



Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

Ogbujah Columbus

*Rivers State University of Science & Technology, Port Harcourt
nogbujah@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

Education entails leading man out from 'darkness to light', from 'nature to nurture' and from 'animality to humanity'. Dewey's educational ideas have structured the educational foundation of civilized societies, and are currently molding that of the civilizing ones, including Nigeria. A meticulous look at the nation's National Policy on Education reveals the depth and magnitude of inspiration derived from these ideas. A practical experience with education administrators discloses an atmosphere of a longing for the removal of all barriers towards implementing Dewey's projections. However, his 'relativization' of values has left the Nigerian education industry worst off in terms of discipline and moral rectitude.

INTRODUCTION

It was the great philosopher – Aristotle who emphatically noted that man is man by virtue of his rationality.¹ Reason, or properly speaking, the kind of reason that permits introspection is what distinguishes a human being from other lower animals, since some mammals do possess capacities complex enough to be called rational. Through reason, man is able to fashion out language for communications. Thus, the practical interdependence of man which gives credence to the age-long dictum that 'no man is an island', is made possible by language. Through language, man sells his ideas and feelings to others. He brings them, so to speak, to experience his situation, his world; he communicates knowledge to them.

Education entails communication of knowledge; a leading out of man's humanity so as to render ineffectual the forces of his animality. While some experts in the industry following the views of Plato maintain that education is

Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

a process of unfolding from within, a remembrance of that which was already there by nature; others like John Dewey favour the notion that education springs from interaction of present organic tendencies with the present environment.² Whatever may be the arguments substantiating the claims of these schools of thoughts, it is of note that Dewey's ideas popularized through his books, University lectureship, and a laboratory school opened in 1896 at the University of Chicago, have tremendously influenced the world education industry. Paying tribute to him, Okafor and Quist noted: "we cannot discuss education without Dewey nor Dewey without education".³ Such is the perception of Dewey's influence on education, and such is the reason behind this current exercise to identify the impact of his ideas on the prevalent educational practices in Nigeria.

Dewey's Life and Works

Born in October 20th 1859 in Burlington, Vermont, USA, John Dewey was an American philosopher and educator. He was among the philosophers to be influenced by psychology and the theory of evolution put forward by Charles Darwin. Dewey was one of the leaders of pragmatism who among other things believed that humans use intelligence to cope with a conflict or challenge and that experimentation is vital to life. His philosophy is equally known as 'instrumentalism'.

Dewey taught at several Universities notably at Chicago (1894-1904), and at Columbia University, New York where he worked from 1904 to 1930. He wrote many books on philosophy and education including *Democracy and Education* (1916); *Experience and Nature* (1925); *Experience and Education* (1938), etc. Overall, the quantity of his literary work is staggering. The topics range from logic to theory of knowledge, psychology, education, social philosophy, fine arts and religion – works that established Dewey as one of America's foremost and most productive philosophers.

John was greatly honoured during his life time. Many foreign nations invited him for lectures at various occasions, and he received honorary degrees from at least thirteen Colleges and Universities around the world. He enjoyed a remarkably good health until his eighties. On June 1, 1952, he died of pneumonia at the age of ninety-three.

His Educational Ideas

In delineating the meaning of things and events, the complexity of reality sometimes makes it imperative to first of all bring out the contrasts. This is true not only for concrete realities (real beings) but also for the concepts (ideal beings) with which we understand the world. Thus, our approach shall first of all assemble all the opposing theories of education which Dewey rejected and then state his positions on education, which are scattered in several of his works.

Ogburn Columbus

Dewey began by rejecting the 'Traditionalists', the 'Perennialists' and the 'Essentialists' notions of education, which saw education as a preparation for the future. For him education is not just a "getting ready" of the child for the responsibilities and privileges of adult life. This is more so not just because reality is in constant flux and by the time the child grows up, what he learnt would have become obsolete, but because learning will be difficult since the child will not be able to withstand adult programme.⁴

Again, Dewey rejected the realists' position whom he accused of seeing education as just a mere preparation for 'life after death'. This is somewhat ridiculous since life is for the living and not the dead. The 'dead' can, if need be, establish their own process of learning which is not for the living to determine. Education, for him, is exclusively earth-bound, and limited to the experiential, experimental world. It does not arise as an 'unfolding from within' or simply from a faculty of the mind. It involves the whole person and must lead to a regeneration of the world. Hence every venture, every programme and indeed every institution that stifles initiatives, inventiveness and adaptability can never properly bear the name education.

