

A CRITIQUE OF DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF PRAGMATISM

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Abstract

Education has no end or purpose beyond the fruitful extension or enlightenment of the experienced life of the learner. All individuals are important and the experiences of each are relevant to the experiences of the whole in the promotion of the overall interest of the society within the social milieu. By means of philosophical analysis, the paper finds out that Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism emphasizes education to meet the diverse needs, interests, and aspirations of students through his child centered curriculum. It also stresses scientific approach to problem solving, experimentation and investigations through results-oriented academic approach. It further discovers that this philosophy is relevant to the modern-day educational practice due to its emphasis on science and technology but lacks the philosophical assumptions of the existing educational system and practice from the standpoint of compatibility, consistency and adequacy. It concludes that if education must induce the necessary behavioral and attitudinal changes in the learners for self realization and societal development, educational practice must be responsive and adaptable to the changing needs of the individual and the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Educational philosophy, Pragmatism, Implications, Criticism and Democracy.

Introduction

One of the ideas of philosophy is given by Omoregbe (2018) who noted that philosophy is first a rational discipline that is concerned with the search for answers to the questions of human mind when we reflect on human experience and second, a rational search for answers to the basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in particular. As a rational discipline, philosophy is concerned with the search for meaning in

human life, intelligible and critical answers about the nature of human existence and the nature of the world in which we live. The philosophical enterprise, is therefore, involved in considering human problems in so far as they are important to all of us through careful and critical examination. This underpinning means that information and beliefs about the nature of the universe and the world of human life are of utmost concern to the philosopher of education because through their analyses, the philosopher can arrive at general, systematic, coherent and consistent body of knowledge aimed at having a clear understanding of the situation of things. Morris (2018) agrees with the foregoing when he opines that philosophy is primarily concerned with three basic questions namely what is real, studied in ontology; what is true, studied in epistemology; and what is good or of value, studied in axiology through its divisions of ethics and aesthetics.

This paper therefore, examines Dewey's educational philosophy of pragmatism under the following sub-headings: background of Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism; basic Tenets/principles of the philosophy of pragmatism; implications of the philosophy of pragmatism and; the critique of the philosophy of pragmatism.

Clarification of Concepts

The concepts that are clarified here are: the concepts of educational philosophy, pragmatism and criticism.

The Concept of Educational Philosophy

Educational philosophy refers to the process of philosophizing about education and the product of that activity; that is, it should be both analytic and speculative. It must be concerned with a critique of the philosophical assumptions of the existing educational systems and practice from the stand point of compatibility, consistency and adequacy in the light of the growing body of human knowledge. This is the analytic aspect. Philosophy of education is also concerned with developing a positive conception of what education ought to be in the light of as much information about man, society, and the universe as he can muster from all available areas of experience and knowledge. This is the speculative aspect of philosophy. Both the analytic and the speculative activities must be combined to make philosophy of education relevant to the needs of the Nigerian society.

Concept of Pragmatism

For the Encyclopedia Americana (Vol. 22) the term pragmatism as employed in philosophical doctrine denotes the general tendency to subordinate logical thinking to the ends of practical consequences. In this doctrine, thought owes its origin to the needs and demands of the practical life. It means that thought is thus a tool or instrument that is always involved to meet a particular crisis or problem-solving from a concrete situation. The Ancient Greek thought

had a great influence on Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism. Heraclitus had posited that reality is characterized by constant change and nothing is permanent except the principle of change. In the same vein, Protagoras maintained that truth and value are relative to time and place while Aristotle taught that moderation and compromise are keys to useful living.

Concept of Criticism

Philosophical criticism as a method of philosophy is concerned with painstakingly the examination of an idea or issue with a view to rendering the idea under investigation devoid of errors or mistakes. Iwuchukwu (1993) writes that criticism is a process of sanitizing educational issues in order to ensure that conclusions drawn from such issues are sound, coherent and consistent in all their forms. He further stated that criticism while not adopting a fault-finding posture represents an attitude of philosophical skepticism in those statements or thoughts are taken with a pinch of salt until all controversial issues are subjected to further scrutiny. The purpose of criticism as a philosophical method is to arrive at knowledge and truth which have been properly verified.

