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## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: JOHN DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL IDEA AS PARADIGM

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### ABSTRACT

This study used John Dewey's educational idea to address the chasm between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. In this work, the authors argue that the countries' educational system is skewed towards theoretical knowledge over and above practice. This is informed by the inability of education graduates to apply their knowledge to real life issues in and outside schools. Irked by this anomaly, the study examined the Dewey's educational idea in order to ascertain the extent to which it can bridge the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. The work adopted the descriptive research method. Findings from the study revealed among others that education, which according to Dewey should be child-centered, should be systematically provided in such a way that it constantly challenges the intellectual ability of the learner through experiments (practice) as this will help in creating a functional balance between theory and practice. Based on the outcome of the study, it was recommended among others that Nigerian educational system should be geared more to learner-centeredness and the programme be provided in such a way that the cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities of the learners would be constantly challenged through information search, individual and group projects, and experiments.



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## Introduction

The importance of education to the general well-being of mankind cannot be over-emphasized. This is because, it is the process through which the cultural values, knowledge, understanding skills and abilities are transmitted among its populace in order to prepare them for further membership and participation in the maintenance, growth and development of the society. It takes care of the total development of the individual personality and the society of which all individuals are a part. There is no worthwhile development and progress that can take place in any society unless its citizens are well educated and fully equipped to use their education as a tool for solving diverse and complex problems facing that society, thereby bringing about meaningful change and positive progress in that society.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that education is incomplete without knowledge and knowledge is incomplete without experience. We need both to make our country a better place if not we will continue to have graduates who cannot perform creditably in the defense of their certificate or we will still continue to get the neighborhood electrician to fix our ceiling fan even though our child is an electrical engineer. The same is the case in politics, where with numerous universities having political science department with score of intellectuals, we are yet to feel their impact towards defining or redefining our precarious and comatose political experimentations. The case is even worse among mechanical engineers who are in great abundance with degrees of knowledge of the science of machines, yet the engine of cars and other machinery in Nigeria today (including those of Professors and PhD holders in those specialties) are mainly maintained by road side mechanics and illiterate artisans who are obviously lacking in the knowledge of the science that drives the engines.

It is thus against this backdrop and many others that John Dewey's educational ideas is sought in a bid to resolve the chasm between theory and practice in the Nigerian education system. Dewey's educational idea is one big contribution that cannot be neglected to the background. This is necessary if the products of this contemporary system must be made relevant, functional and responsive to the current problems and issues of Nigerian society. The choice of Dewey's educational idea is informed by the fact that its practical paradigm in the educational process more than any other philosophic approach, seems to hold out a very realistic and workable formula for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. In this paper therefore, it is our contention that Dewey's educational idea would go a long way in bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian education system. We strongly believe that it is only when the chasm between theory and practice is bridged that the skewed situations in Nigeria - socio-political, economic or religious would begin to receive the needed elixir to cure and remedy the ailing situations in the country.

We now turn to our discourse. We shall begin our discourse with a biography of John Dewey and an attempt to clarify some of the major concepts such as pragmatism and education. Thereafter, we shall try to examine the educational idea of Dewey, then Nigeria and its educational system; after this, we shall discuss Dewey's educational idea as a paradigm in bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system, then the recommendations and conclusion.

## Biography of John Dewey

John Dewey was born in Vermont in United States of American in 1859 and he died in 1952, at the age of 93 years. He was the third of the four sons born to Archibald Sprague Dewey and Lucina Artemesia Rich of Burlington, Vermont. After his early primary and secondary education he attended the University of Vermont and graduated there in 1897. While at the University of Vermont, Dewey was exposed to evolutionary theory through the teaching of G.H. Perkins and lessons in Elementary Psychology, a text by T.H. Huxley, the famous English evolutionist. The theory of natural selection continued to have a life-long impact on Dewey's thought, suggesting the barrenness of static models of nature, and the importance of focusing on the interaction between the human organism and its environment when considering questions of psychology and the theory of knowledge. The formal teaching in philosophy at the University of Vermont was confined for the most part to the school of Scottish realism, a school of thought that Dewey soon rejected, but his close contact both before and after graduation with his teacher of philosophy, H.A.P. Torrey, a learned scholar with broader philosophical interests and sympathies, was later accounted by Dewey himself as decisive to his philosophical development.

