

PHILOSOPHY OF PRAGMATISM: WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR EDUCATION?

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Abstract

Education is a magic wand in development of nations. It is viewed to be the system motivating sound ideas, theories and conceptualizations. However, education in Nigeria has suffered huge setback due to so much focus on ideas and theories without allowing them to pass through the anvil of experience. But with pragmatism, which hold that no idea is worth it until it brings solution to perplexing human problems, a way forward has been advanced for education. Hence, this paper lends itself to the exposition on philosophy of pragmatism and a way forward for education. It postulates that education forms the basis for generating ideas which seem to have fallen short of proffering solution to societal problems. The concepts of “education”, “pragmatism”, and pragmatic education were articulated. The paper examines theories and ideas as cankerworm in the practice of pragmatic education. The paper observes that too many ideas and propositions in education have not been experienced to the extent of not using them to solve not only human but societal problems. Way forwards were conjectured based on the observations made in the work.

Keywords: Education, Pragmatism, Pragmatic Education, Nigeria

Introduction

The challenge to think critically and logically has always been there for man. At certain instances according to Agbanusi, Ndianefoo and Odimegwu pragmatism presents itself to man as the criterion for the proof of their existence. At some other instance, it calls as a necessity for tackling the myriads of problems that confront man. This challenge has never been as urgent in any other clime as it is in ours today when most people gloss over their existence and run away from the

problems that task their critical thinking.*¹ The search for explanation of things diligently pursued led man to philosophy.

Philosophy has no universally accepted definition; hence, definition of philosophy is not easy to come by. However, it can be literally seen as love of wisdom. For Umeogu:

Philosophy can be seen as a study that seeks to understand the mysteries of existence and reality. It tries to discover the nature of truth and knowledge and to find what is of basic value and importance in life. It also examines the relationship between humanity and nature and between the individual and the society. Philosophy arises out of wonder and curiosity and the desire to know and understand (Umeogu, 2019: 5).^{*2}

It is the mother of all discipline, including philosophy of education, which is the application of philosophical tenets and principles to bring about the solution of so many problems in the field of education. But Dewey argues that philosophy of education is not the application of ready-made ideas to every problem, but rather the formation of right mental and moral attitudes to use in attacking contemporary problems. This prompted Okafor to assert that the data utilized in philosophy of education include to some degree the content of sciences, the arts, literature and so forth to bring about the practical solution needed in the field of education ^{*3}

Philosophy has three crucial branches: metaphysics (reality), axiology (value) and epistemology (theory of knowledge), where education is domiciled.^{*4} There are also three basic schools of thought in philosophy, namely, idealism, realism and pragmatism. Realism can be divided into three primary branches thus, Aristotelian, Scholastic and Scientific realism; pragmatism is an offshoot of scientific realism.^{*5} It will be worthwhile at this point to give a succinct clarification of the concepts inherent in this study.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Pragmatism

Pragmatism is widely described as America's distinctive philosophy; it however has European and Roman root. It is a word that is rooted in Greek, and means "work". It is a 19th and 20th century philosophical movement. Dewey believes that pragmatism is preferably known as instrumentalism and experimentalism. The chief proponents of pragmatism are Charles Sanders Peirce; William James and

John Dewey. Pragmatism according to Agbanusi, Ndianefoo and Odimegwu is the school of thought in philosophy which claims that they cannot know anything about “substances”, “essences” and ultimate realities; metaphysics and etc.*⁶ Furthermore, they averred that pragmatism opposes all authoritarianism, intellectualism, and rationalism. In other words, they prefer democracy, intelligence and experience to the former. Supporting Ike et al’s view, Okafor asserts that the avoidance of metaphysical issues is the essence of pragmatism and that pragmatist is a philosophy saddled with scientism-based on scientific tradition.*⁷ But for Stace, the major effort of pragmatism is to clarify and extend the methods of science and also to strengthen the prospects of freedom and intelligence in the contemporary world. Stace further states that comprehensive pragmatist thought is to bear the imprint of traditional modes of argumentation, and also lay emphasis on logical and methodological ideas.*⁸

Even at that, pragmatism is a doing philosophy. It is viewed by Howard and Samuel as an idea that rather encourages seeking out the processes and doing things that work best to help achieve desirable ends.*⁹ They further assert that pragmatism examines traditional ways of thinking and doing and where possible seeks to incorporate them into everyday life. In other words, pragmatism is out to support new ideas that deal with changing world in which people live. In this regard, Dewey thought that such new thought should be along the line of scientific method where people think in an orderly and coherent fashion.*¹⁰ It is noteworthy to assert that when Dewey thought of scientific method, they did not mean test tube and statistics, rather they meant orderly thinking and an experimental approach to problems of life designed to bring about a better life for all.