Background to Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophical doctrine of the 20th century advances in science and technology. Its main thrust is on direct and results-oriented philosophic methods that make practical consequences the test of reality or truth. Pragmatism as a philosophical method can be traced to continental philosophies of the British and the Americans; and the scientific realism which developed in the 15th and 16th centuries by scientifically minded giants such as Galileo, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon and Bertrand Russell to mention but a few. According to Nwosu (2013:32), the scientific realists reject the concept of "being" and "prime mover" as figments of human imagination. Its main thrust relying mainly on empiricism and experimentation is that man should regard himself as the main architect of his fortune. Scientific realists opine that the best way to unravel the mysteries of the cosmos was to investigate them through experimentation. This relates to the use of measurement or testing, and the drawing of conclusions based on the findings.

The key proponents of the philosophy of pragmatism are Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-1952), who contributed most in expounding the philosophy of pragmatism and in giving direction towards its application to education. The philosophy of pragmatism is influenced by three great revolutions in modern life of which the traditional school has taken little or no account. These revolutions are the intellectual revolution, brought about by the discoveries of modern science, the industrial revolution that occasioned the invention and developments of modern machinery and the social revolution arising from the growth of modern democracy.

Basic Tenets/Principles of the Philosophy of Pragmatism

Dewey's pragmatism in education lays claim to the practical application of ideas and the importance of observable evidence as criterion for problem solving. The tenets of pragmatism include:

- instrumentalism,
- fallibilism,
- humanism,
- pluralism,
- social and political engagement
- Scientific thinking in education
- Social nature of educational aims
- Learning by doing.

These ideas are discussed below:

- *Instrumentalism*: Pragmatists believe that ideas and theories should be judged by their usefulness and effectiveness in solving problems and guiding action. They argue that theories should be constantly tested and revised based on new evidence and experiences.
- *Fallibilism*: Pragmatists acknowledge that all beliefs and theories are subject to revision or even rejection in light of new evidence or counterarguments. They emphasize the importance of open-mindedness and the willingness to consider alternative perspectives.
- *Humanism*: Pragmatists place a strong emphasis on human experience and the importance of understanding the world from a human perspective. They believe that knowledge and truth are constructed through human experience and that they should be shaped by practical needs and concerns.
- *Pluralism*: Pragmatists recognize that there may be multiple valid perspectives and approaches to understanding the world. They argue that different ideas and theories can coexist and that there is no single, absolute truth.
- *Social and Political Engagement*: Pragmatism holds that man has a social nature. This predisposes him to interact with his fellow human beings for a harmonious living and makes social efficiency imperative in man. Through a democratic society as Siddiqui in Okere (2016:27) has noted that the individual "can fulfill his purpose and perfect himself". Pragmatists encourage active engagement in society and politics, believing

that individuals have a responsibility to work towards creating a better world. They emphasize the importance of democratic participation and the use of reason and evidence in shaping public policy.

- *Scientific thinking in Education:* Dewey believes in the scientific approach to problem solving to education. This approach is a method that begins with the consciousness of a problem or difficulty and follows along with a diagnosis of the situation; a listing of possible solutions; a projection of the consequences of each possible solution; a testing of each solution to see if the projected consequences really occur; and a final judgement on the basis of this method. He believes that the scientific method gives rise to objective truth which can only be investigated through a rigorous process.
- *Social nature of Educational Aims:* Among other questions, that of the aims of education may be considered very seriously on the philosophical level. The aim of education could be said to be the living of the good life. The good life, the happy life, the virtuous life as Aristotle has explained it-will consist in the cultivation of human capacities to their fullest reach by processes which Broudy calls self-integration. The school can contribute to the student's capacity for the good life. The school is not the only agency concerned with educational functions yet, the school; retains an autonomy because its primary task, that of the development in its students of intellectual habits, is a task peculiar (not exclusive) to itself. Anything that the school can contribute toward the good life beyond helping the students develop their intellectual capacities, their power of symbolization is in the nature of a fringe benefit; but no matter how many fringe benefits it supplies, failure to perform its primary task will leave it, as a school, without any justification for existence.

According to Dewey in Okere (2016):

The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are connected that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of their race and to use his own power for social ends.