Dewey went on to complete a doctorate in philosophy at the newly organized John Hopkins University (where Pierce was one of the professors). Upon obtaining his doctorate in 1884, Dewey accepted a teaching post at the University of Michigan, a post he was to hold for ten years, with the exception of a year at the University of Minnesota in 1888. At Michigan, Dewey also met one of his important philosophical collaborators, James Hayden Tufts, with whom he would later author *Ethics*. In 1894, Dewey followed Tufts to the recently founded University of Chicago. It was during his years at Chicago that Dewey's idealism gave way to an empirically based theory of knowledge that was in concert with the then developing American school of thought known as pragmatism.

At Chicago, he developed his ideas into a theory of progressive education and created an experimental elementary school to serve as a laboratory for testing his educational theories. His theory of education was widely adopted and transformed American school systems. In 1904, Dewey ran into conflicts with the university administration over the laboratory school. As a result he resigned and went to Columbia University, where he remained until his retirement in 1929. He was not content to simply express his ideas in books, but was an evangelist of liberal approaches to education, going all over the world to gain the largest possible audience. He lectured in Japan, China, Turkey, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. John Dewey was a prolific writer. He was an author of 40 books and about 700 journal articles. *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) among others, are books that best summarized Dewey's educational ideas (Amaele, 2017).

### Pragmatism

The term pragmatism derives its origin from a Greek word meaning to do, to make, to accomplish. So the uses of words like "action", "practice", or "activity". Action gets priority over thought. Beliefs and ideas are true if they are workable and profitable otherwise false. Hence, the most common interpretation of the term is what works; making it to be known as the philosophy or theory of workability (Enoh, 1995). It is distinctly different from the traditional philosophies such as idealism and realism. As a philosophy, pragmatism anchors on the importance and value of change, process and relativity since it is clearly nudged on the fact that the value of an idea is dependent on actual consequences.

It is primarily an American philosophy, although its roots go back to Greek thinking. Pragmatism also known as experimentalism believes that things are constantly changing. It is based on the view that reality is what you experience. It believes that truth is what works right now. Pragmatism examines traditional ways of thinking and doing and, where possible, seeks to incorporate them into everyday life. It also supports creating new ideas to deal with changing world in which people live. It may be noted that the fundamental start of pragmatism is "change". In this sense, no truth is absolute and permanent. It is always changing from time to time, from place to place and from circumstance to circumstance. Thus, those ideas and values which are useful in certain circumstance, time and place, need not prove to be same in changed circumstances, places and times. Hence, pragmatists do not uphold any predetermined philosophy of life. To them, only those ideals and values are true which result in utility to mankind in certain circumstances, places and time. The chief proponents of pragmatism are C.S. Peirce, W. James, J. Dewey, R. Rorty, etc.

### Education

The concept of education is so complex so much so that defining it is not an easy task. Affirming this, Peters (1976) contended that "in exploring the concept of education, a territory is being entered where there are few signposts" hence "education is a concept which is not very close to the ground. Consequent upon this, there are many conceptions as to the meaning of education. To this end, Dewey in Akinpelu (1981) has received education as the "continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience". This definition emphasizes experienced – based knowledge resulting from the interaction of an individual in the society which subsequently increases the individual's wealth of experience. This is basically developing the attitude of problem solving ability of the individual. Contributing further, Peters (1976) sets out three criteria for education such as:

- i. Education implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it

- ii. Education at least rules out some procedures of transmission on the grounds that they lack willingness and involuntariness on the part of the learner
- iii. Education must involve knowledge, understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert.

The above conception implies that education has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values that are useful to the individual and the society in general. Such values must therefore be positive and constructive. For instance, it does not constitute education for an individual to acquire the skills, knowledge or values in such activities as armed robbery, embezzlement, thuggery and all corruptive tendencies. These activities are catastrophic and have fallen short of Peters' standard to be accepted as education because they are not worthwhile, and therefore of no positive standards to the individual and the society in general which this paper subscribes to as a matter of moral, social, economic, political, scientific, technological as well as vocational development.

### **John Dewey's Educational Idea**

John Dewey was a great educationist because he was a great philosopher; no one since the sophists has so intimately identified philosophy and education as Dewey has done. He was a genius for his revolutionary works/thoughts dominated philosophy and education throughout the first part of the 20th century. As a pragmatist, Dewey believed in change, relativity and sense experience of all beings. He therefore admits that man's organic make up makes him also to create his environment through the senses. Thus, through the senses, man experiences his environment and enriches his knowledge. He equally admits that all reality must be experimented limited to scientific investigation. In fact, Dewey's pragmatism admits that experience is basic stand for measuring all realities.

From the above, it can be argued that his philosophy of pragmatism had great influence on his educational postulations. He thought of an education that emphasizes community, communication, intelligent inquiry and a re-constructive attitude that can best serve the citizens of an ever-evolving world. His work rendered a great service in trying to bridge the gulf between life and school, between theory and practice, between interest and effort and saved children from the tyranny of purely abstract studies unrelated to their lives.

