

Pragmatism and its Implications for Nigerian Education

A. F. OYELADE
University of Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract. This paper analyses Pragmatism as a philosophy of education; it also analyses Nigerian education in the light of Pragmatism. This is important because pragmatism which originates from renowned American philosophers like Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey has great implications for global education, including Nigerian education. Thus it is important to analyse the implications of the philosophy for education, and specifically for Nigerian education. The research method employed in the study is the method of philosophical analysis which involves logical, linguistic, critical and expository analyses. It was found that pragmatism disclaims divine origin of man and divine solution to problems; rather it claims that man is a biological and social organism whose existence is due to evolution, and whose survival and development depend on the use of his intelligence in the exploration of his natural and social environments. Pragmatism emphasizes experimentalism in man's use of his intelligence. Nigerian education appears to be patterned after pragmatist education with the consequence of less emphasis on spiritual and moral developments of the learner and the society. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian education emphasizes physical, social and spiritual developments of the learner for the total development of the learner and the society.

Key words: Pragmatism, philosophy of education, philosophical analysis, John Dewey, Nigerian education

1. Introduction

Pragmatism is a modern philosophy of education; that is, it is not an ancient philosophy of education like Idealism and Realism. Its major advocates are Americans: Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. John Dewey is however the most prominent among them. He is a renowned philosopher because of his prolific writings and immense contribution to social, political, economic, and educational discussions.

John Dewey would prefer to refer to pragmatism more as experimentalism because of the emphasis of the philosophy on exploration of the natural and social environments for man's personal and societal development (Dewey, 1916:163-178.). Dewey considers philosophy as the general theory of education (Dewey, 1969:78-79) in the sense that our thinking is not complete until it is made to act upon our experience such as to lead to man's personal and societal development. So, philosophy whose hallmark is thinking does not do its business conclusively until it is made to act upon our experience in such a way as to result in societal development. Since education is involved in the business of discovering and transmitting knowledge, it is necessarily involved in exploration of the natural and social environments towards the discovery and transmitting of knowledge desirable for the development of the society.

Thus both philosophy and education are involved in the exploration of the environment for the discovery of knowledge and the truth, towards the development of the society. It is in this connection that Dewey considers philosophy

(whose hallmark is thinking) as the general theory of education.

How much of this philosophy can be found in Nigerian education, and what are the implications of the philosophy for Nigerian education? This is the focus of this study. Thus this study is concerned with the analysis of the philosophy of pragmatism and its implications for education, and specifically for Nigerian education.

2. Research Method

The research method employed in this study is the method of philosophical analysis. This is because the study is in philosophy of education which employs philosophical analysis for clarification of ideas. The philosophical analysis involves logical, linguistic, expository and critical analyses for the analysis of the philosophy of pragmatism and its implications for education, and specifically for Nigerian education. Thus the analysis involves discussion of the theory of knowledge and the truth, the theory of ultimate reality, and the theory of values in the philosophy of pragmatism; and the implications of all these for education and specifically for Nigerian education.

3. Theory of Knowledge and the Truth

Dewey the foremost advocate of pragmatism emphasizes “complete act of thought” for the acquisition of knowledge and the truth. “Complete act of thought” would involve five steps: identification of problematic situation that might be blocking development of the society; generating thought (hypotheses) about possible causes and possible solutions to the problem; collecting instruments (data) that could possibly help to solve the problem; testing the instruments (data) with the various ideas (hypotheses) generated such as to see which of the instruments would eventually help to solve the problem - until the problem is eventually solved; when the problem is solved then the thinking is complete, because it has led to a unit of knowledge since it has helped in the development of the society.

Thus thinking that does not lead to the development of man and the society is vain, it is

incomplete. And for thinking to be accepted as complete, it should not only lead to the development of the society it should also be open to public testing, it can not reside only in the private experience of the thinking individual. Thus like in the sciences, pragmatic thinking should be open to public verification in the fashion of scientific experimentation, whereby the thinking would be made to act upon similar experiences in similar environments and would be confirmed to be true (Dewey 1916:163-178).

The emphasis on pragmatic experimentation in “complete act of thought” implies that, like in the sciences the unit of knowledge derived from such thought would also be tentative since knowledge/truth derived from scientific experimentation is normally tentative. Scientific truths are not absolute, for they could be modified when further evidences show that currently embraced truths are no longer true.

Moreover, scientific knowledge/truth disclaims divine origin. This implies that pragmatic knowledge derives absolutely from man’s intelligent exploration of his natural and social environments. It follows that Dewey’s experimentalism disclaims divine source of knowledge and truth (Dewey 1916:139, 163-178, 228-270). This implies that the philosophy of education disregards divine and spiritual source of knowledge and truth.

4. Metaphysics

Dewey identifies with Darwin’s theory of evolution (Gutek, 1974:111-113); whereby man’s existence derives not from creation by God but from gradual evolution of the species from lesser state of being to more complex state. Man finds himself in a world that nourishes him, but that also constitutes threat to his existence. So to survive, as he interacts with his natural and social environments he explores intelligently the environments whereby he confronts and reduces the threatening and problematic situations, and thereby he not only survives but also makes progress as a specie in the world.

