

JOHN DEWEY'S INSTRUMENTALISM AND NIGERIA'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Nigeria's educational experience fails to be proactive or responsive to the numerous challenges bedevilling its society. In its curriculum and pedagogy, it fails to take adequate consideration of the peculiarities of the socio-cultural reality of Nigerians. Despite the admission of the instrumental value of education in the *National Policy on Education* (2004) as a tool for national development, we continue to see a sheer form of non-pragmatic formalism, verbalism, legalism, and blatant mimicry of British, American, and lately Asian systems, structures, and models in our system. Some, if not all, of these educational systems, structures, and models we mimic are alien and alienating to the students, teachers, and society. Of course, there is nothing wrong with adopting functional models from other societies as the world is fast becoming a global village; the challenge lies in the failure to fine-tune and *glocalize* these adopted models to suit our needs and preserve our values and culture. Thus, in addressing these problems, this paper particularly advocated for the application of Dewey's instrumentalism to the Nigerian educational experience. We, however, understand that the social, political, economic, or philosophical circumstances that might have necessitated Dewey's concept of instrumentalism might differ in details from the Nigerian educational experience today. Nevertheless, we argued that regardless of such differences that might exist in both societies (America and Nigeria), in principle Dewey's instrumentalism is feasible for Nigeria's educational experience.

Key Words: John Dewey, Instrumentalism, Education, and Experience.

Introduction

In a much broader sense, education is the means of social continuity of life. “Every one of the constituent elements of a social group, in a modern city as in a savage tribe, is born immature, helpless, without language, beliefs, ideas, or social standards” (Dewey 2001, p. 6). Yet, it is the case that “Each individual, each unit who is the carrier of the life experience of his group, in time passes away. Yet the life of the group goes on” (Dewey 2001, p. 6). It is through education that the life of a group is sustained. The inestimable importance and role of education in the growth and development of the individual and society is largely agreed upon, especially concerning the problem of what the curriculum ought to look like and how the pedagogy ought to be designed for effective education.

It is in the attempt at answering some of these fundamental questions pertinent to the nature of education and how it could possibly serve as a befitting tool for national development that warrants the role of philosophy in education. Thus, it is by means of applying philosophical principles, doctrines and methods to the resolution of fundamental educational problems that makes philosophy relevant to the discipline of education.

With regards to the case of Nigeria’s educational experience there is an underlining consensus amongst scholars (Odia & Omofonwan 2007) that there is something fundamentally wrong with Nigeria’s educational system. However, on the question of what exactly is the problem and recommendations on how to possibly tackle the diagnosed problem, some of these scholars part way. Okoroma (2006) acknowledges that the poor performance of the education sector is worrisome. However, he believed that the cause of the problem is the ineffective implementation of the educational policy “engendered primarily by lack of political will, lack of continuity of programs and corruption” (p. 244). And he recommends the “discontinuation of the *National Policy on Education*” on the basis of the fact that it (the *National Policy on Education*) is fashioned after the American system which fails to take into consideration the culture of Nigerians. Thus, he recommends the Asian (Indian, Chinese and Japanese) model. Odia and Omofonwan (2007) admit of the numerous social problems faced by Nigeria’s educational system but however, they maintain that the problem is fundamentally one of poor funding. In tackling some of these educational problems, the paper considers Dewey’s instrumentalism as a relevant tool in addressing some of these problems.

Instrumentalism as a form of philosophical pragmatism as put forth by the American philosopher John Dewey is his own more general brand of pragmatism. The concept of instrumentalism according to Dewey entails that the value of any idea is determined by its usefulness in helping people to adapt to the world around them. The experience of a people be it in the economic, social, cultural, geographical or political sphere cannot be divulged from the education of a people. Commenting on the relation between experience and education, Dewey (1997) states; “I take it that the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (p. 22).

Ours is a society bedevilled by too many challenges most of which our educational experiences neither relates to nor serves as an instrument for the confrontation of these challenges. We argued that Dewey's instrumentalism can be effectively applied as a model to Nigeria's educational experience. First given that Dewey's instrumentalism lays emphasis on direct experience with regards to the natural environment or happenings of the immediate society. The naturalization of educational curriculum and pedagogy is necessary for a multicultural society like Nigeria. A non-naturalized educational curriculum and pedagogy is both alien and alienating. His instrumentalism would aid in emphasizing a direct educational engagement with the happenings of our immediate society. And secondly, the sheer form of verbalism or formalism in the Nigerian educational experience affects its progress and instrumentality in the utilization of education as a tool for national development. Dewey's instrumentalism abhors all forms of empty formalism which lacks the needed instrumental value for the progress of society. This we believe makes Dewey's instrumentalism a more apt model for the much-needed progress in Nigeria's educational experience.

