

A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF DEWEY'S THEORY OF EDUCATION

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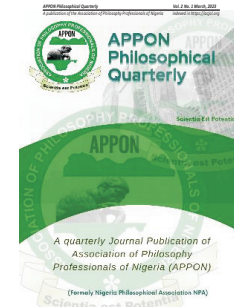
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Abstract

The idea of education as a social life has been neglected in contemporary time by both the educators and policy makers. This has derailed and destroyed the entire educational system, which has resulted in the present decay where certification is the goal of education in Nigeria instead of the utility and moral values it could bring to both the learner and the society. Our present educational system has failed woefully because it neglects the fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. Dewey's theory of education is generally overlooked despite its intellectual articulation and identification of the fundamental problems of human society. He sees philosophy as a problem solving discipline. His philosophy focuses on the importance of critical inquiry, practical intelligence, teleological nature of human conduct and character. His philosophy is predicated on the constitutive and integrated character of human conducts in social relations. He believes in the social nature of moral reality and of the public good in contemporary society. His advocacy is on educational progressivism of the child in the immediate social environment; and more comprehensive view of human society. His philosophy aims at human innovation, conducts, perception, thought, actions, habits, impulses, and intelligence. His vision of democratic society is anchored on progressive social change, knowledge and experience. His ideas are grounded on scientific principles and methodology that brings education within the template of science that promotes epistemological flourishing. Education is taken to be a social liberating agent that seeks to eradicate ignorance, which is in line with the Socratic recognition of this as a vice, while knowledge that education provides is seen as a virtue. This paper therefore seeks to examine the value of Dewey's theory of education and its relevance to the Nigerian system of education. It is the position of this paper that Nigeria has a lot to gain from the Deweyan theory of education because of its pragmatic, ethical and democratic values to the development of society. As a democratic society, it is imperative that

our system of education include the ideas espoused in this theory of education since it is child-centred and affirms the biblical injunction that a child will not depart from the way he/she was trained when he/she grows up. Our approach here will be analytic as we will evaluate the ideas of other scholars in relation to our subject of discourse.

Keywords: The Child, Community, Democracy, Education, School

Introduction

This paper is aimed at addressing Dewey's theory of educational pragmatism as a means of social relation, social change, human progress and social transformation. His theory of education reflects on the formative development of the child's intellectual capacity and moral character. His theory of education focuses on the relevance of education to the community social life. Education is the formal and informal way of training the child right from birth, home and school. The Deweyan philosophy of education has great relevance to the Nigerian society. It is worth noting that lip service has been paid to the improvement of education in Nigeria as a country. The educational system in Nigeria has been seriously neglected by the Nigerian government. The application of Dewey's philosophy of education in evaluating Nigeria's educational system is quite appropriate. The entire educational system in Nigeria is in a state of shamble or comatose, and which has resulted in the present decay where certification is the goal of education rather than the application of knowledge and experience. The Primary,

Secondary and University institutions in Nigeria are in a serious crisis which has fallen short of the Deweyan tradition. The policy makers do not care for the Nigerian educational system. Even some educators are accomplices to the nonchalant attitude of these policy makers. The Deweyan theory of education is anchored on the scientific principles of knowledge and experience. He sees the school as a form of community social life. His theory of education is based on critical thinking. He sees pragmatic philosophy as a problem solving discipline. His philosophy is practical philosophy. The Deweyan philosophy focuses on the importance of social inquiry, practical intelligence, teleological nature of human conduct and character. His philosophy reveals the integrated character of human conducts in social relations. For Dewey, integration is an achievement rather than a datum.¹

His educational pragmatism is articulated in the social nature of moral reality and of the public good. His theory of education is grounded on scientific principles and methodology that brings education within the template of science that promotes epistemological flourishing. The acquisition of knowledge through education is seen as a virtue. This paper therefore seeks to examine the value of Dewey's theory of education and its relevance to our global society. However, Nigeria has a lot to gain from the Deweyan theory of education because of its pragmatic, ethical, social, epistemological and pedagogical templates. As a democratic society, it is imperative that our system of education should include the ideas espoused

