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Vocational Education and Social Reconstruction in Nigeria: A Deweyan Intervention

Akinsanya, Patrick Olujenyo and Oyefuga, David Adewale

Abstract

This paper beams attention on how the pragmatic educational contributions of John Dewey could be used as an intervention in Nigerian pattern of education. The present Nigerian education churns out products that are heavily dependent on white-collar and blue-collar jobs; products that cannot use the education received to cull-out their innate propensities towards vocations and entrepreneurship. This is because the curricula they go through are not deeply vocational-friendly. The injection of Deweyan sense of schooling into Nigerian education is thus capable of producing a comprehensive/holistic education which will bequeath to the Nigerian child, the needed intellectual acumen and vocational dexterity, and consequently, bring about a social transformation or reconstruction of Nigeria.

Dewey's Pragmatic Background

John Dewey, an American philosopher, born in Burlington, was one of the progenitors of pragmatism. Albeit the movement was pioneered by C.S Peirce and orchestrated by W. James, it gained wider popularity in the works of Dewey. Pragmatism, as a school of thought, preaches workability, utility and usefulness. In the words of Taneja, pragmatism "teaches that what is useful – what works in a practical situation – is true; what does not work is false" (Taneja 2001). In another place, he says; "pragmatic philosophy is a practical philosophy, having no fixed or absolute standards" (Taneja 2001). Pragmatists are people driven by the desire to examine the practical or utilitarian effect/consequences of ideas. They stress the practical significance of thought and the functioning power of ideas. This has given them such labels as experimentalists, instrumentalists or functionalists. These labels receive consent in the writings of the pragmatists themselves. Dewey, for instance, terms his rendition of pragmatic philosophy

instrumentalism, to emphasize the further horizon of the experiments of belief, and the social setting or community from which they arise. In this spirit, Dewey proposed that ideas had to be tested to prove their functionality. For instance, Dewey had an idea of how to bring the school into touch with real life, as a deviation from the traditional conception of the school system which failed to keep pace with the changes that had occurred on account of industrial revolution and democratic style of life. Dewey, would not however, sell out this idea without subjecting it to test, to find out its workability or functionality. As such, Dewey had to set up an 'educational laboratory' in the University of Chicago in 1896.

With the assistance of his wife and some other colleagues, pupils between the ages of four and fourteen were admitted into the school. Thereafter, discoveries were made. The team was able to discover "ways of breaking down the barriers between school and community life, and also to find ways of including a richer, more varied subject matter in pupil's studies without adding to the burden of rote learning and symbol-interpretation" (Curtis & Boulwood 1965). The results of this experiment enabled Dewey to clarify and modify his educational ideas.

Evidently, pragmatism enables education to relate with utility as the test of educational values or pursuits, and that the worth of an educational experience is measured by the degree to which it functions in meeting the actual life needs of the individual and of the society at large. This means that an education which confers non-functionality to an individual and the society where one lives, is not worth the name in the first instance. For the pragmatist, education is meant to be instrumental; a child is educated to achieve something. 'Education for its sake' does not exist in the world of Dewey and other pragmatists. Education, for them, has a functional value, helping the learner to fulfill some social, physiological, psychological and other needs. Taneja understands this point clearly when he submits that pragmatic education is an "educational philosophy which makes learning a purposeful process; giving the children the sense of reality in the school, making schools into workshops, laboratory and inspiring educational experimental places" (Taneja 2001).

This is what education means for Dewey. It is a process through which man becomes the architect of his own fortune via the interactions with experienced ones {teachers} who are able to cull out inherent capacities and capabilities from the child, and consequently, make him rely on his abilities rather than relying on 'white collar' or 'blue collar' jobs for survival.

Deweyan Sense Of Education

Dewey makes it clear that the relationship existing between education and social life is akin to the relationship between nutrition/reproduction and

physiological life. Without education, social life suffers possibility. Education secures the conditions that make for the most complete and effective adaptation of individuals to their environment. Education, however, has two forms. The first is informal education. This is the education which one gets from living with others; it is incidental and natural. It is a type of education which a learner receives in an informal setting, mostly in indirect mode. Such settings are homes {parents, siblings, cousins, nephews, nieces and other relations}, peer-groups, clubs, religious houses, *et cetera*. Through this form of education, the child learns how to greet and respect elders; how to relate with people; how to walk and sleep; etiquettes guiding eating; maintaining decorum in the public; manners of dressing; ways of socializing; societal norms, values and goals, and more importantly, learning vocational trades available in the community {e.g. craftsmanship, farming, carpentry, sewing, fishing and so on}. Chinoy, cited in Braheem's *Principles and Practice of Education*, gave an illustration of a typical prototype of an informal system of education, thus;

A farmer's son, working at his father's side, learns to cultivate the land and understands within the limits of available knowledge the needs of the soil, the vagaries of the weather, the behaviour of animals. Where specialized crafts are practiced {e.g. iron working, carpentry, boat-making, gold-smithing}, they are usually passed on from father to son. If these skills are not inherited, they are learnt through some form of apprenticeship in which the craftsman instructs the young man, and perhaps provides him with food, shelter and clothing in return for several years of service (Braheem 2006).

