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Dewey’s Pragmatism and Nigeria’s Education Policy: Towards a Consistent and Functional Policy-Document

Patrick O. Akinsanya

Abstract
Attempts were made in this paper to appraise Dewey’s ideas in a manner that renders the extrapolation of the relevance and infusion of the scholar’s ideas to Nigerian education policy. While Dewey’s pragmatism was not considered in this work because it was a perfect philosophy, for no such philosophy really exists, rather Dewey was considered because his philosophy possessed some useful insights which could be fused into Nigeria’s education policy for the purpose of reconstructing and reconstituting the policy-document towards consistence, coherence and functionality. Of course, in this consideration, allowances were given for reconstruction of Dewey’s ideas to fit into the peculiarities and exigencies of Nigeria’s scenario; at least Dewey’s philosophy gives allowances for such processes. The infusion of Deweyan insights thus helps us nip in the bud various inconsistencies, incoherencies and mismatches found in the policy-document which are innumerable as discussed in this paper.

Key words: Dewey’s pragmatism, Education policy, Education system, Functionality, Coherence and Consistency.

Introduction
Education, as it is generally known, is the key to development and progress. Many things which contribute to development, according to Majasan (1998: viii), depend on education, such as health, early childhood development, women empowerment, population control, viable government, good nutrition, among other things. This is why he concludes that those who wish to make waves in the comity of nations or those who wish to command some respect and assert themselves must lay claim to some contributions to human growth and development which can only come through qualitative education. This means that the level of development anywhere is determined by the standard of education operated within that confinement, and it is premised on this understanding that education policy makers in Nigeria stated categorically in the document that “education shall continue to be highly rated in the national development plans because education is the most important instrument of change; and any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution” (FGN in NPE 2004: 3). However, it could have been much easier for education to herald meaningful change with resultant development in Nigeria if the policy set in place was anchored on an enduring philosophical base. Such base would have reduced to the bearest minimum, the retinue of gaps, inconsistencies and incoherencies indiscriminately knitted together as a policy. But as it were, and as reflected in the national education summit held in Abuja, analysts at the summit submitted that “the system lacks consistency among other shortcomings” (Ikuomola 2010:4). Nduka had earlier in his paper “Philosophy: The Weakest Link in the Chain of National Development” hinted that quality of the philosophical component of the Nigerian educational enterprise is too weak as it lacks clarity, coherence and consistency which has predictably generated inconsistencies in thought and practice (Nduka 1981: 7-10).

Uduigwomen and Ojumba agree with Nduka’s opinion in their article – “Philosophy and Nigeria’s National Policy on Education” when they opined that the absence of a well-articulated philosophy of education is the major cause of the present abyss of decay into which the Nigerian education system has been thrown (Uduigwomen & Ozumba 2004: 8). This situation, unfortunately, has generated some encumbrances in the policy formulation and implementation. These encumbrances have been discussed in one of my recent works (Akinsanya 2013), but we shall quickly highlight them here again to make it easier to decipher how and where Dewey’s ideas could fit-in.

The inconsistencies found in the policy-document, among others, are;

• Achieving the goal of democracy through an education system that is devoid of the basic fundamental principles of democratic practice.
• Building a just and egalitarian society through a system of education that favours elitism.
• Uniformity of standards and over-centralizing education policy to the detriment of the usual intercourse between cultural variants and systems of education.
• The full integration of the individual into the community and the preservation of Nigerian cultures through relegation of indigenous languages in the curriculum.
• The inculcation of values and right attitudes for survival of the individual in the Nigerian society with a set of curricula that harbour no single place for moral education.
• Achieving the goal of self-sufficiency through curricula that are narrow, parochial, one-sided {centering majorly on cognition}. 

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Laying a sound education for the Nigerian child: and toying with the background of such proposed education, etc.

Because of page constraints, we shall limit this research to the afore-listed shortcomings. The question which then comes to mind, here, is: How does Dewey's pragmatism take care of these gaps? Put differently, how does Dewey fit into the inconsistencies identified in the policy as stated above?