This means that the school is an agency of the society that is responsible for bringing about social change in the society through collaboration with the home environment and other socializing agents. Aristotle corroborates Dewey's idea of education when he writes that education develops the child into the best form of man by promoting the reasoning ability of the person since that is the best and the highest element in man. He further stated that education must inculcate practical wisdom for the individual to live in the society that is, good moral conduct and concern for the social welfare of his fellow citizens; and the fostering in the individuals, the ability for intellectual and

theoretical engagement. Educational aims should be practical and not theoretical. Dewey contended that previous education techniques were aimed primarily at inculcating a mass of factual information into students without giving them any means of utilizing them. Pragmatists maintain that education should develop problem-solving skills in the learners which they could apply to societal problems. This means that education has social functions. It should provide life experiences to the learners and help them cultivate a dynamic and adaptable mind which will be resourceful and enterprising in all situations. Enoh (2009) notes that the general aim of pragmatic education is the development of the learner's intellectual ability, acquisition of vocational skills, democratic ideals and citizenship, the development of self-reliance and ability to cope adequately in a world of pressing problems.

- *Learning By Doing:* In considering how the school can bring about these results, Dewey rejects the traditional subject-centered curriculum on the grounds that it does not supply sufficient motivation to learn, it does not even lead to the retaining of information; does not develop the ability to think and, it is not well integrated and omits current social problems. He also rejects the problem-centered curriculum on the grounds that the problems which are real for immature students usually do not require formal knowledge and any particular scientific method in order to be solved by the students themselves on a level that will be satisfying to them. Dewey suggests a form of general education which aims at developing in the students the habits and skills of acquiring knowledge of solving problems; and of using knowledge imaginatively. This goal will require four general kinds of educational activity: the systematic study of organized subject-matter, especially the symbolic (abstract) disciplines of reading and mathematics; problem courses aiming at enabling the students to understand, to deliberate about, and to judge problems more effectively; and opportunities for aesthetic creativity, which along with the natural joy of knowing and being able to think, will contribute to the enjoyment of knowledge. The curriculum that is intended to help bring about these results is presented as a rather drastic revision of the elementary and secondary course of studies; how to introduce subject matter in history, science and arts in a manner that they have positive value and real significance in the child's own life; how to make instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic relate to the child's everyday experience and occupation; how to pay adequate attention to individual powers and needs (Dewey in Emeam 2016 p.141). According to Okoh (2003:36) "pragmatism stresses action and doing and maintains that imaginative theorizing must be supported and controlled by the outcome of active experimentation".

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) corroborates the above idea when he writes that the child must be involved in the action; he must practice what he has learned repeatedly until it becomes a part of him; his second nature. In his exact words, “we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts..., states of character are formed by doing the corresponding acts’.

Educational Implications of Pragmatism

Pragmatism has several implications for education in the following areas. These implications are discussed as follows:

1. **Emphasis on practical Skills:** schools should teach practical skills which students can apply in the real-world situation. Education should therefore, prepare students for life in the society for equipped them with relevant and salable skills for the world a work.
2. **Emphasis on Problem-Solving:** Education should enable students to solve problems and race his challenge. School should serve as places where students analyze problems, evaluate alternative perspectives and implement the most effective approach.
3. **Emphasis on experience:** pragmatists believe in experiential learning through which students acquire the skills for problem solving. Enoh (2009) opines that: In education, students should be engaged in enhance on-learning experience which makes possible practical application of theoretical knowledge to real life situations.
4. **Flexibility and adaptability:** Teaching and learning process should be experimental where by new approaches and strategies should be used in teaching students based on their interest and needs.
5. **Student-centered learning:** Learning should be centred on student’s needs, interest and learning styles. This means that learning perspective should explore individual variability, strengths, and weaknesses with a view to planning instructional objectives in line with these principles.
6. **School curriculum should emphasize experiences and problems that arise in man’s interaction with his environment.**
7. **Moral development is based on the use of critical intelligence to determine which action results in human development.** Children must also learn to cooperate with others in group work and projects.
8. **The teacher is a facilitator in the teaching-learning process.** He should guide the child’s learning as individuals and in their interaction in groups. It means knowledge of child’s psychology and teacher’s involvement in children’s experiences.

