

PRAGMATIC EDUCATION: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

It is a common cliché that the problem with Nigeria is not the theory formulation because many experts abound, but that of work implementation and workability of the theories so formulated. This makes the authors agree that there is a yawning gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. This we believe is because the countries educational system is skewed towards theoretical knowledge over and above practice. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to establish how pragmatism can be used as a veritable tool in bridging the gap between educational theories and practices with reference to the Nigerian Educational system. We have carefully discussed Pragmatic philosophy, Education and the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system as a veritable tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. We recommended among other things, that the pragmatic methods of teaching should be adopted in the Nigerian educational system. This is with a view to enhance students' abilities and also help to provide solutions to some if not all the problems and needs of human society.

Key words: Pragmatism, Education, Theory and Practice.

Introduction

For some decades now, Nigeria has faced myriads of issues and challenges which have stood in the way of national development. Such challenges are encountered in schools, among teachers and students; in homes, among parents and their wards; in places of work, among employers and their employees; among public and private organizations; and lastly, among the administrators at the helm of affairs. Education, that is supposed to be channeled to inculcate value and develop skills has not been so organized to be able to play that role effectively; government,

that is the major provider of jobs, has failed in her duty to the extent that job opportunities for young school leavers are not available; and the private sector is also not able to alleviate the situation.

Indeed, more than anything else, the educational system in this country has been found to be the bane of these social problems. Various policies and theories advanced to tackle these social issues have all failed. Much as government after government have tried to set things right the situation, seem far from being improved over the years. This is basically because the educational system has, for a long time, not

been tuned to produce school leavers and graduates who are able to apply their school knowledge to real life situations. A good number of the products of the Nigerian educational institutions tend to be stuffed with more book and theoretical knowledge than they are with practical-based knowledge. And so they turned impotent when they are faced with societal issues that demand the practical application of their educational knowledge to settle or provide answers to problems. This means that there has been a poor synergy between educational theories and practice. Thus, most often, the educational contents of these individuals are found to be misdirected, unresponsive, uncompetitive and redundant. This is so because the Nigerian educational system has refused to change with the trends of time. It has always given more emphasis to theory and memorization of facts than it has given to practical application of the body of knowledge to real life issues of our society.

In order to correct this abnormal situation, there is the urgent need to find out why there is no functional balance between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in the Nigerian educational system all these years. It is thus against this backdrop that educational postulation of the pragmatist school of thought are sought in a bid to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the contemporary Nigerian educational system. 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 pragmatic school of thought 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 towards bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system.

In this paper therefore, it is our contention that the pragmatic school of thought would offer a veritable tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. We strongly believe that it is only when the gap 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 shall begin our discourse with the clarifications of the concepts of pragmatism and education. Thereafter, we shall try to examine the tie between pragmatism and education, then the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system; after this we shall discuss pragmatism as a veritable tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system, then the recommendations and conclusion.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is the greatest American contribution to knowledge in the 20th century. It is an indigenous American philosophy, having been founded by American philosophers (Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey, etc).

The concept, pragmatism is said to have been derived from a Greek word "Pragma" meaning "action" and it emphasizes "practice and practical". Both entries (practice and practical) Rader (1956:128) affirms come from "pragma". This very nature of pragmatism has informed several definitions from scholars bordering on practical consequences and applicability. For instance, Hocking William defines it as:

the principle, which holds that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence.

In a similar manner, Pam (2012:143) declares that pragmatism is a doctrine of meaning, and often a definition of factual truth.

From the foregoing discussions, we can conclude that Pragmatism is a philosophy which proposes that truth is that which is successful or advantageous. By successful or advantageous, we mean that which “works”. Hence, this peculiar attribute of pragmatism has earned it several other names. These names include philosophy of workability and the idea that works. Uduigwomen and Ogbinaka (2011:124) added instrumentalism, functionalism and experimentalism as other names by which pragmatism is known.

These other names of pragmatism as given by scholars reflect the fact that pragmatism is dependent on the workability of a thing that works or serves the intended purpose. Whereas, the contrary does not exist or at best is not real. It accepts concreteness as against abstractness. Curtis in Amaele (2017:171-172) affirms this statement when he said that pragmatism as a theory interprets the meaning of a statement in terms of its practical consequence. This also implies that it is not just a philosophy (a view of life) that places emphasis upon the practical and the usefulness of things that has satisfactory consequences. But also a method and an attitude that should be cultivated and adopted.