¹. Dewey, John, *Experience and Nature* in J. A Boydston(ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Vol. 17, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1925), p.30

in this Deweyan theory of education since it is child-centred and it espouses a kind of self-development, “self-transformative moments and place based pedagogies.”² For instance, Plato, Socrates, Rousseau, Russell, Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Quintilian have exhaustively discussed the importance of education to our democratic society. This paper is subdivided into various compartments. These compartments include the Basic Elements of Dewey's Pragmatic Theory of Education and its Social Relevance to Democratic Society; Dewey's Notions of School and Education; John Dewey's Pedagogy of Education; The Implication of Education as Social Institution; A Critique of Dewey's Educational Pragmatism and Conclusion. The Deweyan theory of education presupposes the need for social relations and existential reflection. It is worth noting that the Deweyan philosophy of education involves wide ranging philosophical issues in ethics, social / political philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind and language and other areas of philosophy.

The Basic Elements of Dewey's Pragmatic Theory of Education and its Social Relevance

Dewey regards his type of educational pragmatism as being very relevant in democratic society. He regards the public school as a true reflection of any democratic society. He believes that education has a great role to play in contemporary society. He opines that the American society during his time was a reflection of its educational system. He saw the idea of the public schools' relation to democratic society as a tool for

social transformation. One of Dewey's main theories was the incorporation of the students past experiences into the classroom. For Dewey, “education is essentially retrospective; that is it looks primarily to the past and that mind is adequately formed in the degree in which it is patterned upon the spiritual heritage of the past”.³ The quality of experience is the key in the development of Dewey's progressivism. He sees pragmatism as a relevant tool for societal progress. He sees his theory of education as a tool for social change. For him, pragmatism is instrumental and central to human progress. The uniqueness of educational pragmatism and its effects on social change has had a tremendous influence on the transformation of society. His contemporary thought is aimed at meeting the educational as well as other institutional needs of society. He also attempts to formulate a theory of social change based on the interplay of habit and impulse and the whole process occurs within the institutional context of his general theory of critical inquiry. His social pragmatism is described as a mirror in which every man can use to critically examine himself for the sake of the progress of human democratic society. Dewey's social psychology sees the individual as an agent for transforming the social institution. In his theory of education, he is more concern with the prospect of ensuring social change in human democratic society.

He believes that social institutions should not infringe on intellectual or the rational capacity of individuals but there ought to be some form of social control. The individual intellectual capacity should be anchored on their levels of

². Hassen, Thorbjorn Finn, Philosophical Praxis as a Community of Wonder in Education and Professional Guidance in Andrea Kenkmann (ed.) *Teaching Philosophy*, (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), pp.193-209

³. Dewey, John, *Democracy and Education*, in J.A (ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. 15 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916), p.78

creativity. He posits that social reforms will bring about the fostering of individual freedom and the advancement of democratic setting. According to Lewis, Dewey believes that the aim of social reform is to produce vibrant institutions that foster the exercise of individual freedom and democracy.⁴ Education is meant to alter and transform human society for the betterment of all in contemporary society. Education means liberation of the child.

Dewey's Educational Theory as a Social Inquiry

The Deweyan theory of education is fundamentally designed to guarantee the participation of the individual in social activity. He believes that this participation of the individual in social activity starts immediately when the child is born. For him, education is characterized by a social process. It is anchored on a continuous learning process. It has to do with learning and re-learning. However, the Deweyan theory of education adumbrates that at birth, the child or the individual power of thinking, consciousness, cognition, habits, impulses, feelings, emotions, ideas are shaped by his immediate social environment. The individual social consciousness is shaped by his participation in the social process of education. Education, therefore serves as a liberating agent to the individual in his social relations with others. The Deweyan theory of education reveals real life situation. According to Dewey, the objects of reflection in philosophy, being reached by methods that seem to those who employ them rationally

mandatory, are taken to be real.⁵He sees methods as a critical part of philosophical reasoning.

Today, in Nigeria, we are experiencing poor educational system. The standard of education in Nigeria has drastically reduced. The Deweyan theory of education is multifarious in outlook. It is psychological, scientific, epistemological, ethical, metaphysical, holistic, cultural, realistic, humanistic, pedagogical and pragmatic.