However, such orderly thinking does not in any way divorce means-end relationship. The above view made Childs to assert that means and ends cannot artificially be separated.*¹¹ In other words, the means used determines to a large extent the actual ends achieved, therefore, vigilance over the means used in any case should be increased. The above proposition can only be obtainable in society where according to Meadows; the self is by nature social and not some mental inner thing hidden from view.*¹² It is quite deducible from the foregoing that pragmatists believe that human experience is an important ingredient in issues of life . It has helped to give pragmatism a decidedly environmental orientation that breeds experience and by extension idea. In line with the above thought, Locke states that as people have more experiences, they have more ideas imprinted on the mind and more with which they relate with people in the social environment. Such ideas according to Dewey have to be defined functionally in reference to a

particular problem, rather than as mere mental construct.*¹³ That is to say that any idea that does not bring solution to problem is like a language that has gone holiday.

Similarly, pragmatists believe that idea should be about idea. Expounding the above proposition, Menand states that ideas are not out there to be discovered as claimed by Plato, but are tools like hammers and microchips that people devise to cope with the world.*¹⁴ Menand further affirms that ideas are not solely individual creations but are generated by social groups. In other words, ideas are entirely dependent on human beings and their environment; the two cannot be separated from the other. Firming the above, Peirce states that what is known about objective reality resides in idea one has of any given object, warning that people always should remain extremely sensitive to the consequences of how to conceive an idea because one's idea of anything is one's idea of its sensible effects.*¹⁵ From this point, ideas cannot be separated from human conduct, for to have idea is to be aware of its effects and or their probable consequences in the arena of human affairs. Peirce concluded by stating that true knowledge of anything depends wholly on testing one's ideas in actual experience because according to them, ideas are little more than hypothesis until tried on the hammer of experience which will inadvertently become truth.*¹⁶

Consequently, truth is not absolute until it is put to test in actual experience. Elaborating the above, James avers that truth is not absolute and immutable, but it is made in actual real life events.*¹⁷ Arguing further, James pointedly states that truth does not belong to an idea as some property adhering to it, for truth is found in conscientiously acting on ideas and in the consequences of ideas. For them the proof is in the pudding, that is to say, before one can say if the pudding (an idea) is any good (true), one has to taste (test) it. The above assertion gladdened the heart of Dewey who states that no immutable or absolute exists; rather it depends on the consequences of human experience.*¹⁸ Hence, ideas are not immutable but are accepted on the basis of how well they solve a perplexing problem.

Pragmatists believe that people should be more experimental in their approach of life issue. Accentuating this point, Dewey states that the above can be done by testing ideas and proposals reflectively before acting on them, and by a critical appraisal and reflective assessment of results after trying out the ideas and proposals in practice.*¹⁹ Deducing from the above statement, ideas are seen as instruments in the solution of human problems, and that those solutions should be tried on experimental basis so that learning can be drawn from such efforts and be directed for better effect. More so, one must view the place of ideas and in an

experimental and instrumental sense. In the same wake of thought, Howard and Samuel assert that Dewey, like Peirce believe that people understand something as true or false on the basis of what it does and what effect it has on human activities, such as education which they see as a necessity of life.*²⁰

Concept of Education

It is a per-se-nota that societies through the ages have one form of education or the other, whether indigenous or western education. This is because education is as essential to man as life itself. It begins from birth to death. Education varies from place to place and from time to time. In fact it is a very important means of developing any nation. The term education has not lent itself to any strict consensual definition as it depends on the perspective from which one views it. It can be considered as the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, interest, abilities, competence and the cultural norms of a society by people to transmit this life to the coming generations so as to enhance perpetual development of the society. Corroborating the foregoing, Tembo in Enemuo asserted that education is a vehicle through which ideological principle and values are transmitted to the young and other members of the society.*²¹ Education, according to Cremin can be described as a deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, interest, abilities and sensibility.*²² For Onwuka, education in itself is the manifestation of life.*²³