This form of education had existed since antiquity. Life has been continually renewed through it. But with the dawn of civilization and constant sophistication of life, informal education could no longer cope with the task of renewal and continuity of life. This is mainly because...

the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of adult widens. Learning by direct sharing in the pursuit of grown ups becomes increasingly difficult except in the case of the less advanced occupations. Much of what adults do is so remote in space and meaning that playful imitation is less and less adequate to reproduce its spirit. Ability to share effectively in adult activities thus depends upon a prior training given this end in view (Dewey 1916)

As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need for another form of education which could cope with the complexities increases. Thus, there emerged the formal system of education. It is a deliberate, intentional or conscious mode of educating the young. It is a type of education a child receives in a school setting. Basically, formal education is schooling. It is a process whereby a child's behaviour is gradually modified through an experienced and trained person, under the guidance of a curriculum. Without formal education, according to Dewey, it is not possible to transmit all the resources and achievements of a complex society. It opens a way to a kind of experience which would not be accessible to the young if they were left to pick up their training in informal association with others, since books and the symbols of knowledge are mastered.

The emergence of formal education, albeit necessary and commendable, has unfortunately been allowed to create an unnecessary bifurcation between what is learnt informally and what is learnt formally. There appears an alarming and dangerous gap between deliberate learning and incidental learning. While the former becomes remote, dead, abstract and bookish, the latter suffers parochiality and frivolity in handling life experiences. Where the acquisition of information and of technical intellectual skill do not influence the formation of a social disposition, ordinary vital experience fails to gain in meaning, formal education {schooling} creates "sharps" learners, that is, egoistic specialists.

Put differently, what we have these days is a situation where those who go to school are lacking in basic vocations needed for a meaningful existence. The graduates have been modified to consider vocational skills as inferior or lower form of knowledge meant for the commoners such as artisans, carpenters, tailors, etc. They are thus known by their certificates which perpetually condemn them to job-seeking and not job-creation. The products of informal education, on the other hand, possess some vocational skills, but are lacking in the intellectual and cognitive skills needed to complement the former for the best possible result. This explains the gap and the danger inherent in it. It is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. To avoid a gap between what men consciously know because they are aware of having learned it by a specific job of learning, and what they unconsciously know because they have absorbed it in the formation of their characters by intercourse with others, is a great task emerging with the constant development of schooling, and it is a task that demands deep attention. This is the reason why Dewey submits that "one of the weightiest problems with which philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional modes of education" (Dewey 1899).

Deweyan Education and the Present Nigerian Schooling

The present Nigerian educational system is a legacy bequeathed by the colonial masters and early missionaries. The parochialism and triviality of this legacy were bemoaned in various educational ordinances, reports, commissions and conferences. For instance, at the 1969 Curriculum Conference (Adaralegbe 1972), a conference which informed the present policy on education, a general dissatisfaction with the education handed over to Nigerians reached a crescendo. People lamented a system of education whose products were merely bookish but could not do anything with their hands. Complaints were raised on how Nigerian school graduates roamed about the street, with loads of certificates, searching for one ready-made job or the other. This was sequel to an over-concentration on the cognitive aspect of education in Nigerian schools, with a jettisoning of the other domains namely psychomotor and affective. Thus, the graduate became academically sound, but vocationally and morally challenged.

It is a thing of concern, however, to mention that despite the frantic efforts made by the participants at the Curriculum Conference to upturn the above-described situation, Nigerian education today is even worse than the 70s. Most school leavers are scornors of vocations. They take skills such as carpentry, tailoring, smithery as relegatory and derogatory. They graduate with good grades from schools but can hardly do anything with their hands. This is the reason for their joblessness and heavy dependence on jobs from the government and private proprietors.

A Deweyan school, on the other hand, presents a holistic education involving the cognitive, the affective and of course the psychomotor. It is an education which gives room for the training of the child on the 3Hs – *the head, the heart and the hand*. Dewey envisions a school which provides the child with intellectual and moral abilities, while he realises his dexterity on one vocational capacity or the other. In his opinion, a contemporary school should make provisions for the acquisition of both intellectual and vocational skills. Students should be made to pick courses that enhance innate propensities and capacities which dangle around vocations and academics. In this wise, the curriculum predisposed to such students must feature subjects such as carpentry, home economics, arts and crafts, tailoring, moral education, language acquisition, *inter alia*.