Dewey's Notions of School and Education

In his explanation of what the school is he maintains that the school is primarily a social institution. Education brings about a social process; which is to say that the school is simply that form of community life in which the child formulates his character. The community life is the most effective way in bringing the child to share in the resources of society. However, the Deweyan pragmatic thought posits that education has a social end. The Deweyan theory of education asserts that education is a process of social living and not a preparation for future living. The Deweyan theory of education posits that the school must represent present social life – life as real. According to Dewey, life denotes a function, a comprehensive activity in which organism and environment are included.⁶ Education is vital to the development of the child as that which he carries out at home, in the neighborhood or on the playground. He maintains that the school, as an institution, should simplify existing social life. He believes that, as such simplified existing

⁴. David Lewis, *American Sociology and Pragmatism*, (eds.), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp.110-114

⁵. Dewey John, *Experience and Nature*, in J.A Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1924-1953*. 17 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925), p.17

⁶. Dewey John, *Experience and Nature in J.A Boydston (ed.) The Later Works of John Dewey, 1924-1953*. 17 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925), p.19

social life, the school life should grow gradually out of the home life; that is, it should take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar with at home. The child exhibits these social activities and reproduces them in such a way that the child will gradually learn the meaning of his social existence through the power of education. The child is capable of playing his own part in relation to other individuals in society. He believes in the psychological development of the child.

For Dewey, education should be used in so far in testing the child's psychological fitness for social life and intellectual capacities.

John Dewey's Pedagogy of Education

We violated the child's nature and render difficult the best ethical results; by introducing the child too abruptly to a number of special studies of reading, writing, geography etc out of his social life. Dewey believes therefore that the centre of curriculum of the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor geography, but the child's own social activities. That education cannot be unified in the study of science, or so called nature study because apart from human activity, nature itself is not a unity; nature in itself is a number of diverse objects in space and time. For Dewey, nature is constituted by events and there are natural ends and those

that result from purposeful activity.⁷ He believes that education influences our social environment. According to Dewey, the social environment acts through native impulses and speech and moral habitudes manifest themselves.⁸ Accordingly, Carden posits that for Dewey, a common good is compatible with an indefinite number of varying conceptions; what is needed is to increase social inquiry and open communication, to empower individuals through active engagement with the natural and social environment.⁹ He believes once more that history is of educative value in so far as it presents phases of social life and growth. According to Dewey, it is significant that life and history have the same fullness of undivided meaning.¹⁰ Life itself is dynamic and challenging.

Accordingly, the primary basis of education of the child is self-development. According to Dewey, Savage claims, self-development is the end of life and autonomy is the means.¹¹ Self-development is crucial for ethical relation. According to Dewey, ethics is directly related to ordinary life.¹² The study of science is educative in so far as it brings out the materials and processes which make social life what it is. Dewey believes that the question of method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of the child's powers and interest in learning. The

⁷. Carden, Stephen, *Virtue Ethics: Dewey and MacIntyre*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p.30

⁸. Dewey, John, Human Nature and Conduct, in J.A Boydston, (ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), p.15

⁹. Carden, Stephen, *Virtue Ethics: Dewey and MacIntyre*, pp.129-130.

¹⁰. Dewey John, *Experience and Nature* in J.A Boydston, (ed.), *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1924-1953*. 17 volumes, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925), p.19

¹¹. Dewey John, Liberalism and Social Action in J.A Boydston (ed.), *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925), p.19

¹². Dewey John, Human Nature and Conduct, in J.A Boydson, (ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), pp.10-20

whole concept of education is to present and treat educational materials that are implicit within the child's own nature. In addition, the child's conscious states tend to project themselves in social action. Dewey believes that the child's method of teachings should be based on the use of images. The image is the great instrument of instruction for the child's education. Images are what the child gets out of any subject presented to him. The child forms his sensations simply through the images which are presented to him in the learning process. The child's development of education is shaped by his interest in the learning process. The development of the child or his growing power could be based on the effective use of communication or language, signs and symbols. Symbols are essential process of the child's cognitive power. For Dukor, the symbol object has an esoteric-veiling and at the same time an esoteric revealing function.¹³ Moreover, the child's emotions and his reflex of actions are shaped by the kind of education given to him through signs and symbols.