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 of formation of fundamental attitudes of imagination, desires and thinking – is strictly correlative with culture in its inclusive sense".⁵ As thus correlative with culture, it proceeds by the individual's participation in the culture of his race. One, as such, cannot be educated in isolation a culture. He will behave like a beast. Education therefore, is the process of living in the society and not just an acquaintance with the past or a preparation for future living. It should derive its materials from present experience and thus enable the learner cope with the problems of the present and future.⁶

By drawing from past experiences, man refashions his present and future experiences and develops more intelligence in the art of living in a problematic society. For Dewey, education involves growth, individual development and problem solving. Life is a continuous process of problem solving. To the extent an individual is able to bring his previous experience to bear on the solutions of the here-and-now problems, to that extent can he be said to have been educated.

The Process/Goals of Education

As a formal institution, the constituents of education are multiple namely, the school, the child as learner, the curriculum, the methodology, discipline and values. For Dewey, educational aims or goals and the process of education are identical. You cannot isolate one from the other without losing your bearing. The objective of learning, for example, cannot be remote to the structure of the curriculum of studies, methodology, discipline or even the school itself through which it is imparted. In its true sense, education entails a 'continuing reconstruction of experiences'. It trains man's intelligence as

Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

an instrument for problem solving, and relies heavily on experimental information. The ethical principle of consequentialism which lends credence to the doctrine that the 'end justifies the means' could not have been given much consideration by Dewey since education prepares the individual to live in society through living in society.⁷ The process is always central for the attainment of its designed goals. To delineate the goals of education in Dewey therefore, it will be paramount to examine the specific structures that constitute the process of education.

The School

The school, for Dewey, is both the germinal and cellular structure of society. By it, the society not only reproduces itself as a socio-cultural entity, but also grows and is nurtured by it. A society is as good as its school structure, and a functional school must take its bearing from societal structures. Dewey explained it in this way:

The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends.⁸

This being the case, the organization of the school should take its bearing from the homes and playgrounds so as not to present to the child (learner) unreal life situations which may be alien to him. Schools must adapt relevant societal cues in order to elicit meaningful encoding, storage and retrieval of information among learners.

The Child

The child is the centre of all educational activity. He is a distinct human being in his own rights; a growing entity that must be respectfully approached in deference of his age. Dewey noted that traditional education failed to appreciate this point by viewing the child as a miniature adult who must be forced to receive information 'for life' even when he is not physically, psychologically and/or intellectually prepared for it. In so doing, traditional education located in the teacher, or textbook or curriculum the centre of educational activity, and the result is poor learning outcomes. Dewey noted:

Learning here means acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders. Moreover that which is taught is taught as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future.⁹

However, if, as he continued, 'the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve', attention would be paid to his basic

Ogbujah Columbus

impulses of 'communication', 'inquiry', 'construction' and 'artistic expression', and the level of his maturation would be fully harnessed for optimal output.

The Teacher

The teacher, in Dewey's understanding, is to be a guide and a director to the child. His work is not to impart ready-made knowledge to the child, but to construct series of educative experiences and prudently direct the child as he grows by passing through those experiences. To be able to do this, the teacher must:

- Be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs and past experiences of those under instruction; and
- Allow the suggestions made to develop into a plan and project by means of future suggestions contributed and organized into a whole by the members of the group.¹⁰

The Curriculum

The curriculum, for Dewey, should be child-centred. School activities must take into account the child's interest and ability so as to be relevant and meaningful to him. Instead of the regimented instruction and listening-only system characteristic of 'reception learning', allowance should be made for enough activity and dialogue between the teacher and the learner.