Similarly, one of the basic tasks of education is to train young people to become useful members of the society. This is done via education which is seen as a change agent that ensures socio-economic, political and developmental change of any society. No wonder National Policy on Education (NPE) sees education as an instrument par-excellent for effecting national development (FRN, 2014).*²⁴ Education must also see to the preservation and transmission of values and traditions of a people from one generation to another; as well as training the people. It cannot however be divorced from its purpose as it is applicable in such domain. The purpose of education as enunciated by Okpilike, whether western or indigenous is to make the individual live successfully and contribute meaningfully to the growth of his society.*²⁵ To be able to achieve this Okpilike stressed, the education offered by the individual should take into consideration the factors and the culture operative in such society. The reason for this is not far-fetched, it is because there can be no meaningful and effective education in the absence of culture where the education practiced is domiciled.

The education system is undeniably the major backbone of the development of any country as it inculcates in the individual, the ability to be a vital part in nation building. It enriches peoples understanding of themselves and the world; it improves quality of lives and leads to broad social benefits to individuals and society. In other words, education raises people's productivity, creativity and promotes entrepreneurship and technological advancement which is the trend in today's world (World Bank 2011).^{*26} It is generally believed that the basis for any true development must commence with the development of human resources, and that can only be done through education. As a result, formal education remains the vehicle for socio-economic development and social mobilization in any society and the whole system of education is centered on the wellbeing of the people.

Consequently, it believed that the wellbeing of the people is captured in Nigeria education ideology. The five main national objectives of Nigeria as stated in the National Development Plan, and which have been endorsed as the necessary foundation for the National Policy on Education, are the building of: i. a free and democratic society; ii. a just and egalitarian society; iii. a united, strong and self-reliant nation; iv. a great and dynamic economy; and v. a land of bright and full opportunity for all citizens. The foregoing objectives are wonderful but the need here according to Ukeje is to rediscover our ideological roots and value systems and have them systematized, modernized and codified through the process of education.^{*27} For Ukeje, it seems the above feats have been achieved already in the five National objectives of Nigeria which have been quoted above.

From the objectives it would appear that Nigeria has opted, at least on paper, for a free, democratic, egalitarian, self-reliant and productive nation. The next step is to pragmatically follow the ideology to foster the achievement of these ends. It would then be the role of education to inculcate and internalize the cardinal virtues of the ideology. Education should then be a process for not only behavioural modification but also in keeping with the national ideology and other beautiful propositions articulated therein. This is believed to be possible with a conscientious heed to some of the tenets of pragmatism – a doing education.

Education in Pragmatism

Education is not just preparation for life, but an important part of life. For Dewey, education is the process by which a culture is transmitted across generations by the communication of habits, activities, thoughts and feelings from adult to the young generation.^{*28} Thus education cannot be mere preparation for life, but an

important part of life that children themselves live. This informs why educators should be aware of interest and motivations of children, as well as the environment from which they come. Howard and Samuel posit that pragmatists, especially Dewey believe that education should free human activities and make people more capable of individual and social life because for them only in this way can proper growth in life occur. Furthermore to the above, Dewey states that education is seen as a planned effort to establish a study environment and educational process so that the student may actively develop their own potential in religious and spiritual level, consciousness, personality, intelligence, behaviour and creativity to themselves, other citizens and the nation.*²⁹

Furthermore, pragmatists argue that education should be an experimental enterprise, as well as something that assists in social renewal and produce humane spirit among educators and educands. Pragmatists believe that education should be flexible so that it can be used in various ways and that educators and students should see knowledge as related. They also see education as action-oriented and so activity-oriented and problem-solving approach should be taught students. Howard and Samuel noted that pragmatists suggest education that is discriminatory; that can meet the need of the child.*³⁰ It should also be a kind that is tended toward a broad education rather than one that is specialized. Dewey did not advocate ahistorical presentism.*³¹ That is, where knowledge is separated from experience; where past knowledge did not relate to the present one and knowledge compartmentalized so that facts are torn away from experience. That is, a situation where a child can recite a given literature without understanding how it relates to it, its value and how it can bring about solution to social problem.

It has been a word against general education, where theory from time immemorial has been the order of the day. It is hoped that with the shedding of light on some tenets of pragmatism, a way forward can be advanced for contemporary education *ceteris peribus*.

