

PRAGMATISM AND LEARNING IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Observation has revealed that the current education system in Nigeria is the type that seems to revolve around too much of theory and encourage rote learning. Therefore, this paper advocated the incorporation of pragmatism into the Nigeria's education system, and is concerned with how it could enhance learning in Nigerian schools if incorporated into the system. This study is qualitative in nature. It is expository and primarily focused on library sources for its data. Being philosophical in orientation, the study adopted the analytical, the speculative and the prescriptive methods. These philosophical techniques are employed in this study to deal with issues and problems such as rote learning, discovery learning, creativity, collaboration tendencies, innovation, invention and receptacle, among others. The paper described rote learning as memorization without proportionate understanding. It examined pragmatism as a theory which believes that an idea should be accepted based on its observable practical consequences rather than in any metaphysical attributes. The study found out that Dewey's pragmatism is like a hunch, and discussed some of the possible implications of pragmatism for learning, if employed, in Nigerian schools. This study revealed that if pragmatism is incorporated into Nigeria's system of education, it is likely to facilitate independent thinking and originality in learning, could enhance critical thinking development, discovery learning, creativity, innovation and invention. It equally revealed that pragmatism has the enablement to engender democratic learning situation and the fostering of collaboration tendencies among the Nigerian students. The paper concluded that the Nigerian education system could become transformed and more productive if pragmatism is incorporated into it.

Keywords: *Collaboration Tendencies, Creativity, Discovery Learning, Receptacle, Rote Learning*

Introduction

It appears as if education in Nigeria at present revolves around too much of theory and promotes rote learning, which Paulo Freire describes as banking education. By this type of education, learners are made to look like mere receptacles into which the teacher, occupying an indispensable all-knowing position in the classroom, empties himself. To solve this problem, this paper advocated the incorporation of pragmatism into Nigeria's system of education. The study explained pragmatism as a theory

which believes that an idea should be accepted based on its observable practical consequences rather than in any metaphysical attributes.

The study found out that pragmatism is likely to expose learners to an appreciation of their immediate environment and the curiosity to explore more, in order to add value. Besides, pragmatism could enhance discovery learning, originality in learning, critical thinking development, creativity, innovation, invention, democratic learning situation, and foster collaboration tendencies among the Nigerian

students. The paper concludes that pragmatism is likely to transform the Nigerian system of education and make it more productive.

State of Education in Nigeria

The claim that western education was introduced in Africa to facilitate imperialism could be substantiated by Aboluwodi's (2015) submission that "the postcolonial education experienced in Nigeria does not differ remarkably from that of the previous colonial years" (p. 123). Although, one may not be able to rule out the role of western education in the developmental process of Nigeria, it appears as if this traditional system of education in Nigeria revolves around too much of theory and is based on rote learning. According to Hurd (2019), too many facts, too little conceptualizing and much memorizing characterize the traditional system of education. Paulo Freire as cited in Luis (2017) called this traditional type of education 'banking education' or 'banking pedagogy'. In the opinion of Freire cited in Ramos (2006), this traditional form of education is based on very unequal roles, with the teacher as active, powerful, and knowledgeable and the learner as passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge. Freire further argued that the traditional form of education reduces learners to receptacles and creates dependent, uncritical, ignorant and passive members of society.

Freire in Curtis (2011) observed that banking pedagogy encourages rote learning. Rote learning connotes cramming, memorization or committing learning material or information into the memory without proportionate understanding. Tuoyo (2003) condemned this type of learning, describing it as 'no learning'. In this case of rote learning, there is the fear of the possibility of 'forgetting'. Alao (2004) described forgetting as the inability to recall the materials retained in the memory. In contrast with the traditional system of education, Freire advocates a classroom situation in which teachers and students are co-investigators. In this spirit, Dewey in Arogundade

(2001); and Curtis (2011) suggested that the process of education should reflect democratic way of life.

Aside the possibility of forgetting, rote learning may degenerate to pro-active or retroactive learning inhibition (interference). Pro-active learning inhibition is a learning problem in which the information or learning material a learner has earlier stored in his memory inhibits him from picking what he is being taught anew. That is, the previously learnt lesson prevents the student from learning what he is expected to learn in the new class. On the other hand, retro-active learning inhibition is a learning problem whereby the new learning disturbs the learner (student) on what he has earlier learnt. In other words, the new knowledge being acquired makes the learner lose firm grip of the knowledge earlier acquired. Given Alao's description of these three issues as negative interference in learning, banking education needs to be discouraged among the Nigerian students.