In the process of realizing his goal; philosophy plays a central role. In fact, within the pages of *Democracy and Education* the author declared that the most penetrating definition of philosophy which can be given is that it is the theory of education in its most general phases. In this work, often referred to as the summary of his thought, Dewey skillfully articulated his views about the nature of human life and the demands of a democratic society, as well as approaches to formal education. The work is an integration of his theory of politics, his theory of knowledge and his theory of education. The theory of politics is democratic, the theory of knowledge is holistic; the theory of education is progressive. However, just as Plato and Rousseau sought to write beyond their own societies, Dewey has in view, not just his own country but any community that aspires to be democratic in conduct rather than merely in name. He writes in the spirit of a cosmopolitan, humane world he envisions coming into being. He does not offer a crude American exceptionalism, so endlessly damaging near and far, any more than do other figures previously mentioned.

In his work, he recognized the importance of nature in education like Rousseau. However, unlike his predecessor (Rousseau), he maintained that one does not need to be isolated since the environment or nature needs both physical and social entities which is why in his work, he emphasized and harmonized both individual and social factors. This means that there should be a strong interplay between education and the society. This is confirmed elsewhere in Dewey when he says that education should be seen as a social function, and until we know what sort of society is best, we do not know what sort of education is best.

To fully appreciate Dewey's contribution to education is to fully comprehend his stress on the relationship between growth and experience, which included the recognition of the individual's previous experience as the most significant point of reference for all future learning, the recognition of the intersecting juncture of past experience with new learning and the recognition of the educative consequences of the novel experiences

provided by educators. For Dewey, education was synonymous with growth, and that growth sprang from experience, but not all experience lead to growth.

Thus, in his work on *Experience and Education*, Dewey wrote that for an experience to be educative, the principles of continuity (which holds that each new experience is constructed upon a past, shaped by what has previously happened and in some way modifies the quality of future happenings) and interaction (which stressed the educational force or function of the new experience, i.e. new experience) were essential (1963:51). Simply put, for an experience to be educative, i.e. to enhance growth and learning, Dewey felt it must connect with the individual's already lived experience in such a way as to contribute to future growth. Little wonder, Dewey held that the criterion of social education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective.

In fact, educational growth according to Dewey consists of the continual reorganization or reconstruction of experience and a constructive process that develops from within experience. It feeds on interaction with others in a sociocultural as well as natural environment. It can be furthered by others, but it cannot be imposed from outside. Learning from experience basically means learning through one's own activities (doing) and the activities of others (e.g., within a learning community or a classroom) in connection with an observation of the effects produced by the activities (undergoing). It is successful to the degree it adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory writes Dewey because without vital connection to the experience of learners, learning soon degenerates into a merely symbiotic procedure because any theory only gains significance and verifiable meaning in its application to experience. Going further, he avows that even a very humble experience is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory whereas a theory apart from experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory.

This continuation of experience acquired in the process of education to future experiences is what makes education for Dewey a dynamic phenomenon. Education does not have an aim outside itself, the needs of a person, his desires and interest, dictate his own aim. This explains why Dewey holds that the aim of education is growth. Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. In this regard, he was speaking of growth as an enlargement of the capacity to learn from experience and to direct experience in a meaningful way. From the above understanding of education to the aim of education set by Dewey, it could be right to argue that Dewey perceived education as a continuous process, which does not operate in isolation from the child's environment. Equipped with this wide vision about education, Dewey criticized the aims, curriculum and even the methodology of teaching, which he said do not consider the individual differences of the child and failed to guide the learners through the complexities of life and also give them opportunities to learn in their natural way.

Due to the above reason, Dewey held that education ought to discover probable ways of breaking down barriers between school and community life, and also to find ways of including a richer, more varied subject matter in pupil's studies without adding to the burden of rote-learning/memorization and symbol interpretation meaning that educators should aim at searching for ways of educating the young so that they become regenerating forces of the society, since they have the potentialities for development beyond the level of their predecessors. For him, reflective inquiry leads to the testing of and reconstruction of the previous experience, which sparks off intellectual growth. Thus, teaching is primarily aimed at the initiation of the learner's unconstructed experiences to refined modes of thought which are formed by critical and independent thoughts.