9. Schools should run as democratic and co-operative institutions in order to ensure learner's freedom. School must encourage free flow of ideas, discussions, participation of staff and pupil in planning and support for student's government.
10. Problem-solving should be based on learner's experiences and not recourse to fixed curriculum.
11. Emphasis on Science and technology. In the secondary schools, emphasis should be placed on the sciences, technology and vocational subjects.
12. Pragmatism should influence the principle of student effective participation in any teaching and learning situation. The traditional method whereby the teacher dominates the teaching-learning activity should give rise to child-centered education by which the child's felt needs, interests, aptitudes, age and maturity to mention a few, should determine the teacher's choice of what to teach and how to teach to achieve joy and satisfaction in learning.

Criticisms of Pragmatism

Having discussed the basic tenets and assumptions of the philosophy of pragmatism and its educational implications, the following have been offered as criticisms of Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism.

1. Metaphysical dimensions of truth are rejected in preference to truth established on individual's experiences in his environment. This metaphysical position has been criticized because there are eternal truths which are permanent and fixed.
2. Denial of the ultimate end of man. Man is not without a purpose otherwise he becomes in no way different from the ants, the reptiles and other non-human realities. There is ultimate end and all men in the universe are compelled to embrace this metaphysical truth. To deny the reality of this end on grounds of lack of experience or demonstration is negative of natural and metaphysical reality. (Iwuchukwu, 1993).
3. External and eternal truths do not always change. The existence of contingent beings is dependent on the existence of non-contingent being in the universe and both are necessary and have sufficient reason for their existence. Therefore, there is sufficient reason of being (existence) of any object of human knowledge whether it is experienced or not. Simply stated, every cause has sufficient reason for effect. (Emeam, 2016)
4. The child-centered curriculum and project method of education are not always the best method of approach in all fields of education. The learner's interest, emotions, felt needs and desires need to be redirected, modified or even ignored in the

organization and implementation of certain educational objectives in order to achieve certain goals. Overemphasis of child-centered curriculum is to allude to extreme individualism in education. Much emphasis on individualism would lead to unmitigated conflicts of interest and the possibility of social anarchy.

5. Ultimate values do not change: While accepting the relativity of values as given by the pragmatists, there are equally, desirable and social values which do not change. Examples are justice, prudence, temperance, life and courage. These values should be taught in schools.

John Dewey's educational philosophy of pragmatism has been influential but also critiqued from various angles. Here are some major criticisms:

6. Lack of Emphasis on Content: Critics argue that Dewey's focus on experiential learning and problem-solving sometimes underemphasizes the importance of content knowledge. They contend that without a solid foundation in core subjects, students might miss out on essential academic skills and knowledge (Schreiner, 2011).
7. Implementation Challenges: Dewey's ideas often face practical difficulties in implementation. Critics point out that creating a truly democratic and participatory classroom environment, as Dewey envisioned, can be challenging in diverse and large educational settings (Brubacher, 1962).
8. Ambiguity of Pragmatism: Some educators find Dewey's philosophy vague or overly broad, arguing that it lacks clear, actionable guidelines for teachers. This ambiguity can lead to varied interpretations and inconsistent application in different educational contexts (Cohen, 1991).
9. Neglect of Individual Differences: Dewey's approach is sometimes criticized for not adequately addressing the needs of students with diverse learning styles or abilities. Critics suggest that Dewey's emphasis on group learning and social interaction may not always cater to individual educational needs (Miller, 2008).
10. Teacher preparedness: To implement Dewey's educational methods may require highly experienced and proficient teachers that are adaptable and flexible in their pedagogic practices. This may be difficult to realize in educational settings.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Education is concerned with inducing changes and transformations in the material and social conditions of man. Pragmatic philosophy must be strengthened in line with what is generally true and acceptable; and educational practice should be overhauled to make it more

responsive and more adaptable to the changing needs of the individual and the Nigerian society especially in this 21st century.

Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism is a progressive vision of education. Its emphasis is on practical, experiential learning, and the development of democratic citizens. This philosophy can make education more relevant and socially engaging. However, the implementation strategies may not keep pace with modern trends especially in the area of epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of science. There is therefore, need to balance this philosophy with theoretical foundations of knowledge for advancing human development.

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