Another problem usually associated with the traditional type of education in Nigeria is that teaching is made to look like a mere talking process at times. Perhaps Ryle in Bamisaiye (1996) described teaching on this ground as "didactic talk" (p. 61). Here, the students are constituted into mere passive listeners, with their initiatives and opinions suppressed in the class, and all kept to themselves. In such a situation, the learners just sit down and receive information from the teacher who is occupying an indispensable authoritative position in the class. The teacher is seen as knowledgeable, and the students as just in the classroom to receive from the teacher. Such students simply give information back to the teacher, in the case of academic competition or examination. It might be better if teaching is made to take the form of communication. Communication usually involves the source of information (teacher), the message/information (learning content), the channel (methodology), the receiver (student) and

feedback (evaluation outcome/result).

Pragmatism

The word “pragmatism”, according to Baliga (2017), is of Greek origin. It takes its root in two Greek words “pragma” and “matos”, which mean “deed”, “from” or “to do”. As explained by Aboluwodi (2019), it could be argued that pragmatism actually started with the Soviet Union in the 1960s but later turned out to become a typical American school of thought. Aboluwodi (2008) noted that the word pragmatism was first used by Charles Sanders Peirce to explain the meaning of an idea as some scientists contended that metaphysical statements are meaningless since they cannot be verified. However, William James later attached a slightly different interpretation to pragmatism, using it to connote the truth of an idea. William James’ slight shift from Peirce’ idea of pragmatism seems to generate a little bit of rift between the two. As a result, according to Apel (1981), Peirce renamed his view “pragmaticism”, presenting it to the world as his new ‘baby’ which he “hoped was ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (n. p). However, in an attempt to reconcile these two divergent conceptualizations of pragmatism, McDermott (2006) reasoned that pragmatism could be perceived from the angle of the notion that both the meaning and the truth of any idea are a function of its practical outcome.

It appears as if the firing of V-2 rocket, a ballistic missile, into the space by Germany during the WW II birthed the American pragmatism. According to Gregersen (2022), “developed in Germany from 1936 through the efforts of scientists led by Wernher Von Braun, it was first successfully launched on October 3, 1942, and was fired against Paris in 1944” (p. 1). Probably this development challenged America, and the Americans felt that they needed an education system that could help them in meeting their needs and solving their problems. Meanwhile, as explained by Engerman (2006),

Dewey had visited Russia in 1928, and got fascinated by Soviet events. Engerman affirms that Dewey wrote excitedly, after his visit to Russia, about the “Soviet experiment” and especially about Soviet educational theorists, and enthusiastically hoped that the USA and the USSR could learn from each other.

Although pragmatism had been in existence since the days of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, it could be argued that John Dewey popularized it, and brought it into the American education system. For instance, Ormerod (2017) reveals that the main originators of pragmatism are Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. This might be a justification for Aboluwodi’s (2008) declaration that the relevance of pragmatism in education should be credited to Dewey. Curtis (2011) averred that Dewey brought pragmatism into American education, before it later became a philosophy that closely relates to the American life and mind. At their own end, Misak and Talisse (2019) argued that pragmatism first started as a philosophical theory of meaning “by Charles Peirce in the 1870s; revived primarily as a theory of truth in 1898 by William James; and further developed, expanded and disseminated by John Dewey” (para. 3). As could be inferred from the foregoing, John Dewey actually gave pragmatism a voice in the world of educational philosophy.

Pragmatism may be interpreted as the product of practical experiences of life. According to Arogundade (2001), for the pragmatist, education should be about life and growth. Pragmatism makes activity the basis of all teaching and learning. It is a philosophical thought which is based on the concept that learning is the outcome of mental construction. It is a philosophy that advocates the experimental method of science and the rejection of unpractical ideas. It is, hence, called experimentalism. The pragmatist believes that an idea or a proposition is true if it works satisfactorily. Pragmatism opposes

metaphysics. The pragmatist believes that an idea should be accepted based on its observable practical consequences rather than in any metaphysical attributes. Baliga (2017) observed that the pragmatist believes that all philosophical concepts should be judged according to their practical uses and successes, not on the basis of abstractions. Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism emphasizes *meaning of an idea*, while William James pragmatism is on *truth of an idea*.

John Dewey and pragmatism

In one of his works, Arogundade (2001) asserted that John Dewey was one of the greatest pragmatic philosophers in history. As explained by Arogundade, Dewey was the son of a village shop-keeper born in 1859 in Burlington Vermont in America. He had a good university education, and later became a lecturer and professor of philosophy. Dewey had lectured in many universities before he finally settled down in Columbia University. After securing the approval of the university, Dewey set up an Experimental School. The school was set up especially for research and to experiment on his new ideas and methods. It seems as if Dewey popularizes pragmatism in the course of his academic activities. Dewey was a philosopher, psychologist, practical teacher and great writer. Dewey's pragmatism, otherwise known as instrumentalism, has been said to be like a hunch.