Given his believe that the curriculum is nothing more than the social life of the community simplified and translated into the classroom, he insisted that it should be expanded to embrace more disciplines to afford every child an opportunity to develop his varied innate abilities. For him, a child-centered curriculum which gives the teacher a heavier responsibility and greater opportunity for guiding the young not only in the habit of democratic cooperation, but also towards the highest intellectual pursuits and the fullest aesthetic experiences should be embraced. His method (called problem method, but reinterpreted to project method) aimed at offering

challenges to engage in deep thoughts and experimentations, train the senses and allows incidental acquisition of basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

Though, the ideas of Dewey may seem neither totally new nor earth-shattering, but his fusion of various outlooks and his indefatigable push to establish meaning from concrete applications resulted in a critique of educational practice that could not be disregarded. In the words of Rusk (1969), in education, we cannot but be grateful to Dewey for his great services in challenging the old static cold storage ideal of knowledge and in bringing education more into accord with the actualities of present-day life. He masterfully intertwined ideas pertaining to growth and experience, social connectedness, and pragmatism into an analysis of education and schooling that remains provocative.

### **Nigeria and its Educational System**

Nigeria's population is one of the largest in Sub-Sahara Africa with more than 180 million people and greatest diversity of culture, ways of life, cities, terrain and also one of the global communities on earth that is blessed with abundant human and natural resources (Richards, 2015). Unfortunately, despite the abundant natural resources, Nigeria is one of the developing countries that is going backward instead of moving forward.

Over the years, Nigeria has expressed commitment to education, with a belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance through functional education will form a basis for accelerated national development. This commitment led to the 1969 conference which gave birth to the first National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977 including subsequent editions. However, a critical examination of the extent to which these policies of education in Nigeria have achieved the desired goals reveals that the policies are more utopian or theoretical than practical. There are clear indications that programme implementation in education have been generally defective and largely ineffective, and have shown disappointing outcomes. The goals of a free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society, a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy and a land full of bright opportunities for all are yet to come to pass.

Education in Nigeria according to Lawal (2019), at least in the public sector, is in a state of dysfunction. Its human capital is in disarray, so is its physical infrastructure. The nation's standard of education totters as the government continues to talk more about the crises facing it rather than act on resolving them. The students are disillusioned with public education. Their teachers are frustrated in the face of poor motivation and ramshackle facilities. As the rot deepens, so does the attention paid to the sector wanes. Successive governments in the last five decades have paid lip service to revamp a sector bedeviled by low budgetary allocation, poor incentives for teachers and dilapidated infrastructure. If there is one thing successive Nigerian governments have succeeded in doing, it is organizing summits or conferences to consider issues that have been thoroughly analyzed and solutions proffered. In Nigeria though, 'history is a fall guy; nobody learns from it'. The repeated call for a declaration of state of emergency in the education system corroborates that point (Lawal, 2019).

Looking at the trend education is assuming in Nigeria, it is obvious that Nigeria has tilted her educational pattern to only theory presentation and has continued to tie herself to the old and unimproved educational curriculum for decades. This could possibly be one of the reasons for the high rate of unemployment in this country. Indeed, Arong and Ogbadu (2012) have lamented that there is high unemployment amongst graduates in general and especially in the engineering fields. Obviously, a greater number of the Nigeria university graduates are jobless even after several years of graduation and the majority have continuously been found incapable of meeting up with the employment requirements of the workforce. They have always been unsuccessful in either securing or keeping jobs. According to Mbaji, Enemu and Kabiru (2018), this is an indication of the lack of confidence of business and industry in the training system.

This is so because the worthwhile knowledge, skills, competencies, discipline and values that should be transmitted and sustained for the survival of the society, through the effective performance of the young generation, remain on paper/documents or is not effectively transmitted to school leavers/graduates (Asogwa, 2018). In fact, it is not an exaggeration to affirm that the Nigerian educational system does not adequately

prepare students with relevant skills to be practically oriented, despite the robust theories presented in the course outlines of many areas of study in Nigerian schools. Utah and Allan (2014) lend their voices to this when they noted that the Nigerian educational system has failed to equip its product with necessary tools to live in the modern world and excel in their environment. It is for those reasons and more that the country's education system is in a mess says our experts in education and it is difficult not to agree with them.

### **Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in the Nigerian Educational System: John Dewey's Educational Idea as Paradigm**

Nigeria is a country that is richly endowed. If the right types of educational products are developed to take up places in the educational institutions, industries, politics and other spheres of life, Nigeria will better for it. The many injuries in the Nigerian education can be healed by promoting an educational system that is functional, practical and basically goal-oriented educational system that is set out to equip the learner not just with theories but also abilities that can be employed to harness development of the individuals and of the society. Such an educational system that will afford its learner these qualities must be based on Dewey's pragmatism.