Education

The concept of education is so complex that delineating it constitutes an uphill task. Affirming, 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. For instance, Fafunwa (1991) views education as “what each generation gives to its younger ones which makes them develop attitude, abilities, skills, interests and other behaviors which are of positive values to the society in which they live”. Hence, for Fafunwa, education is a potent tool for a nation’s development. However, for Brembeck (1986), education seems to carry a contradictory load when he says “there is no magic in education, except as we give it magic”. For to him, education can heal or kill, build up or tear apart, lift or deprive. It is an instrument that can be used for good or evil. We must learn to use it well.

However, in spite of the different orientations education has assumed, generally speaking, education can be said to be the overall process of knowledge acquisition for the purpose of making man more human. In this sense, education is acquired as an instrument for social and mental development. In a similar view, Okeem (2000) sees education as a process whereby the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behavior acquired for the overall development of man are to the general good of the society. Similarly, Fafunwa (1991) defines education as the aggregate of a the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior, which have positive value to the society in which he

lives. Dewey in Akinpelu (1981) posits that education is the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. Contributing his view, Peters (1976) argues that if something is to count as education, what is learnt must be regarded as worthwhile just as the manner in which it is learnt must be morally unobjectionable; for not all learning is educational in relation to the content of what is learnt. Scrutinizing the above definitions provided here, we are able to see that all the definitions point to and emphasize the transmission of worthwhile skills, attitudes, knowledge and behavior that are needed to develop the young adults and make them useful to them and to the society in general.

Pragmatism and Education

Pragmatism is America's major contribution to philosophy in the contemporary World (Akinsanya, 2010). It is a way of life meant to exhibit a practical application of received knowledge to societal issues. It is an approach for determining the meaning of ideas. In the field of education, John Dewey introduced his philosophical treatise in his bid to reconstruct ideas, aims and objectives and of strategies to be employed in contemporary educational system. The factors that influence such introduction include:

- Darwin's biological theory of evolution which portrayed man as evolving organism that grows via developmental processes from a simple cellular structure to a complex one and continues infinitum

- The development of empirical psychology
- The socio-political situation in America at the time of Dewey where there was immense development in technology, industry and commerce.

With the introduction of pragmatism to education, it became expedient that the aims and goals, the curriculum and method of education be reconstructed to suit the changing time. Education thus started to witness a continuous reorganization or reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability of the individual to direct the course of subsequent experiences. Education was then geared at developing the child's ability to deal with present and future problems (that is, the development of the child's social intelligence to solve problems). To achieve this, the curriculum needs to reflect the social life of the community; it also needs to be simplified and translated into the classroom experience. Such a curriculum would be broad-based featuring the sciences, the arts and those other subjects that are selected based on sociological and psychological underpinnings.

Thus, in order to translate the contents of this curriculum to the learners, the project/problem method is considered ideal. The teacher would however need to devise the method in such a way that it will be child-centered which will mean and emphasize learning by doing it oneself, using the senses in the process of knowledge acquisition. Akinsanya (2015:68-69) emphasizing the need for pragmatist approach noted that since pragmatism is basically interested in the practical usefulness or relevance of education, it is expected that the education given to a child

should equip him/her with problem-solving skills so that he/she could cope with the constant changes of his/her environment.

Also, Uduigwomen & Ogbinaka (2011:130) harping on the need of application of pragmatism in the educational process, among other things advices that we must avoid hasty generalization and rationalization, and face observable reality. They emphasize further that we should cultivate the rigorous scientific method of observing with our senses, experimenting, verifying and classifying data before we can conclude or generalize. By these statements, we can see how useful and functional it is for learners to acquire knowledge through practical experiences. Such knowledge acquired would remain relatively permanent in the learners and can be easily applied where and whenever the need arises.

Odionye (2018:163) also emphasizing the necessity of pragmatic approach to education, puts it differently when he says that the learners needs to be guided to discover things for themselves. Here, it is very clear that guidance best conveys the idea of assisting learners through cooperation so that the natural capabilities of the individuals guided will blossom. Contrary to this idea is the fact that most teaching is more or less a one-sided activity which focused more on theoretical impartation of knowledge to the detriment of the application of the same knowledge to solving problems of everyday significance. This has resulted in a situation where the learners are compelled to memorize whatever the teacher has given in the name of education. The result of this type of education is usually dullness of natural capacities or potentialities of the learners being put through the process of education.