Dewey and Nigeria's Education Policy

The gaps in the policy highlighted above are adequately taken care of in Dewey's various works. For instance, in Democracy and Education (1916), Dewey championed democracy as the best form of association. This conception takes democracy beyond the confines of politics; it infiltrates into social, moral, economic, religious, and of course, educational. It is the best because it paves way for freedom of expression and action; and brings about cooperation in the face of stiff competition. But all these are unachievable if education is not democratized. An education which instills the spirit of cooperation in lieu of habitual competition; an education that ridicules challenges in diversities of voices, and embraces monotony instead; an education that allows the autocratic administrators rule bureaucratically in our schools; an education that tolerates the autocratic teacher in a cemetery-like classroom with passive, deaf and dumb learners: an education that features teacher-centred and subject-centred curriculum without any involvement of the learners in designing such curriculum; an education that is not readily accessible and affordable to the common man, but is made a special reserve of the privileged-class who use it to perpetuate themselves in power. an education which hinders the spirit of exploration but promotes conformism in the learner—can never and will never be able to produce a democratic society; and this is the rationale behind the submission that:

*Unless the principles of democracy are reflected in the aims and ideals of education, curriculum, methods of teaching; administration and organization in discipline, in the atmosphere of the school and in the outlook of the teacher, democracy cannot grow* (Tameja 2001: 244).

Thus, following the trend of Dewey's thought, education would have to be completely democratized in Nigeria if indeed we are serious at achieving a democratic society "founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice" (FGN in NPE 2004: 1). This will entail the removal of all encumbrances to democratic ideals in our educational system.

On the goal of self-sufficiency through parochial and narrow curricula, Dewey's functionalism falls in place. A Deweyan would appreciate the Nigerian education policy-makers for deeming it fit to have self-sufficiency as one of the major educational goals, but he would criticize them for their inability to develop a curriculum which would help the Nigerian child to be really self-sufficient. The policy as it is presently constituted, focuses mainly on the head (relegating the heart and the hand to the background): it focuses on cognition to the detriment of affectivity and psychomotor: it again focuses on formal (condemning informa and non-formal education to the appendix). The type of curriculum that would emerge from these kind of relegations would automatically be one-sided, and would consequently produce graduates or school leavers who are bookish and whose survival depends largely on a white-collar or blue-collar job. This is a situation that John Dewey detests. For him, the worth of any education system is measured by the degree to which it functions in meeting the actual needs of the individual and the environment in which he lives. Any education that fails to help a child realise all the capacities in him (which involve the head, the heart and especially the hand) may not worth the name in the first instance. Hence, the national policy on education needs to actively involve other domains of education to be a comprehensive document.

Furthermore, Dewey's insistence on giving full, if not fuller concentration, to early childhood education of the citizenry is inspirational. He attributes the efforts dissipated at this level of education to the concentration given to the foundation of a house by engineers: once they lay a weak foundation, the rest of the house is dissipated at this level of education to the concentration given to the foundation of a house by engineers: once they lay a weak foundation, the rest of the house is history. This is why he says that he has never been able to feel much optimism regarding the possibilities of higher education when it is built upon warped and weak foundations. Taking cues from Dewey's position, the Nigerian government shall ensure that it states objectives and workable implementative strategies for achieving the objectives at this early period, just as it is done at other levels. The period of 0-6 years should never be toyed with. It marks the beginning of the child's personality formation. This will equally entail the government entrenching pre-primary sections in all existing public schools, rather than tacitly leaving it in the hands of the private proprietors whose sole aim in education is business and profit maximization.

Another point which is gainful in Dewey's philosophy is his stance on subjecting every idea to the laboratory of experience before confirming it. It was this commitment that propelled Dewey to set up an educational laboratory in Chicago where educational ideas and theories were expectedly observed and
experienced upon before been exposed to the public: the experiment on the relationship between the education and environment which later resulted in a book, *School and Society* (1899), which is one of the many instances of Dewey's commitment. This commitment ensures that people do not just come up with abstract and frivolous ideas which can only be executed in the Plato’s idealistic world. It is this kind of commitment that is needed in our conception of policy formulation and implementation. A conception of first formulating policies before talking about how to implement it, as noted by Obanya, is a conceptual fallacy (Obanya 2007:218). A policy that is meant to work must have its implementative strategies conceptualized at the very beginning. This means that policy formulation should fuse into implementation, and vice-versa. With this option, one is able to decipher immediately, an idea which is workable and viable, as different from the idea which is utopic.

There is yet another important lesson which could be sieved from Dewey’s philosophy of education into Nigeria’s education policy – it is the synergy between culture and education. Dewey opines that culture is the total way of life of a people, and it is what differentiates a tribe from another. He maintains that the culture of a people is propagated and transmitted through education, and since education cannot exist in the first instance without a culture, its aims and methods must be dependent on the culture of the people in which it takes place. The implication of this is that since culture varies, its mode of propagation ought to vary. Put differently, if education is highly dependent on the way of life of a people, then wherever and whenever there are different ways of life, there will be different education systems and of course, different education policies. This explains the reason for the difference in education systems operated in Liberia and Togo, Zimbabwe and Zaire; Algeria and Egypt; Australia and Japan; et cetera.