Dewey's Instrumentalism

John Dewey (1859–1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer. His ideas have been of tremendous influence in the area of education (progressive education) and social reform (liberalism). He is one of the primary figures associated with the philosophy of pragmatism, and is considered a major educational reformer of the 20th century. Dewey's instrumentalism is a pragmatic philosophy that maintains that thought is an instrument for solving practical problems. It also sees truth as something not constant but that which changes as problems change. Under instrumentalism scientific theories are considered useful tools for predicting phenomena instead of true or approximately true descriptions. Methodologically, Dewey's instrumentalism considers ideas as useful instruments, and that the worth of an idea is based on how effective they are in explaining and predicting phenomena (Dewey, 1997).

The approach of John Dewey to philosophy, while influenced by many factors, sees a person's philosophy as more intimately and internally related to the social processes. Instead of viewing it as primarily a means of analysis and clarification, Dewey sees the role of philosophy as a method of social reconstruction, and logic as a method of inquiry rather than a means of exploring the implications of analytical definitions and empirical facts. This therefore makes his philosophy progressive, "rather than critical and constructive or idealistic and materialistic" (Bloom, Crapster, et al. p. 2, 1958). However, like most philosophies, Dewey's instrumentalism did not just come out of the blues, certain preexisting factors or events must have necessitated it. And how he arrived at his instrumentalist philosophy can best be understood by briefly tracing his long intellectual journey which culminated in his instrumentalism.

In the course of his education, Dewey came under the influence Hegelian thought. Bloom, Crapster, et al. (1958) argued that this Hegelian influence provided Dewey with an intellectually respectable synthesis of his religious and philosophical interests. However, Dewey later rejected much of Hegelianism due to two later major interests. "First the more practical emphasis of Kant led him to reject rational idealism's interpretation of mind as a constitutive and determinative factor in the universe. Second, the psychology of William James tended to confirm this conclusion but Dewey

did not enter the camp of the materialist. Rather he began to see mind as a biologically grounded instrument of the interaction between the person and his environment” (Bloom, Crapster, et al., p. 16, 1958).

Just as Charles Darwin held that parts of the human organism evolve, Dewey believed that the human mind evolves. And its special role is that of participant rather than either spectator or dictator in man’s social evolution. Such an interpretation of mind had the further advantage of being open to objective, public and scientific study.

Dewey's instrumentalism, is thoroughly naturalistic, it rejects transcendent absolutes of all sorts, and is also antimetaphysical. His instrumentalism as a method, has two unique features. It is, on the one hand, an attempt to apply his interpretation of the scientific method to the human and social areas. By viewing scientific ideas practically, instead of theoretically, he sought to unite the scientific and ethical strivings of men, while at the same time avoiding any absolute notion. Since scientific and all other ideas are but means for change, he suggests that it is possible to treat them as instrumental ideas, rather than as universals or finalities. On the other hand, since all such ideas receive their validation from within the realm of evolving human experience, he claims that such a method is itself incapable of becoming absolute, but is rather a continually self-correcting tool. “It is only by viewing philosophy this way, as an ever-reconstructed method, that men will be able to solve their social and cultural problems, and at the same time preserve their democratic tradition” (Bloom, Crapster, et al., p. 16, 1958). And it is on the basis of these abovementioned two unique features of Dewey’s instrumentalism that we shall base our argument for its applicability to Nigeria’s educational experience.

At the heart of Dewey’s instrumental is the view that man’s knowledge of both himself and the world around him in virtue of which he understands reality is derived from the interaction of human being with society. This is quite evident in the pragmatic view which maintains that the world is neither dependent on nor independent of man’s idea of it. Thus, reality is considered the sum total of what we experience. Just like the other major proponents of pragmatism of which Dewey’s instrumentalism is a variant, they all agree that inquiry springs forth from felt need and results in practical gain. “Thus, reflective thought characteristically arises when there is some difficulty, conflict, or crisis that disrupts the ordinary routine of living” (Uduigwomen & Ihuah, p. 111, 1995).