Before Dewey brought pragmatism into the American education system, the traditional teaching-learning method was in vogue in the country just like it was in operating in many countries of the world that time. The traditional method of education encompasses memorization, drilling, rote learning and recitation. Based on Dewey's pragmatistic educational ideas, he ties up the aim of education with reform and revision of the society. Dewey sees education as an unending process which has no final goal except to promote democratic way of life. On this note, he advocates the kind of education that reflects a

democratic way of life.

In his pragmatism, Dewey advocates that what the child learns should be determined by his outlook and interest, and indicates that there should be close understanding between the pupils and the teacher. For him, education should not only be concerned with transferring of knowledge from the adults to the youths but also with helping the youths to become agents of progress or improvement in the society. As such, he conceives education as the reconstruction of experience. He went further to posit that education should help the child to grow in his experiences and direct further experiences in meaningful ways. Seeing the development of social life in the society as one of the aims of education, Dewey maintains that civilized society exists because education is transmitted from generation to generation. Without this, social life cannot exist.

Generally, pragmatists believe that there should be one pattern or method for educating a child. Dewey, a leading pragmatist, shares this idea. However, he recognized that there are individual differences. As a result, he believes that no stereo-typed methods of teaching can be of much use to a class of students with differing abilities. He, therefore, recommends that the school should provide a rich social opportunity where each individual can learn on his own. Nonetheless, Dewey recommends a number of methods. As an experimentalist, he is of the opinion that the best method of acquiring knowledge is through experiments. As further explained by Arogundade, Dewey sets out five steps to follow in experimental investigation. They are the consciousness of a problem or an obstacle, mental survey and analysis of the situation, listing out of possible solutions, thinking out of the possible implications of each so that comparison will indicate the most suitable, and the actual putting into practice of the decision for either success or failure.

As Dewey's pragmatism places emphasis on creation of knowledge rather than the acquisition of it, the project method constitutes part of his teaching/learning method. A project is usually undertaken to solve a particular problem or task arising out of practical need. In a school or class project, the teacher becomes the Coordinator, while the pupils are assigned definite roles. The teacher and the pupils work cooperatively to achieve the goals of the project. Dewey also suggests other methods, namely, the play way method, use of material objects or object learning, and through excursion where children could see things for themselves. These are very useful methods that seem to have gained entrance into the Nigerian educational system.

One may not be able to argue convincingly that Dewey's idea about the curriculum is different from that of the other pragmatists. They all seem to advocate that the child's total experience (the society around him) should be the basis of the Curriculum. Dewey feels that the curriculum should consist of the study of the occupations and associations which provide man's basic needs. In following this curriculum, the essentials (food, shelter, clothing and household furniture, among others) should come first, and the luxuries second. He also argues that the interests of the children should form the basis of the curriculum. As far as Dewey is concerned, learning should not be a predetermined or fixed programme. Rather, it should be constantly revised according to the changing interests and life of the children. All these mean that children should be given freedom to engage in self-activity and develop self-initiative. Dewey is opposed to traditional education because it is bookish. He is in favour of practical education. For him, learning should be mainly through practical experience. Discipline should not be free to allow freedom of action.

Imperative of pragmatism for learning in Nigerian schools

Learning may be viewed as a behavioural process in man. Learning takes place as one constantly interacts with, and is influenced by one's environment. According to Tuoyo (2003), learning is characterized by relative permanence in behaviour, and could be simple, complex, part or whole. Relatedly, Sharma (2023) posited that any relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of practice and experience as learning. One may, therefore, want to conclude that learning has not taken place in an individual until it begins to reflect in the learner. Some of the possible implications of pragmatism for learning in Nigerian schools are discussed below.

Independent thinking and originality in learning

Independent thinking and originality in learning may be achieved among the Nigerian students if pragmatism is applied in Nigerian schools. For instance, Aboluwodi (2019) asserted that Dewey's pragmatism has been discussed as the teaching-learning process that allows the learner to develop his own idea. This, by implication, suggests independent thinking and originality in learning. Developing one's own idea entails independent thinking. Education, according to Fieser and Lillegard (2002), should be targeted at teaching students 'how to think', rather than 'what to think'. Any education system that encourages independent thinking may serve this purpose. Besides, any idea personally generated or developed as one learns tends to be original. It follows, by logical consequence, that pragmatism is capable of enhancing independent thinking and originality in learning among the Nigerian students if employed in the schools.

Critical Thinking Development

Closely related to the above is that pragmatism could facilitate critical thinking among the students. Critical thinking, by nature,

is strategic, skillful, analytical, progressive, purposeful and productive thinking. To think critically is to reflect on one's thinking. Dewey in Olalekan (2017) conceived and uses critical thinking as reflective thinking. Ability to think critically is very important to function effectively in this modern world. Blake (2018) opined that students require critical thinking ability to be successful. Blake, in furtherance, describes a critical thinker as someone who is habitually flexible, trustful of reason, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, orderly in complex matters and prudent in making judgments. Pragmatist classroom situations in Nigeria could enhance the students' critical thinking skills.