Thus to pragmatism man is not a spirit being, he is an organism who survives in the world by

virtue of his functional intelligence in his interaction with his natural and social environments (Dewey, 1916:139, 163-178; Gutek, 1974:111-113).

5. Axiology

The philosophy claims that man is a biological and social organism, not a spirit being. It also claims that knowledge and truth derive from man's functional intelligence in his progressive exploration of his natural and societal environments. It follows that the value theory of pragmatism would disregard spirit, and absolutes. Actually pragmatism considers our values in terms of how much problem our thinking is able to solve in the environment whereby we are able to make personal and societal progress.

Thus problem solving exploration of the environment is of very great value. It follows that as in the sciences, wherein conclusions are tentative and subject to change in the light of new evidences, conclusions about values in pragmatism are also tentative, and subject to change in the light of new scientific evidences. So values are not conceived in absolute terms. Besides, the sciences constitute a good source of helping man to arrive at conclusions about what values to pursue in the light of natural and societal threats in our environment.

In effect in pragmatism, values change from time to time, from people to people, depending on man's needs in his natural and social environments. But although man has to explore his environments intelligently to acquire what he ought to value he should also realise that if he eventually pursues what he ought not to value he would face the consequences (Dewey 1916:76, 139). It is the issue of consequences that eventually is expected to check man in pursuing what he ought to value.

It follows that consequences of what we value play a great role in determining what we value and how we go about pursuing the acquisition of such value. Consequences not divine or spiritual leading. This implies that pursuit of values in pragmatism is informed by man's functional intelligence in his natural and social

environments and the pursuit is eventually checked by the consequences of pursuing such values (Dewey 1916:76, 139).

The foregoing discussion of the philosophy of pragmatism has exposed its theory of knowledge and the truth, its theory of ultimate reality, and its theory of values. Next are considerations of implications of all these for education; and specifically for Nigerian education.

6. Pragmatism and Its Implications for Education:

Briefly, pragmatism emphasizes the pursuit of education that would encourage the learner to explore his natural and social environments for personal and societal developments. The education would therefore have a curriculum that would expose man's natural environment and social environment to the learner such that he could interact with them and thereby explore his environments with the view to attain personal and societal developments. The environments have to be such that the learner would be able to interact with, realistically. That is, the curriculum content should be within the experience of the learner in the society, whereby he would be able to reason along with the curricular experience and the teacher. There should be continuity of experience from home to school. In fact, the school should constitute the miniature community of the child's society. In this way the learner would be able to think along with the curriculum content and the teacher; and he would be encouraged to explore the environment for problem solving purposes. The teacher should be an organizer of experiences for the child as well as a moderator of his exploration of the experiences.

The teacher would use project method when giving the learners activities to engage in, such that they could have cooperative learning experiences as emphasized by pragmatism – for man learns faster by engaging in shared experiences (Dewey 1916:76; 1959:22; Gutek 1974:111-113). So, much as the learners would engage in individual exploration, it would also be useful to engage them in cooperative exploration.

The sciences are highly favoured on the curriculum. This is understandably so, because of the experimental disposition of pragmatism in terms of emphasis on making our thoughts to act upon our experience before such thoughts can be regarded as “complete act of thought” (Dewey, 1916:228-270). Although the natural and social sciences are highly favoured on the pragmatist curriculum, the arts are not disregarded. For instance, the study of history is encouraged to enable the learner interact with the cultural heritage and progress of man and to enable him explore further possibilities of progress. The study of language is also encouraged to enable the child appreciate the need for communication in interacting with others in his natural and social environments, in the process of exploring his environments for personal and social development (Dewey, 1916:228-270, Gutek, 1974:122-123; Peters, 1977:118; Akinpelu, 1981:151).

However, the study of the arts in the curriculum of pragmatism excludes religious studies (which intend to encourage spiritual development). This is because the divine, the spirit, is not considered to be involved in man’s existence in his natural and social environments, and has nothing to do with his survival; and personal and societal developments (Dewey, 1916:139, 163-178; Gutek, 1974:112; Akinpelu, 1981:142). Dewey identifies with Darwin’s theory of evolution in connection with man’s origin (Dewey, 1916:139, 163-178; Gutek, 1974:112; Akinpelu, 1981:142).

It follows that pragmatist education excludes religious education and spiritual development. This might be considered as a weakness of pragmatist education because there are evidences from some other sources of knowledge that man is not only a physical and social being but also a spiritual being, which would imply the need to encourage spiritual development in the education of the learner. For instance, Biblical evidences about ascension of Jesus Christ (BSN, 2004:Luke 24v51) imply spiritual experience in the physical and social environments of the Israelites, which has not

been refuted by scientific exploration over the years.

It follows that man exists in environment that is not only physical and social but also spiritual. Thus man’s exploration of his environment for personal and societal development should not only be physical and social but also spiritual. Further, pragmatist education should not only encourage physical and social exploration of the environment but also spiritual exploration for total development of the learner and the society.