Instrumentalism and Education

Before delving into the unique case of Nigeria’s educational experience with regards to the applicability of Dewey’s instrumentalism, in a much broader context we have to investigate the possible connection between Dewey’s instrumentalism and education. Dewey defined education as an “intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience”. Thus, for him education or the curriculum must be in sync with the experience and happenings of the immediate environment of the learner. O’ Connor (1980) commenting on this needed connection between education and instrumentalism states that, “The educational system of any society is a more or less elaborate social mechanism designed to bring about in the persons submitted to it certain skills and attitudes that are judged to be useful and desirable in the society” (O’Connor, p.7 1980).

Dewey's conception and ideas on education are scattered across most of his works. His educational theories are presented in his *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Experience and Education* (1938), etc. Through all of these works, Dewey consistently maintained that education and learning are social and interactive processes, and thus the school itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place. In addition, he believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning (Dewey, 1997).

From Dewey's instrumentalist standpoint, education ought to have experiential curriculum rather than mere theories. Education is seen as a process of developing the habit of problem solving the growth in intelligence through experience. Under this instrumentalist framework, knowledge is not just for knowledge sake but practical problem solving and addressing challenges which unfolds itself in the course of living in a given environment. This implies that education is fundamentally the interaction between the learner and his immediate environment. "learning is realized by doing and that the learner realizes his interest by participation. The teacher only supervises, guides and directs". Dewey's instrumentalism seems to see humans as not necessarily having any fixed or constant nature. And thus, in an academic system the learner is regarded as an active organism, continually engaged in the interpretation and reconstruction of his experiences. To achieve this, the content of what is taught, that is, the curriculum should be a reflection of the social life of the community "simplified and translated into the classroom". The content of the curriculum Dewey insist should be such that the learner under the tutelage and direction of the teacher will be able to explore and discover knowledge by himself/herself (Dewey, 2001).

In recognizing the importance of the potential of education in social reconstruction, Dewey makes a strong case for the importance of education not only as a means of gaining knowledge, but also as a means to learn how to live. He is of the view that the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. He rightly pointed out that "to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (*My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey, 1897). In addition to helping students realize their full potential, Dewey goes on to acknowledge that education and schooling are instrumental in creating social change and reform. He notes that "education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction".

Dewey's instrumentalism relates knowledge to action or theory to practice. He lamented that the main problem of philosophy is the separation of theory from practice. Science is to be integrated into the realm of values in order to overcome the separation of theory from practice. On the contrary, the conservative worldview promotes spectator theory of knowledge, which separates knowledge from overt action. In this sense, knowledge is considered fixed and immutable.

However, this spectator theory of knowledge has to be relaxed by a theory that regards the knower as an intelligent agent who acts on his environment to change contingencies in nature. Hence, knowledge serves as the offshoot of inquiry as in the case of experimental science. In his theory of inquiry, Dewey (1938) portrayed that thinking would not exist, and hence knowledge would not be found, in a world that presented no trouble. In other words, every inquiry is prompted by doubt, which requires problem solving method to tackle the situation.

Reality for Dewey is not something out there but a product of our interaction with our environment. And education must be designed in a manner that aids the learner in studying the world around him as it affects him. Commenting on the social dimension of instrumentalism and education, Uduigwomen and Ihuah (1995) puts it thus;

the learner must learn to live in a community of individuals, to cooperate with them and to adopt himself intelligently to social needs and aspirations. Learning here means more than accumulating facts that have been scientifically established: it also means speculating and advancing beyond the limits of such findings. Knowledge derived from this kind of exercise results from critical examination of our grounds of convictions, prejudices and beliefs (p. 114).

In all its entirety, Dewey's instrumentalism repudiates all forms of verbalism or verbal solution, the idea of eternal truth or principles, absolute claims and all forms of dogmatism. And rather makes emphasis on the openness of systems and mind to the tentative nature of what is considered as truth, with a premium placed on the workability of ideas. Thus, the workability or instrumental value of an idea becomes the watchword for any educational system which seeks to be relevant to the context of its environment. How does Nigeria's educational experience fare with Dewey's Instrumentalism?