The Implications of Education as Social Institution

Dewey believes that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. Education is a regulation of the progress of coming to share in the social consciousness, and the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness. The pedagogic method is the only sure method of social reconstruction. Dewey asserts that this have both individual and social implications. He further argues that

the role of education is to bring about a better community of persons. He asserts that the main objective of education in contemporary society is the advancement of the public good or human flourishing and to ensure the normative possibility of social order. For Osemwegie, to strip society of the knowledge of philosophy and education is to set the society in a great disarray, unrest and rumpus. The knowledge of philosophy and education awake in the individual the tool of critical thinking. The focus on child education is aimed at addressing the root of social menace (problems) and moral disorders prevalent in the society today.¹⁴ However, through education, society can transform its own collective purpose; and it can organize its own means and economy. Education shapes itself with definiteness and it gives society the positive direction in which society wishes to move. Dewey opines that it is the business of everyone to be interested in the power of education. He asserts that the primary end of education is to ensure the most effective instrument of social progress and social reform. The Deweyan theory of education argues that society ought to realize what the school stands for. Dewey believes, finally that the teacher is engaged not simply in the training of individuals but in the formation of the proper character of the child.

A Critique of Dewey's Educational Pragmatism

Dewey's theory of education concerns specific educational policies and practices. This educational policies and practices are deeply rooted in social, legal, and institutional

¹³. Dukor, Maduabuchi, Symbol and Symbolism in Info-Tech Epistemology in Journal of the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria, Volume. 2 No.1 (2009): pp.84-108

¹⁴. Osemwegie, T. Wesley, Philosophy and Education: The Basis of Social Order in the Light of Quintilian, Froebel and Pestalozzi in George Ukagba et al (eds.) *The Kpim of Social Order: A Season of Inquiry, Meaning and Significance in the Modern World*, (USA: Xlibris Publishers, 2013), pp.86-87

contexts. His philosophy is aimed at the desirability of standardize curricula and testing of the child, social, economic, legal, and moral dimensions of specific funding arrangements of society, and the justification of curriculum decisions and justice. His thought on education reflects social change and reasoned inquiry. For Ferrante, social change is any significant alteration, modification or transformation in the re-organization and operation of social life.¹⁵ Education is concerned with matters of beliefs, action and judgment. In his work, *Education and Social Change* in 1937, he believes that our school system is aimed at the social transformation of society. The Deweyan theory of education has a broad spectrum or wide range of philosophical issues. His theory of education is deeply rooted in epistemological realism and liberalism. For Carden, Dewey's conception of liberalism is moral democracy and the source of progressive social change.¹⁶ While Dewey's educational theories have enjoyed a broader popularity during his lifetime and after, they have a troubled history of implementation. The Deweyan theory of education asserts that much of present education fails because it neglects the fundamental principle of the school as a form of community social life. Dewey's ideas are very robust, but were never broadly and

deeply integrated into the practices of American public schools, though some of his lofty ideas and values were widespread.

For Dewey, in consonance with Rousseau, the masterpiece of a good education is to make a reasonable man.¹⁷ Nevertheless, for Adetutu, the educational enterprise, consists in all forms and places of activity.¹⁸ The Deweyan theory is characterized by vagueness. His philosophy is in tandem with the Habermasian tradition. They both believe that society is conceived with a practical intent.¹⁹ Dewey's idea of education is consistent with the fundamental institutional reforms of society. Dewey's philosophy of education is an illuminating indicator of his theoretical reflection on changing human experiences. He believes that human experiences are always changing. For Paine, the circumstances of the world are continually changing.²⁰ His theoretical philosophy is an indication of the realm of the fundamental human problems. For Odimegwu, fundamental problems require fundamental solutions.²¹ His theory of education is based on the need for human flourishing. For Carden, an adequate conception of human flourishing should emerge from the bottom up, so to speak; it should arise from the actual struggle of life rather than from the airy realm of conceptual coherence.²² Moreover, his