It equally explains the disparities in education systems in nations that are heterogeneous: United States of America, Spain, Brazil, New Zealand, Mexico, India, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Ethiopia, Australia, Colombia and China. Nigeria should have been another good example but for the gross disrespect for the gross disrespect for the intercourse between culture and education. In the pretense of one nation, the country adopts a uniform education system meant to preserve and transform all the different cultures. This is why Nkom (1997:242) considers Nigerian education as a wonderful example of a system with no systematic planning for cultural components; and this is the reason why our varied cultural elements (especially indigenous languages or mother tongues) continue to suffer relegation and almost going into extinction. This is, however, not a call for disintegration of the country, but a decentralization of education in Nigeria. This is what a Deweyan would champion, knowing fully that with decentralization, the immediate cultural elements of each tribe or region will be adequately taken care of by the consequential education policies that will be set-in-place.

**Reconstructing Nigeria’s Education Policy**

At this juncture, one is sufficiently compelled to agree with Uduigwoum and Ozumba (2004:7) that “the injection of a sound philosophy of education for new directions and as a guiding principle will undoubtedly add vitality and dynamism to the system”. The infusion of Deweyan insights into the existing Nigerian education policy could strengthen it to become an enduring and reliable footing for the system on education in Nigeria. This infusion is thus capable of exterminating the gaps in the policy which will consequently generate consistence and functionality in the system. The policy thus stands reconstructed if the following recalibrations, gained from Dewey’s philosophy are done:

**On The Goal Of Democracy And Democratised Education In Nigeria**

It was clearly shown on page one of the National Policy on Education that Nigeria wishes to build a democratic and egalitarian society; and that she wishes to achieve this through education as an instrument. Such education is expected to promote self realization and better human relationship: individual and national efficiency: effective citizenship: national consciousness and unity: social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress. But as we have argued earlier, education can only achieve all these if it is democratized. A democratized education will expose the child to basic democratic principles such as justice: fair-play: freedom of expression, of worship, of association. Amaele understands this argument when he affirms that:

Democratic cannot be attained, well enough, in the wider society if it is not practiced in the nation’s education. Educational institutions are the human factories where all the societal theories [raw materials] are manufactured and tested (Amaele 2005:85).

Tanweja (2001:244) equally agrees with Amaele as he insists that “if democracy will catch roots anywhere, it is in the school which is a very rich and fertile field for its growth and development”. So, Nigerian education system must be democratized to achieve a democratic society. To kick start this process, education will first and foremost, be made available, accessible and highly affordable, if not free, to all and sundry. This condition is highly pertinent because as noted by Olarewaju (2009:38), there is no way we can have a full democratic society in a nation where we have many illiterates. The people who cannot make a rational decision that affect their own lives cannot be called upon to make decisions that affect the life of society. They cannot make such decisions because
they lack the rational information on which they could base their decisions upon. And then, the curriculum at all levels must feature learning experiences that will predispose the principles of democracy in the educand. Akinpelu (2005:185) suggests the inclusion of civic education, political education, moral education and so on, as ways of inculcating democratic attitudes in the learners; or alternatively, he recommends the participation of all constituencies of education (parents, teachers, students and the community) in the organization and administration of education. While we agree with Akinpelu on the inclusion of the afore-mentioned courses and participation in school management, we contend that the subjects-contents in the entire curriculum should be arranged in such a way that the child is exposed to the meaning of unity in diversity and the principles of harmonious living in the society. Dewey recommends project method because it fosters the spirit of cooperation or togetherness in the child; the Nigerian teacher should constantly adopt this method and/or any other method which fosters cooperation in lieu of competition.

Nigerian education shall be seen to be democratized when the following happens:

- When education is seen and operated as a right and not a privilege, and consequently made available, accessible and highly affordable, if not free.
- When curriculum features subjects which are capable of fostering the spirit of democracy in the child.
- When learners are encouraged to practice democracy in their various students’ associations; and when they are given opportunities to go on field trips visiting places where democratic institutions are solidly entrenched.
- When all stakeholders in education have “a say” and “a way” in the planning and execution of education in Nigeria.
- When educational administrators especially at the primary and secondary levels are encouraged to drop the habits of being autocratic or despotic, and instead, embrace the spirit of democracy in educational affairs.
- When educational posts (e.g. vice-chancellor, principal, head teachers, zonal education officers, etc.) are not imposed by external bodies, but instead, decided on the basis of merits and collective choice of the people affected.