In Dewey's curriculum, the major concentration is to foster a unity between the school and the society. He thought of some organized experiences which could break down the barriers between the immediate environment and education. For him, it is useless, fruitless, damaging and time-wasting, taking learners through experiences which do not have direct relationship with the roles and tasks expected to be performed in their later lives. The school and the curriculum, for Dewey, should be structured to reflect a prototype of the larger society. In this vein, and in line with other pragmatists, Dewey proposed

some principles that guide the process of curriculum planning and development. They are;

Principle of utility: The pragmatists consider that only those subjects and activities which are beneficial to the child's present needs and future expectations of adult life should be included in the curriculum. Sharma terms this principle – the forward looking principle (Sharma 2008). It is forward-looking because it insists on making the child get adjusted to the peculiar conditions of living in his environment, and creates a foundation of knowledge which enables the child to manipulate those conditions which deserve changes, especially as the future is concerned. As such, the curriculum must be structured in a pattern that enables the school to educate for progressive citizenship. Such subjects as languages {especially language of the immediate environment}, physical training and well-being, geography, history, sciences, agriculture and home sciences should be included in the curriculum.

The principle of interest: This principle states that only those activities and experiences which attract the natural interest of the child should be included in the curriculum. These interests, for Dewey, are of four dimensions, namely; (a) Interest in conversation; (b) interest in investigation; (c) interest in construction; and (d) interest in creative expression. While Sharma prefers to tag this principle – the creative principle (Sharma 2008), he agrees with Dewey that the curriculum must include those activities which will enable the child exercise his creative and constructive powers; cater for his active interests; develop himself into maturity; and give the child opportunities to sublimate the instinctive powers with which he has been endowed. The curriculum basically, must be child-centered.

The principle of experience: This principle encapsulates experience, **vocations** and child's activity. It insists that the three variables are interwoven. While it condemns the process of cramming, memorization or learning by rote, it emphasizes the importance of practical work and experience. Dewey, thus, insists that the curriculum should feature varieties of learning experiences {psychological, social and the logical} which promote original thinking and cultivate the freedom to develop social and purposeful attitudes. In this vein, Dewey laid emphasis on the teaching of vocational subjects.

The principle of integration: Principle of integration considers the interwovenness of subjects and activities. Dewey frowns at the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge into various units with no overlapping. He criticizes the traditionalists who opined that the sociologists, for instance, should be interested only in activities that concern sociology, with little or no

interest in what the psychologist does. This, for Dewey, is an unnecessary, rigid compartmentalization. Knowledge is one unit which cannot be divided into watertight compartments or separate subjects that have no interconnections or interrelations. Such isolation engenders narrowness and shallowness, and thereby, "violates the child's nature and renders difficult the best ethical results" (Taneja 2001). The teaching of the subjects in the curriculum should thus be "closely interlinked and correlated so as to form right concepts and proper understanding in children" (Rusk 1985).

The principle of flexibility and dynamism: The curriculum, in Dewey's view, must be flexible and dynamic. In being rigid and pre-determined, the curriculum will be incapable of accommodating the constant changes taking place in the society. It will also be incapable of accommodating the child's changing interests, capacities and productivities. Such education does not worth the name *ab initio*.

A Rebranded Education and Reconstructed Nigerian Society

Nigeria, indeed, needs a rebranded education for promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria. Akinpelu 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" (Akinpelu 2005). For Nigeria to have this kind of 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 producing-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 University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria, since 2005. Since this period, the management of the institution, following the footsteps of Tai Solarin, made it mandatory for every student who passes through the gates of the 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 a student is in the class, he/she will not graduate from the university. This experiment produces a situation where all who graduate from the university, have one vocation 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 rebranded functional education that is being proposed for the entire country. Nigerian education should be able to produce outputs that are comprehensive in skills. Such outputs will be able to turn around the fortunes the country and thus bring about the much desired social reconstruction.

Conclusion

It is a common knowledge that the value of Nigerian education and the curricula used in all Nigerian institutions have become irrelevant to the overall needs of the country. Our education is gradually becoming totally 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 Sikkeman and Niyekawa, quoted, in Olarenwaju, "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" (Olarewaju 2009). In a similar vein, Ejiofor, cited in Uduigwomen&Ozumba (2004), propounds a 3H-strategy which could help Nigeria to evolve practical curricula needed to salvage educational system from a cocoon of inefficiency and redundancy. The head, according to him, must be taught through massive qualitative and functional education – an 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 will definitely produce the rebranded, functional and qualitative education needed to reconstruct Nigeria as a social entity.

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