¹⁵. Ferrante, Joan, *Sociology: A Global Perspective*, Fifth Edition, (USA: Wadsworth Publishing Group, 2003), p.545

¹⁶. Carden, Stephen, *Virtue Ethics: Dewey and MacIntyre*, , pp.121-129

¹⁷. Bloom, Allan, Jean Jacques Rousseau'Emile or On Education, (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p.89

¹⁸. Adetutu, S. Omotoso, Rousseau Educational Theory: Lessons and Implications in MaduabuchiDukor(ed.) *Philosophy and Public Sphere*, An Interdisciplinary International Journal of Concerned African Philosophers, Volume.7 No.1, (2010), p.11

¹⁹. Habermas, Jurgen, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p.3

²⁰. Paine, Thomas, *Rights of Man*, with an Introduction by Derek Matravers, (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996), p.12

²¹. Odimegwu, Ike, *Philosophic Foundations of Politics*, (Anambra: LumosNigeria Limited, 2008), p.6

²². Carden, Stephen, *Virtue Ethics: Dewey and MacIntyre*, p.136

educational theory reflects his pedagogical position of education as an art. For Pippin, Dewey sees art as experience.²³ However, philosophy of education concerns itself with the theory/practice dichotomy.

Dewey's thought emphasizes what Drew Leder calls a particular mode of experiential learning process.²⁴ Education brings about socio-economic and political growth. Accordingly, Russell posits that the sole purpose of education is to provide opportunities of growth and to remove hampering influences... and that its business is to train useful citizenship.²⁵ Dewey's progressive education has its roots in what William Edelglass calls real world problem solving.²⁶ For Ignacio Perez-Ibanez, education's main goal should be to create individuals who grasp the complexity and broader implications of social issues. He wants a more democratic, just, free; and peaceful world, where civil liberties and human rights are respected.²⁷ His work reflects civilized society.²⁸ Education brings

about the possibility of civic stability and democratic encouragement.²⁹ It reflects the formation and transformation of character.³⁰ Education has a role to democratic growth. He asserts that democracy... is aimed at the all-round growth of every member of society.³¹

Conclusion

Dewey's work on education has wide ranging philosophical agendas which are ethical, metaphysical, pragmatic, epistemological, sociological, pedagogical, political, and psychological. He gives an illuminating account of the theory of education that is theory-oriented. Dewey's pedagogical analysis of the child reveals an illuminating indication of his theoretical outlook on social psychology and progressive social change. His pragmatic philosophy is grounded on a contextual analysis of society. His philosophy of education is "place-based pedagogies", child-centred and the broadening of the intellect.

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- ^{23.} Pippin, Robert, John Dewey on Art as Experience in Stanley Rosen (ed.) *Philosophy 101: Selections from the Works of the Western World's Greatest Thinkers*, (New York: Great Britain, 2007), pp.267-275
- ^{24.} Drew Leder, Escaping the Cave: Experiential Learning in the Classroom, Community and Correctional Institutions, in Andrea Kenkmann (ed.), *Teaching Philosophy*, (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), p.87
- ^{25.} Russell, Bertrand, *Education and the Social Order*, (London George Allen & Unwin Publishers, 1980), p. 151
- ^{26.} William Edelglass, Philosophy and Place Based Pedagogies in Andrea Kenkmann (ed.), *Teaching Philosophy*, (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), p.71
- ^{27.} Perez-Ibanez, Ignacio, Dewey's Thought on Education and Social Change, in *Journal of Thought*, Volume 52, No.3-4(Fall/Winter, 2018), pp.19-31
- ^{28.} Plato, *The Republic*, Second Edition, trans. Desmond Lee, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p.60
- ^{29.} Plato, *The Republic*, Second Edition, p. xiii
- ^{30.} Jeremy, J. Wisniewski, Wittgenstein and Ethical Inquiry: A Defense of Ethics as Clarification, (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), p.61
- ^{31.} Dewey, John, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in J.A Boydston (ed.) *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. 15 Volumes.* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1920), p.186