As we can see the pragmatists believe that practical experience should be employed to guide the learners to bring whatever they learn home to solve problems or to be applied directly to life situations. In other words, theoretical knowledge should be applied directly to the realities of the environment. In Nigeria educational system, what is obtainable at the present time is at a variance with pragmatic education advocates. Rather, what obtains is more of acquisition of theoretical knowledge without any corresponding utilization of such knowledge to solve environmentally and socially posed problems, which is why the pragmatist scholars advocates among other things, students' active participation in the educational programs and decision makings, both within and outside the school. Examples of such pragmatists include Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, C. I. Lewis, George Herbert Mead and many others (Zalta, 2016).

As it could be deduced from the foregoing discussion or even observed, active participation of students in the educational programme is a very important ingredient in pragmatism. In education, active participation refers to a situation of teaching and learning in which students are involved more directly in the acquisition of both theoretical and practical training under the guidance of the teacher. Active participation goes beyond mere classroom participation. It is a high degree of involving/engaging the learners to seek out information for their selves, and carrying out individual or group projects as directed by the teachers. The aim of this approach is to make the learners to contribute more to the educational process than ordinarily it should have been with the teacher-

dominated classroom. According to Share (2016:25), this very way of educating learners stresses “participation in, rather than participation for, life”. In other words, it requires here-and-now action and practice. Students are expected to be encouraged to live out what they learn, and not just learn and keep for the life after schooling. For this, it follows that the pragmatic paradigm goes beyond mere preparation for life itself. This means that students learn by doing and also doing to learn.

For the pragmatists, therefore, education should not be separated from the learners’ real life and interests. This can be achieved by the teachers providing learners with learning experiences they (the learners) can actually put into practice outside the school environment, and giving them homework and assignments that involve contacts and interactions with real life situations. It is in this respect that Dewey in Aggarval (2008) maintains that the school must represent life as real and important to the learner in such a way that it reflects what goes on in the home, in the neighborhood and even on the playground. The import of Dewey's view is that representing life as real to the students will facilitate their application of classroom knowledge to concrete situations, whether in the school, at home, in the neighborhood or in the community. This view is supported by Merrill (2002) when he holds that learning is promoted when knowledge is applied and integrated in the real world. In a similar train of thought, Caswell (2009) asserts that application is the primary focus of using theory.

Finally education, according to the pragmatists is a social process. By this statement they mean that education should aim at transforming the society. In this case

education ought to be conducted in such a way as to bring out the best from the learners who in turn should be able to use their developed potentials and capacities to help develop their society. By implication, this means that education should not force something that is external on the learner, but should rather exploit and harness the hidden potentials and capacities in the learners to the fullest, to the betterment of the learners and the human society at large. Education is thus considered a transforming agent.

The Gap between Theory and Practice in the Nigerian Educational System

It is obvious that the learning of theories is a basic academic step in education and other areas of study. However, theories are not just taught and learnt for its own sake. As Caswell (2009) has pointed out, application is the primary focus of using theories. In other words, even though the learning (using) of theories precedes application or practice the essence of learning theories is to apply these theories to solve real life issues. This means practice (application) is the end result of all learning. The practical relevance of theory is observed by Merrill (2002) when he notes that learning is promoted when knowledge and skills are applied in a real life situation. However, as it has been observed in many quarters, this is a far cry from what obtains in the Nigerian educational system. It has been unequivocally stated by many authorities that there is a yawning gap between theory and practice in the educational system in Nigeria. And this calls for an urgent need to reconsider the system with the aim of bridging this gap so that the products of our educational system can live up to expectation. They should be able to apply

their knowledge to real life issues in school and outside schools.

Obviously, the inability of some learners at certain level of education in this country to read fluently, write meaningfully, speak fluently in English language and even do some simple calculations in mathematics competently is a serious indication that there is a serious and disturbing gap between theory and practice in learning in Nigerian schools. 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. This is as a result of teaching that is carried out with little or no intention to translate theory into practice. To further express the situation, Kakwagh (2013) states that visits to many technical colleges around the country revealed that students who have gone through senior secondary schools still enroll in technical colleges for the purpose of acquiring relevant skills needed to be practically oriented. More so, graduates from Nigerian universities and school leavers from various other lower levels of education in Nigeria are these days generally adjudged to be inept, unskilled and half baked. Utah and Allan (2014) lend their voices to this when they notes 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.

This is the crux of the matter. When an educational system is unable to achieve its set goals, the entire nation fails. 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).