All these factors, and others not mentioned here, must be taken into serious consideration if we truly need a democratic society. In a similar vein, Nigerian society is expected to be egalitarian through education: but with what type of education? Rather than have an education which fosters equal rights and fairness, what we have in place is elitism at its apogee. An instance is the institution of unity schools, which harbour some selected children from all over the states in the country, under the guise of uniting the nation. These schools, rather than unite, further expand the gap between the privileged and non-privileged, who in turn ensures the perpetuation of their children in the process that produced them. This situation prompted Olarewaju (2009:41) to ask the following questions: If we aim to build an egalitarian society, why are we selecting few children among all the children in the society for such prestigious education? Why are we working against what we aim to build? What are the purposes of these elitist schools? Perhaps, Fafunwa is right in saying:

*The problem that is created by unity schools will continue until all the 5,000 secondary schools in Nigeria become unity schools.... Either you convert all the Nigerian schools to unity schools or you ban them (Fafunwa in Akinkugbe 1994:105).*

If Nigeria is to be an egalitarian society, then, it “must part company with the present elitist system of education which cannot, because it was never intended to, mobilize the great mass of the citizens and gear them for rapid development” (Ndula 2006); in other words, education must not allow special treatments for special children; education must be egalitarian.

**On Nigerian Education And Cultural Variations**

Since it has been argued that education and culture are inseparable, and that wherever there is cultural variabilism, there must be corresponding difference in education systems, we recommend that urgent steps be taken towards respecting the various cultural components in the policy.

If indeed justice is to be done to the statement made on page four of the policy, that efforts shall be made to relate education to each community needs, then each culture or region would be allowed to develop its own strategy to respond to its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. Obanya (2007:209) submits that a responsive national policy on education should accord both voice and visibility to the needs at sub-national levels. In the Nigerian context, a responsive national education policy would mean ‘36-37 policies equal one policy’ in Obanya’s opinion; and in practical and concrete terms, this submission will translate to each state of the Nigerian federation having a state-specific policy. The overall national policy can then take the form of a general policy framework, while the state policies will contain the bulk of the specifics. This recommendation thus calls for a decentralization. We argue that a decentralization of the policy is inevitable. Akinpelu (2005:113) agrees that there is ‘a grave need for extensive decentralization in the nation’s educational system so as to allow for local adaptations and experimentations’. His agreement...
is sequel to his research on the problems and future prospects of the Nigerian education system. Among other critical shortcomings and deficiencies identified as militating factors against efforts at providing qualitative education for all, he observed that over-centralization and over bureaucratisation in the management and control of the education system with consequent inevitable inefficiency, frustration and shifting of initiative constitutes a great cog in the wheel of educational progress. The decentralization of education, proposed here, will ensure that each cultural variation in Nigeria is well taken care of. Education will no longer be alien to those who receive it.

Along with decentralization, is the idea of catering for indigenous languages in the country, after all, language is an essential aspect of culture. The relegation given to indigenous languages in the present policy must be revised. Olamosu (2000:11) noted that native languages are used in America, England, Germany, France, Italy, China, Japan, North and South Korea, et cetera, to ensure that their children explore their natural endowment and environment, and thus, acquire at very early stages, self-confidence, personal initiatives, resourcefulness, creative reasoning, skills for adaptability necessary for further growth in later stages of development. Why is Nigeria different? After all, the experiments conducted by Fajimolu and other experts (1989) have revealed the power of mother tongue on intellectual growth. Hence, Nigerian languages should no longer be taken as just a subject, which will be dropped later in the educational ladder. Meanwhile, preference is given to English and French, and they are used all through the process of education.

On Policy Formulation And Implementation

To checkmate the situation where policy declarations are grossly contradicting policy implementation or programme recommendations, we propose a paradigm shift from our perception of policy formulation cum implementation. A viable policy, as it is operated elsewhere, is a cyclic process with no sharp lines of demarcation between formulation and implementation. What Nigeria indeed needs, is a policy development process with in-built implementation. This will help sustain the core values of pragmatism.