Education and Pragmatism

If there is a prevailing view of pragmatism in the fields of education today, it is that pragmatism is incompatible with educational ideas and metaphysical realities therein. Pragmatism believes in practice and experience. They averred that anything that is metaphysical, that cannot be proven and does not pass through crucible of experience should be discarded. For them educational ideas that cannot bring solution to pressing need; are not experiential and cannot be proven are not

worth it. Just like moon, stars and some other heavenly bodies were seen as an abstraction until they were proven to be concrete and a place people can visit. Mathematical theories were seen as mere theories until airplane and other technological tools were built through them. Hence, pragmatism does not concern itself with anything that is not ascertainable, verifiable and concrete like most of the theories and ideas in education.

As a matter of fact, it is believed that education sees to the preservation and transmission of values and traditions of a people from one generation to another; as well as training the people. If this point is anything to go by, why is it that our contemporary society is bedevilled with moral and value problem; where there is no system of ethics and principle of conduct. Where there is no more respect for the instituted authority by all and sundry. The elders and political elites are not by any means helping matters. The values and the tradition that education projected to transmit and preserve seem to have fizzle away.

The well-articulated educational ideologies and other theories that we pride with have been only on paper and continues to be there until only-God-knows when. Because none as far as the writers can remember has been judiciously put to use. Pragmatism as a school of thought have theoretical shortcoming, in the sense that they never believed in any idea or theory that does not proffer solution to perplexing problems.

Furthermore, pragmatism does not believe in predetermined truth. They are not friendly to the absolute conception of truth. As a matter of fact, they frown at it. This assertion implies that pragmatism does not believe that ideas and theories that are not verifiable and cannot bring solution to perplexing issues cannot be of absolute truth. Pragmatism believes in practical, verifiable means towards truth and ideas, so for them to believe in most of the educational ideas and concepts, they must feel it; touch it, smell it and perceive it to not only be true, but workable. Anything that is short of this, for them is not reliable. That informs why William James writes, the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true; is made true by events.*³²

Similarly, in education, acquisition of skill is paramount. But for pragmatism, skills were necessary, but critical thinking which manifests itself through intelligence was of more importance. The above assertion seems to fall in line with the view of Hook, who pointed out that intelligence, is significant because it enables one to break the bonds of habit and make it possible to devise alternatives that are more satisfying and desirable.*³³ The implication of the above is nothing

but that a professor of agriculture should think out of the box (theories and ideas) so as to produce food for themselves and ideally for the nation.

Why should a professor of mechanical engineering hire a roadside mechanic to fix their car and that of civil engineering seek for the service of a quack mason on their street to build their house? These and many other educational ideas have become a great burden to pragmatism. They believe that everything changes including educational theories and ideas; therefore, they should change for good, for God's sake. Therefore, every idea, concepts or theories and ideologies in education should pass through the crucible of experience for it to be workable, at least for once in Nigeria, pragmatism concluded.

The Way Forward

Much as education has occasioned sundry changes in building human capacity and fostering change in the society. There have been noted lapses. These lapses border on the inability of education to test its ideas and theories. So, education should borrow a leaf from pragmatism that practices what it preach, in other words, education should put their ideas and concepts to test.

Skills acquired in course of education should be taken from intellectual level to intelligent level. In other words, engaging in critical thinking and thinking out of the box to bring about development to the society.

Good ideas (if there is anything like that) are wonderful, but those ideas should be put to crucible of experience to see if it can proffer solution to challenging problems. This is because Ideas and concepts are meant to use to unravel tasking issues. So, education should ensure the above so that theories could be brought to reality.

Consequently, this calls for harmony between pragmatism and education. Because in as much as things should be done by theories and ideas, there is need for practical and experiential reality. Some of the weakness of pragmatism notwithstanding, its benefits and advantages should be upheld by education. More so, one advocates that, those aspects of pragmatism that are beneficial to man should be upheld.

Conclusion

The era of "think-tank" is gone and gone for good. So, what we should be talking about now is "do-tank". Reason been that the kind of education we have practiced over time has been replete with beautiful theories and ideas, yet with little

achievement. Such ideation has been on in our education system without much accomplished; rather we have been grappling with survival from the inception of western education. As such, there is urgent need for a clear shift from the status quo. Pragmatism has, if not all but most of what it takes to take education to the “promised land” of doing-education. Pragmatism, the pride in providing man with a “mediating way of thinking” about reality, and the one which mediates between the extremes of a positivistic, “tough-minded” physicalism on the one hand, and “tender-minded” educational theories which according to them lack any empirical grounding on the other. Therefore, pragmatism notwithstanding its shortcomings, it seems to have given education a soft landing, as long as problem solving is concerned.

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