Discovery learning

Discovery learning could be engendered by pragmatism as it entails learning by doing. Tuoyo (2003) conceptualized discovery learning as learning by doing. As such, discovery learning seems to be subsumed in pragmatism, or, at least, intersects with it. As further explained by Tuoyo, discovery learning is the type of learning in which the learner is exposed to activities that would enable him to understand the subject matter. It involves the doing method. By doing, the learner has the opportunity to see, hear, feel or perceive. This, no doubt, is experimental method. Here, the learner is exposed to his mistakes and made to learn from them. As the learner constantly interacts with his immediate environment (in the pragmatic learning situation) in an attempt to generate practicable knowledge, there is the likelihood that he discovers a lot of new things. This is discovery learning. Pragmatism could help these students to develop in constructivism and constructionism. Constructivism, as pointed out in Unit 1-Pedagogy Strand (2018), is an educational theory that advocates Problem-Based Learning. On the other hand, constructionism, as explained in Constructionism (2014), advocates Project-Based Learning.

Creativity

Creativity may be arguably described as a possible outcome of pragmatism. According to Doyle (2019), to be creative is to be able to come up with something new or look outside the box. For Tracy (2015), the most important part of creativity is the ability to generate new ideas. Something may be seen as creative, or created, if it is new and useful to the society judging and admiring it. Pragmatism, by nature, as could be inferred from the above, is a kind of education theory that may help in developing the creative ability of the Nigerian students if applied. Independent learning for creating practicable knowledge, which is part of the focus of pragmatism, can lead learners into being creative. A creative learner identifies problems or difficulty, makes guesses about the problems (or difficulty), evaluates those guesses, and communicates the result. A pragmatist learner is expected to possess these same qualities to make headway in learning.

Innovation and invention

Innovation may be conceived as renewing, changing or creating more effective processes, products or ways of doing things. In the opinion of Drucker cited in Jeff (2018), innovation may be defined as "change that creates a new dimension of performance" (p. 1). As a learning-by-doing theory, pragmatism could lead to or aid innovation and invention process. Sometimes, being innovative may not necessarily mean inventing, although they often go together. Where there is invention, innovation may not be far-fetched. Therefore, as pragmatism could enhance discovery, so it could enhance innovation and invention and support the processes among the Nigerian students if incorporated into the Nigerian education system.

Enhancement of democratic learning situation

John Dewey is known to be a leading pragmatist, and his educational ideas reflect his

view of pragmatism. He advocates a democratic classroom situation in schools. This advocated democratic approach may be regarded as part of Dewey's immense positive impact on the Nigerian students and on the country's entire education system. This system would allow learner's greater freedom of expression and action in the class. Teachers and school heads will have to welcome, with greater understanding and sympathy, the students' complaints and/or opinions. Teachers and students would become co-investigators in the classroom. Thus, students are not made to look like mere receptacles into which the teacher should empty himself. By consequence, this may help in relatively reducing the possible authoritarian tendencies of teachers over the learners. As Dewey discourages corporal punishment in schools, the school environment is likely to be more psychological conducive for learning for the students.

Fostering of collaboration tendencies

Collaboration connotes the ability to cope with, or work together with others towards achieving common goal(s). Kenton and Abbott (2019) considered collaboration to be a soft skill. Pragmatism, if incorporated into the Nigerian education system, could foster or enhance collaboration tendencies among the Nigerian students. By implication, learners that are brought up under the influence of pragmatism are likely to develop into individuals that can work with other people to achieve a common goal. Besides, an individual who has trudged the path of group activities may have the understanding of individual differences. Such an individual would understand why people behave the way they do, and have respect for others opinions. This is likely to enhance brotherhood, patriotism and peaceful coexistence among Nigerian youths.

Conclusion

The traditional system of education that operates in Nigeria at present seems not to be

adequately problem-solving. A practically functional, reforming and productive type/system of education is urgently needed. Granted this, a pragmatist system of education may be recommended. Pragmatism advocates learning by experience and applying idea or knowledge for practical result. Judging from its nature and characteristics, pragmatism, if adopted in Nigerian schools, is likely to engender discovery learning, independent thinking and critical thinking among the students. It could, as well, facilitate democratic learning situation, enhance creativity, innovation, invention, and foster collaboration tendencies among the students. Since pragmatism involves learning by doing, it could help in the area of vocational/technical studies. As such, the Nigerian education system would become transformed and more productive.

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