The Nigerian Educational Experience and the Application of Dewey's Instrumentalism

To engage in any meaningful discourse on Nigeria's educational experiences, we must visit the document of the *Nigerian National Policy on Education* which contains the philosophy of education, aims and objectives to be attained, and how they shall be attained. It provides a general guide that facilitates decision-making. Educational policies provide the direction for educational activities. In principle, the document serves as the *modus operandi* of the educational system.

The first paragraph of the Introduction of the *National Policy on Education* explicitly admits the role of education as being of instrumental value to national development. It reads thus; "Education in Nigeria is an instrument *par excellence* for effecting national development". The goals of education it maintains shall be clearly set out in terms of its *relevance* to the needs of the individual and those of the society, in consonance with the realities of our environment and the modern world" (p. iii). Judging from these lines alone one gets the feeling that in fact the Nigerian system of education is definitely pragmatic and particularly is in sync with Dewey's instrumentalism. With the overt emphasis on education being relevant to the needs of the individual and those of society one

might be led to believe that not only in principle but in practice our educational experience is in consonance with the realities of our environment and the era we live in.

Prior to 1977 Nigeria operated an educational policy inherited from Britain at independence. The inability of this policy to satisfy the national aspirations of the country rendered it unpopular. In 1969 a National Curriculum Conference was organized which reviewed the inherited curriculum and identified new national goals for Nigeria's education. A National Seminar was organized by the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in 1973 under the Chairmanship of Chief S. O. Adebayo. This gave rise to the National Policy on Education in 1977 (Akangbou 1985; Bello 1986; Okoroma 2000). The National Policy on Education is anchored on Nigeria's philosophy on education as enunciated through the nation's objectives. Nigeria has five main national objectives as provided by the Second National Development Plan and accepted as the necessary foundation for the National Policy on Education. They are the building of:

- a free and democratic society
- a just and egalitarian society
- a united strong and self-reliant nation
- a great and dynamic economy
- a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (FRN, 1998).

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that there is something inherently wrong with the Nigeria's system of education. Where does the problem lie or what exactly is the problem? This question tends to generate different responses from scholars. Is the educational policy faulty and therefore the cause of the educational quagmire, or does the problem spring forth from faulty implementation of the national policy? N. S. Okoroma (2006) is of the opinion that both "ineffective implementation" of the National Policy on Education and the manner in which the National Policy on Education is modelled is responsible for the problem of education in Nigeria. Okoroma puts his findings thus:

The findings blame the distortions in the educational system on the ineffective implementation engendered primarily by lack of political will, lack of continuity of programs, and corruption. The situation has hindered national development and, until urgent action is taken to review Nigeria's educational system, its national aspirations will continue to be compromised (Okoroma, 2006).

However, Okoroma recommends the discontinuation of the National Policy on Education. He argues that it is fashioned after the American system. And insists on the adoption of the model practiced by Asian countries such as Japan, China and India given that it takes the culture of the people into consideration.

Educational theories as Ezedike (contained in Uduigwomen & Ihuah 1995) points out could be evaluated on the basis of their philosophical or non-philosophical underpinnings. And this he believes will enable us access the extent to which they are grounded in philosophical principles of "rationality, criticality, logicity, and coherency" (p. 172). Educational theories such as:

perennialism, essentialism, reconstructionism all possess some form of a priori principle and expectation of reality. Inherent in these theories of education are divergent conceptions of “reality, knowledge and values”. However, progressivism as a theory of education is founded on the philosophical foundation of pragmatism of which Dewey’s instrumentalism is a variant. Dewey’s instrumentalism rather than cling to any view of reality as possessing an inherent essence upon which any educational theory is to be predicated upon, sees reality as a process of change not permanence. Therefore, given this constantly changing nature of things, ideas, principles or theories, Dewey’s instrumentalism insist that we must adopt theories or ideas on the basis of their utility value, that is, their workability in tackling problems we encounter in the course of life. However, to argue for the application of Dewey’s instrumentalism to Nigeria’s educational experience without any attempt at describing the present educational quagmire would amount to prescribing a solution for an undiagnosed predicament.

First, going by the policy document, there is an overt emphasis on developing and equipping student with relevant skills and knowledge. In the area of specialized and technical education which places a premium on creative and productive development of the learner. In practice, this is hardly the case in Nigeria. Most institutions lack the equipment and technical know-how for the actualization of this defined needs, goals and aspirations that constitutes the basis of the nations educational policy.