7. Pragmatism and Its Implications for Nigerian Education

Briefly, Nigerian education encourages the study of the arts, the social sciences and the natural sciences for the balanced development of the child and the nation (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013:19-23, 25, 30-42, 54-56). But it lays lopsided emphasis on science and technological education for personal and national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977; 1981:25; 1998:33; 2004:39; 2013:55-56). This has been so since the beginning of the National policy on education (see Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977; 1981:25; 1998:33; 2004:39; 2013:55-56).

It follows that Nigerian education encourages exposure of the learner to experiences in the arts and sciences such that he can explore his natural and social environments to solve problems for personal and societal developments. Religious experiences are encouraged in addition to other experiences in the realm of arts (for instance, history, and language). But as the learner starts his Secondary education, Religion becomes a subject which he might not offer if he does not wish to (it is an elective subject) (see Federal Republic of Nigeria ,1998:19; 2004, 20, 22; 2013:30-34).

The result is that religious and spiritual development of the learner and society becomes continuously reduced to the extent that our social and national fabric tend to record moral and spiritual problems (some of which are: gross disregard for the interest of others, bribery and corruption - Nigerian Educational Research and

Development Council, 2004:iii-iv). All these further result in Nigeria's slow pace of national development and not-so-good public image (Buhari, 2015:31-33; Buhari, 2016:2, 3, 45). The corruption and fraud for instance result in Nigeria's needless poor economy whereby its national currency which was of equal value with the American dollar in the early 1970's is now of much lower value. Today the American dollar is equal to about 304 (CBN, 2018). These should not be so if Nigerian education adequately encourages moral and spiritual developments.

This was why the Independent and Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission ICPC (an organ of government) encouraged the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council NERDC (also an organ of government) to develop a National Values Curriculum that would promote the teaching of moral and spiritual values for the development of the learner and the nation (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2004:iii). The National Values Curriculum has already been developed and published (see Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2004. National Values Curriculum – An Anti-Corruption Programme for Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education in Nigeria) but it is yet to be implemented with great results.

The foregoing shows that Nigeria's lopsided emphasis on science and technological education for personal and national development is a tendency towards emphasizing the implementation of pragmatism in Nigerian education. And as can be seen, it is not wholesome for the development of the nation's individuals and the society. Pragmatism needs to recognise that man and his education need to explore the physical, social and spiritual environments for development. It follows that Nigerian education needs to recognize the exploration of the physical, social and spiritual environments for the development of the nation's individuals and the society.

8. Conclusion

The paper has analysed pragmatism as a philosophy of education; it has also analysed Nigerian education in the light of pragmatism. It was found that pragmatism emphasizes the use of intelligence for man's exploration of his natural and social environments towards personal and societal developments. It was also found that pragmatism disclaims man's divine origin and divine solution to problems; rather it recognizes evolution as man's origin and scientific experimental exploration of man's natural and social environments as solution to problems.

It was also found that such solutions are tentative and the consequences of embracing wrong solutions are to be borne by man. Moreover Nigerian education was found to tend towards the implementation of pragmatism, however some organs of government appear to be taking steps to correct that (ICPC and NERDC); because of evidence of lack of regard and concern for the interest of others in the society, fraud, bribery and corruption, all of which lead to national poor economy and social insecurity.

9. Recommendations

The analysis has indicated that pragmatism has lopsided emphasis for physical and social developments of man and the society. Thus, if the philosophy is pursued strictly in education, it would result in disrecognition of spiritual development of the learner and the society. Since the spirit has also been found to be part of man's nature through some other sources of knowledge (for instance, revelation), it is recommended that education pursues physical, social, and spiritual developments of man and the society for total development of the learner and the society. This would help education and specifically Nigerian education to promote total development of the individual and the society.

References

- Akinpelu, J.A. (1981). *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Buhari, M. (2015, December 23). "Budget of Change" for 2016. *The Nation*, pp. 31-33.
- Buhari, M. (2016, December 15). "Budget of Recovery and Growth" for 2017. *The Nation*, pp. 2,3,45.
- Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). (2018). www.cbn.gov.ng/rates/exchratesbycurrency.asp Retrieved on 15th April, 2018.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Dewey, J. (1959). In M.S. Dworkin (Ed.), *Dewey on education* (p.22). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1969). *Philosophy as the General Theory of Education*. In C.J. Lucas (Ed.), *Philosophy of education* (pp. 78-79). London: Macmillan.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (1977). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (1981). *National policy on education*. Lagos : NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (1998). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos : NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (2013). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Guttek, G. L. (1974). *Philosophical Alternatives in Education*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.
- Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). (2004). *National values curriculum (An anti-corruption programme for Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Education in Nigeria)*. Lagos NERDC Press.
- Peters, R.S. (1977). *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education*. In R.S. Peters (Ed.), *John Dewey reconsidered* (p.118). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- The Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN). (2004). *Holy Bible (King James Version)*. Lagos: The Bible Society of Nigeria.