Indeed, looking at the trend education is assuming in Nigeria, it is obvious that Nigeria has tilted her educational pattern to much of theory presentation at the expense of practical relevance and has continued to tie herself to the old and unimproved educational curriculum for decades. Practical relevance is only given a lip service. 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, Enemuo & Kabiru (2018), this is an indication of the lack of confidence of business and industry in the training system.

From the foregoing, we need to ask ourselves some basic questions:

1. Why would engineering graduates and their likes remain unemployed years after graduation?
2. Does Nigeria education prepare children for the real world?
3. What then is the cause of this ugly development?
4. How would our educational system be overhauled to promote effective link between theory and practice to be able to solve these problems?

Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in the Nigerian Educational System

A cursory look at what is happening with our present day graduates will suggest a no answer to these questions. Hence, to contend with the obvious gap in Nigerian educational system, it becomes pertinent therefore, to tinker on how we can reconcile theory to practice. This would no doubt make for a robust educational program. We have no doubt that if and when this bridge is forged there would be a leeway to the enormous challenges in Nigeria. Indeed, Nigeria is a country that is richly endowed with enough human and natural resources. If the right types of human resources are developed to take up places in the educational institutions, industries, politics and other spheres of life, Nigeria will be 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 we belief must be based on pragmatism. Clearly as pointed earlier in our discussion, Nigeria needs classrooms that are dominated by guidance of the learners to do things for themselves.

The learners just needed the assistance and co-operation of teachers to help them develop to the fullest their natural potentials and capabilities. In other words, the teachers devise their lessons in such a way that the learners would have activities to accomplish. They should reduce situation where the learner is compelled to memorize the view of the teacher in the

name of impartation of knowledge and provide programmes that will interestingly compel the learners to seek out information themselves and then convert and use information (knowledge) to attend to real life situations either inside the classroom or outside the classrooms. This way, the knowledge so acquired would become part of the learners and could be easily applied to life situations.

In fact, without belabouring the fact, the teachers should attune themselves to learner-centered and activity-based programmes for the learners. They should pursue scientific and relevant competency-based activities for the benefit of the learners. This means that the method adopted should be more of problem-solving by the learners. This way, the learners would unconsciously imbibe the spirit of enquiry that is very important in the pragmatist system of education. As the learner progresses with a lot of interest to achieve the set goals by their teachers their cognitive, affective and psychomotor are simultaneously developed. As a result of the cognate development of these skills, these learners are bound to become more creative and more innovative, and would be more disposed to handle competently both novel and mundane situations they are confronted with in life.

Apart from these considerations, the pragmatists believe very strongly in the quality of the teachers, trainers and educators. So one of the ways of helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice is to make sure that 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 needed 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.

As an adage goes; no one can give what he does not have. The teachers who are not equipped with the required skills to carryout teaching and guidance that are pragmatically-oriented cannot function in the type of education that can marry seamlessly theory and practice. So it is necessary the government begin to think of a pragmatic-oriented teacher programme for all teachers at all levels of education system.

It is obvious that if the operators of our educational system are able to adjust themselves to these suggestions and practically-based innovations and really go out to mount programmes in a determined manner to implement the innovation so far suggested the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system would no longer be there. And of course, this would help to improve the social, political and economic needs of Nigeria, thereby improving the living standard of its teaming population.

Recommendation

- Thus study recommends that the tenets of pragmatism should be imparted to all would-be teachers and the Nigerian public.
- The pragmatic method of teaching should be adopted in Nigerian educational system. This is necessary because the method enhances more students' activity and participation and improves theoretical as well as practical abilities of the student, thus

helping them to be very relevant and functional in their day-to-day living.

- The study recommends that Nigerian educational system should be geared more to learner-centeredness and the programme be improved 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 programs 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 stakeholders and school administrations should ensure that dedicated and qualified teachers are engaged to teach in all levels of the Nigerian educational system.

Conclusion

The argument we have tried to sustain in this paper is that there exist a wide gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. It is observed that its education system pay mere lip service attention to the issue of practical knowledge while much attention is given to theoretical knowledge. This situation we believe results in the inability of the various institutions in Nigeria to produce graduates who have the capacity to manipulate situations to solve our societal problems and improve life.

We strongly believe that if practical knowledge is given equal attention as theoretical knowledge, then our graduates will be functional and realistic. This is

possible if we are willing to adhere to the suggestions that have been put forward. It is our belief that a brighter future awaits Nigeria if all concerned are favourably disposed to make it so.

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