge would be useful not only to himself or herself but also to the society at large. Having evaluated some of the strong points marshaled out in Dewey’s philosophy of education as regards nation building, it behooves on us to point out some of the loopholes that have been conspicuously noticed in his philosophy of education. Man as it were, is a psychosomatic entity; in order words, he consists of body and soul and as such, pragmatic education must not fail to acknowledge this reality: in that it must see to it that knowledge is being imparted in a manner that is most adequate or that accommodate the psychosomatic nature of man.

According to Hutchins (1963), education should provide for the perfection of man’s rational and spiritual faculties. However, Dewey’s philosophy of education does not seem to have been explicit on this, as it subtly glosses over it. Equally, Dewey’s philosophy of education as regards the interest of a child, if not properly applied. This might in the long run be detrimental to the society’s needs and interest. Indeed, it tends to leave out some salient or important aspects of the child or reality. Therefore, undue concentration on both the real and imaginary needs of a child must be guarded against for the sake of national consciousness and sustained nation building. Furthermore, the metaphysical aspect of man was neglected by Dewey. This is because the experimental reality is only a part and not the whole reality. To deny totally the metaphysical and supernatural dimensions of reality is not an acceptable philosophical stand. Thus, all generations of humanity always explain man’s needs and goals not only in the physical and social but also in terms of metaphysical or supernatural perspective. Nevertheless, it is only in the light of the aforementioned areas that any case of misapplication might most probably expose the lacunae that lie hidden in Dewey’s philosophy of education.

Recommendations

- i. Education policy makers should make policies that will favour inclusion of pragmatic approach in Nigerian education system.
- ii. In teaching – learning processes, there should be a shift from teacher’s centered to learner’s centered process.
- iii. Experimental based learning should be encouraged.
- iv. Learners active roles should be encouraged.
- v. More effective teaching practices should be ensured to enable learners become familiar with the environment where they will practice.
- vi. Nigerian education should emphasize more on problem solving approaches.
- vii. Entrepreneurship skills should be incorporated into our National policies. Nigerian education should be reconstructed to suit the Nigerian culture, environment, etc.

Conclusion

From the foregone, we cannot over emphasize that education has remain the main driving force for significant development and building up of any nation. If the inclusion of Dewey’s pragmatic education approach is necessarily considered in Nigeria, then the quality, and productivity of education would be enhanced for a better Nigerian society.

References

- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education* New York: The Macmillan Co.
- Hutchins, M. R. (1963) *The Higher learning in America*. New York: Yale University Press.
- Morris, C. (1970) *The pragmatic Movement in America Philosophy*. New York; Doubleday Canada Ltd.
- Onitsha; Njoku Africanna Books.
- Ohanado, E et al (eds) (1997) *Nigerian Education system and National Development*.
- Olu, O (1989) *History and Policy of Nigerian Education in World perspective*. Ibadan; AMD Publications.
- Okafor, F. (1980) *Philosophy of Education and the third World perspective*. Enugu; Star Publishers.
- Peterson F. A. (1970) *Philosophy of Man and Society*. New York: Philosophical Lib Inc.
- Peters R. S. (1966). *Ethics and Education*. London: Alen Press.
- Robert, R. (1965) *Doctrines of the Great Educators*. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Umeh, M. et al (eds) (2000) *Sociology and education*. Akwa: Marpaj Educational Research and publishers.
- Vespoor A. and Lockhead M. (1991) *improving Primary education in developing Countries*. New York; Oxford University Press.