On Strengthening The Foundation Of The Child

Since the government appreciates the importance of good foundation to other levels of education, the policy should give deserving concentration to early childhood education. This level of education, like other levels, must equally have spelt-out objectives with concrete modalities for achievement. The government shall ensure that it regulates and controls the operation of this level of education. It shall ensure that this sector is not primarily controlled by private owners or proprietors, whose desire is the business part of the service, and thus consequently, perpetrate the margin between the rich and the less privileged (enthroning elitism which is a negation of Nigeria’s cherished ideology – egalitarianism). All these translate to mean that the present system of 9-3-4 may need an upturn to say a 6-9-3-4 system where the first six years is meant to take care of the child from when he comes out of the mother’s womb to the period he/she will be matured enough for primary and junior secondary education which is the next nine years, and then three years in senior secondary and four in the tertiary. The government cannot afford to be less serious with early childhood education if she really wants to lay a solid foundation for the Nigerian child.

On Functionalism And Self-Sufficiency In Policy-Statement

Experts at a national summit on Nigerian education tagged “Reclamation, Restoration and Sustenance of Quality and Ethics in Education in Nigeria” lamented that the present education policy was introduced nationwide as a response to the agitation for a more functional and qualitative education system: but rather than the policy meeting the agitation of the people, it has worsened their situation. Perhaps, this explains the reason for the President’s request that those were behind the policy should be made to apologise to Nigerians (Onwona, 2010:4). Nigeria, indeed, needs a functional education for promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria. Akinpelu (2005:104-105) had hinted that “the type of education that can revolutionize our society must be geared to the effecting of rapid change in all relevant aspects of the life of the society; it must be functional and scientifically oriented”.

For Nigeria to, however, have a functional education, two related factors must be ensured. First, school programmes must be relevant and comprehensive. This entails the proper integration of raw vocational education into the school system at all levels. At the end of a child’s education, he should be given a certificate which indicates that he is found worthy in intellectual capacities and more importantly in vocational skills. Vocational acquisition should begin to gain more relevance in our policy planning than before. It is the only way that will make Nigeria cease from being a consumer-country to a productive-one. Thus, subjects like home economics, agricultural science, creative arts and local crafts, introductory technology, and other vocational subjects should no longer occupy the status of electives, whereas, French language is made compulsory at some levels. It should become mandatory that a child must acquire one vocational skill or the other before such child could graduate from one educational step to the other. This is an experiment that had been embarked upon in Tai Solarin College/University of Education, Ogun State, Nigeria, since 2005. Since this period, the managements
of the institutions, following the footsteps of Tai Solarin, made it mandatory for every student who passes through the gates of the College/University, for one programme or the other, to pick a vocation and run it side-by-side the classroom activities. Such vocations are made compulsory to the extent that if a student does not have a pass mark in at least a vocation, no matter how ingenious the student is in the class, he/she will not graduate from the college/university. This experiment produces a situation where all who graduate from the college/university, have one vacation or the other, and as such, will not need to wait for a ‘white-collar’ or ‘blue-collar’ job before living meaningfully and graciously in the society. This is the kind of functional education that is being proposed for the entire country. Nigerian education should be able to produce outputs that are comprehensive in skills. The curriculum for all levels must be restructured.

Our education has become useless and alienated from Nigerian societies, because it has chosen to place a section of education above other important sections. It has chosen to invest only on intellectual skills to the detriment of vocational and affective skills; and according to Sikkman and Nyekawa, quoted, in Olarenwaju (2009:73), “if we are going to provide educational experience that results in holistic perception of the global village in which we live, we need to develop curricula that combine the cognitive with the affective”. In a similar vein, Ejiofor, cited in Uduigwomen & Ozumba (2004:8), propounds a 3H-strategy which could help Nigeria to evolve practical curricula needed to salvage educational system from a cocoon of inefficiency and redundacy. The head, according to him, must be taught through massive qualitative and functional education — education imbued with a high dose of philosophy; the heart must be sensitized to high moral principles and ethical practices; and the hand must be equipped with requisite tools and suitably rationalized material incentives for greater performance. A combination of these factors should produce the functional and qualitative education that Nigeria needs.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the policy on education in Nigeria is reconstructed and the system becomes functional if the inconsistencies observed in the policy-document are taken care of, and that is, - if Nigerian education is democratized for the achievement of her social ideology; if the system of education reflects egalitarianism rather than elitism; if education is decentralized to give way for cultural variations in the country; if policy formulation and implementation has an in-built mechanism fused in from inception; if the policy is structured to concretely cater for early childhood education so as to provide sound education for the Nigerian child; and if the curricula is diversified to make provisions for all domains of education so as to make the Nigerian child self-sufficient; among other factors.

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