Education in Dewey's pragmatism means a process of leading out and bringing up; so the task of educators strictly speaking, is that of guidance. Dewey believes that children are endowed with untrained powers. They are signs of possible growth which when properly harnessed or directed yields purposive growth. He believes that guidance best conveys the idea of assisting through cooperation, the natural capacities of the individual is guided. The role of the teacher will not just be to disseminate information but to construct a situation that involves both direct experience with the world of the learner and opportunities provided to comprehend these experiences. The chief function of the teacher is to suggest problems to his pupils and to stimulate them to find by themselves, the solutions which will work. The teacher must provide opportunities for the natural development of innate qualities of children (Dewey, 1902). He believes that genuine education is a development within, by, and for experience. This implies that education is not and should not be something to be forced upon children and youth from without, but the growth of capacities within which human beings are endowed with at birth.

Dewey (1916) avows that experience is the source of all knowledge. In the same way, he defines education in terms of experience. Education comes as a result of experience, it is lesson learnt from experience but it is not every experience that is education. The experience that is educative is the type that makes possible other experiences in future. The experience must be productive and must not be a limiting experience. An experience is limiting, if it hinders other possible experiences. This could be the reason Dewey in Akinpelu (1981), defined education as a continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. . Since knowledge comes through the process of experience by intelligence, using the problem-solving method, the aim of education is therefore the development of the learner's ability to deal with future problems. Since the problems to be solved arise in the course of daily living, it means that the child is learning as he lives from day to day, and each day's experience, if it is educative, increases his power of solving problems. Learning in this sense is not an activity that should take place in a secluded spot or isolation from the child environment.

Dewey emphasized practical ideas in his philosophy, always striving to show how concept could work in everyday life. He stressed the importance of hand-on-hand learning as opposed to the authoritarian method of teaching. He believes that it is not enough to formulate theories, but will be more productive if the theories are practiced to ensure result and probably from the experience of the practice, formulate other theories (Dewey, 1916). For him, learning by doing (practical learning) makes acquisition of knowledge permanent and paves way for creativity on the learners' part. Again, Dewey's idea is that practical experience ought to be employed to help the learner's understanding. The message of his pragmatic philosophy of education is that education should not be mere dead facts, but that skill and knowledge which students learned be integrated fully into their lives as persons, citizens and human beings.

Dewey in his ideas emphasized adequate training of the teachers, trainers and educators. So one of the ways helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice is to make sure those that are assigned to teach, train and guide the learners receive adequate training on how to teach and guide the learners to achieve the desired

learning outcomes. This means the teachers themselves need to be given the appropriate and required knowledge, skills and techniques of imparting functional knowledge and skills. In Nigeria today, many of the teachers in schools are products of theory-based learning who are bereft of the corresponding practical knowledge needed to turn out learners that are responsive to solving life issues. These aspects of Dewey's pragmatism are of paramount importance for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system and for the overall development of the individual learner.

From the foregoing, the relevance of Dewey's educational idea in bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system becomes obvious. Obviously, what Dewey highlighted in his philosophy of education as explained above is indeed lacking in the Nigerian educational system, especially as regards the blend between theory and practice. Education should improve man and serve as a means of doing things. In other words, education should serve as a tool for mobility and instrument for practical and successful living. Teachers should always develop relevant and practical approach/methodology in imparting knowledge to their students and the Educational system should constantly reflect the rapid changes in the world of knowledge. Education, which should be child-centered, should be systematically provided in such a way that it constantly challenges the intellectual ability of the learner through experiments. Learning by doing is yet to form part of our educational system in Nigeria. It is only when the learning experiences form part of the learner that the attributes of an educated man will be made manifest in his daily living. The implication of Dewey's pragmatism for Nigerian educational system is that; field/discovery learning should not be taken for granted in the Nigerian educational system.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There can still be way forward in our educational system if all hands are on deck. If Dewey's educational idea is holistically harnessed and adhered to in Nigerian educational system, every citizen of the country will be endowed with worthwhile knowledge, skills, competencies, discipline and values that can be transmitted and sustained for the survival of the society and for the building of an egalitarian and self-reliant society. Furthermore, for Dewey's educational idea to be a paradigm shift for the Nigerian educational system, the following recommendations should be taken;

- The study recommends that Nigerian educational system should be geared more to learner-centeredness and the programme be provided in such a way that the cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities of the learners would be constantly challenged through information search, individual and group projects, and experiments.
- Students' experience, talent and creativity should be explored and developed via school programmes assignments and projects in and outside school.
- Practical skills should be emphasized more in school-based activities through the carrying out of project and experiments.
- Government and school administrations should ensure the adequate employment of dedicated and qualified teachers to teach in all areas of the Nigerian educational system.



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