Secondly, some scholars have argued against what they considered to be such a bogus curriculum that includes certain irrelevant fields that have no direct bearing or relevance to our present or future needs. Take for instance, the study of typewriter. Typewriters are anachronistic and the modern world have moved on to using more sophisticated computers yet in secondary and tertiary institutions, students are still made to learn this. Like Uduigwomen and Ihuah rightly pointed out (1995), “It is not an exaggeration to say that our curricula most often contain what should not be and takes out what should be there” (p. 124).

Thirdly, it is argued that nowhere in the 6-3-3-4 educational formula as practiced in Nigeria that emphasis is made on the other dimensions of being. Particularly the moral and spiritual. Uduigwomen and Ihuah (1995) maintained that “any system of education that undermines spiritual and moral underpinnings of our being is bound to fail” Thus, for a complete and holistic approach which takes cognizance of composite nature of humans, our educational system has failed in properly addressing this need. And in some parts of the country, this is being taken up by individuals and organizations with extremist or radical ideology capable of destabilizing peaceful coexistence amongst members of society. Thereby subjecting young mind to dogmatic doctrines which are not open to dialogue and antagonistic to our cherished values of multiculturalism and pluralism.

Fourthly, the problem of lack of funds or inadequate funding of educational institutions in Nigeria militates against the effective and efficient learning environment. The problem of lack of funds or inadequate funding in Nigeria is a major challenge which could possibly be attributed to corruption, misappropriation of funds for educational purposes. The fraction of the national budget on education speaks volume of the nation’s lip service commitment to education as a key to unlocking the potential of its citizens for national development.

Fifthly, The Nigerian educational system is bedeviled with the problem of lack of motivation of teachers, which has a negative impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge transmission from teacher to students. This inevitably affects the passion and steadfast commitment of the teacher and the overall educational system over time.

Lastly, the inadequacy of specialized manpower to help in realizing the aims and objectives of the nation's policy on education affects the chances of the actualization of the objectives of educational goals in Nigeria.

Bearing in mind the emphasis of Dewey's instrumentalism as a philosophical doctrine which strongly repudiates the traditionalist, essentialist and "perennialist" notions of education, Dewey calls for a new educational outlook. His instrumentalism kicks against all forms of preconceived notion or essentialists claims about the nature of humans upon which any system of education should be predicated. For him education is not just a "getting ready" of the child for the responsibilities and privileges of adult life. And this is not just the case because reality is in constant flux but because by the time the child grows up, what he learnt would have become anachronistic. In delineating the meaning of the term education then, Dewey employed a lot of descriptive attributes: 'Education for life', 'Education for direction', 'Education for reconstruction, etc. For him "education in the broad sense implies the formation of fundamental attitudes of imagination, desires and thinking is strictly correlative with culture in its inclusive sense" (Dewey, 1997, p. 22).

It seems reasonable to believe that at least in principle the *Nigerian Policy on Education* appreciates Dewey's emphasis on the instrumentality of education. However, much of the problem lies in the implementation of the educational policy. And specifically in the design of the content of school curriculum, we still see subjects or courses which are practically of no relevance to the present or future development of the student and society at large. A proper subscription of the Nigerian system of education to Dewey's instrumentalism will entail a total jettisoning of the all-pervasive verbalism and formalism which characterizes our educational system. The emphasis on always employing a particular method or doing things simply because that is how it has always been done would no longer be acceptable. Emphasis shall shift to the workability of ideas and methods or pedagogy. And these shall in turn have a direct bearing to the life and environmental or societal challenges.

Conclusion

In the course of the paper, we investigated Dewey's concept of instrumentalism, particularly with regards to its basic tenet. On the issue of Nigeria's educational experience, we argued that in principle the national policy on education made attempt at drafting the educational policy in sync with the individual and societal needs. However, in practice we hardly experience the workability of such policy. Our educational system is still stuck with empty and irrelevant verbalism and formalism in its pedagogy or curriculum. Thus, for the attainment of national development arises the need for thorough examination of our educational system. Particularly with regards to the philosophy or theory actually driving the system. If our system of education must attain the goal of true national development, it must cease from paying lip service to the utility value of education and commence the process of jettisoning idea and processes that have stagnated our national

development. The adoption Dewey's instrumentalism therefore becomes important if Nigeria must make any pragmatic advance.

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