Dewey criticized the old practice which allowed some subjects to be made available only to a small elite group in society perhaps, as a result of inheritance or unusual intelligence or other talents. For him, since some of the knowledge and skills developed in these 'special subjects' have greatly contributed to the quality of human life, all children should have the opportunity to acquire these knowledge and skills. In addition, children should be made aware of their cultural heritage, which will serve not only as a component of knowledge, but also for its effect on their attitudes and ways of thinking. The idea of developing 'many-sided interest' by studies in all human disciplines was encouraged.

Methodology

The methodology Dewey proposed is in line with the foregone explications: child activity and experimentation rather than the teacher doing everything for the child who only sits down and listens to sermons in the name of lectures. Children are to find out things for themselves rather than be told things. This may have been the rudimentary basis for what was later called 'Discovery learning' credited to Jerome Bruner who maintained that "practice in discovering for oneself teaches one to acquire information in a way that makes that information more readily viable in problem solving".¹¹ The mantra of this method is 'learn by doing', and its scientific nature has helped to develop in the learners initiative, reflective thinking and the art of problem solving.

Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

Discipline

Dewey believed there should be no externally imposed discipline or authoritarianism on the child. Discipline should be internal or self-directed rather than other-directed. A child should be allowed to develop along the lines of his basic interests. His interests in the projects at hand, as Dewey would say, will so preoccupy him that his problems of discipline would be eliminated. The kind of external imposition which was common in traditional schools limited rather than promoted the intellectual and moral development of the young.¹² Control and management can only come in within the co-operative context of shared activity as the child works with instruments and other people. This however, does not intend to encourage lawlessness.

Values

Dewey does not admit of any static value because of individual differences and constant change of situations. Every subject matter is as important as the other. Education is a value-laden pursuit, but all values are relative. There are no absolute norms. A subject matter is valuable only to the extent it is educative and helps in the art of problem solving by use of the scientific methods. Value thus, for Dewey, is what I experience as good for me and society.

The Current Educational Practices in Nigeria

Any avid reader could glean the current educational practices in Nigeria from the existing National Policy on Education, and its implementation. Having adopted education as a perfect instrument for affecting national development, the Federal Government of Nigeria went forth to spell out the basic philosophy and objectives that underlie its recent massive investment in education. These were couched under a five-point agenda encapsulated in the second National Development Plan as entailing the building of:

- A free and democratic society,
- A just and egalitarian society,
- A great and dynamic economy,
- A united, strong and self-reliant nation, and
- A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.¹³

Hence, the philosophy behind the nation's education system is consequently focused on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen, and the granting of equal educational opportunities to all citizens at all levels both within and outside of formal school system. To achieve this, the quality of instructions at all levels must be oriented towards inculcating, among other things, faith in man's ability to make rational decisions. While the objectives to which this philosophy is linked, as arising from the 1977, 1981 and 2004 editions of the policy include:

- The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;

Ogbujah Columbus

- The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individuals and the Nigerian society;
- The training of the mind and the understanding of the world around; and
- The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competences both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

A glance into the respective aims of the different levels of education from pre-primary to the tertiary, and even to technical education reveals that education is basically geared towards this same direction namely, inculcating in the child (learner) the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the local environment. That is to say, the laying in the child, of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking.¹⁴ And to achieve this, government elected to take various measures which include:

- Multiplying educational and training facilities and making them more accessible to afford the individual a far more diversified and flexible choice;
- Ensuring that educational activity will be centred on the learner for maximum self-development and fulfilment;
- Making effort to see that education is related to the overall community needs;
- Ensuring that use and improvement of modern educational techniques, like the audio-visual aids at all levels of education system;
- Restructuring education system to develop the practice of self-learning by de-emphasizing the memorization and regurgitation method, and encouraging practical, explanatory and experimental methods, and in particular, the development of manual skills;
- Continuing to create opportunity for religious instruction at schools.

Dewey's Influence on Nigeria's Current Educational Practices

It will be an over-exaggeration if anyone claims that Nigeria as a nation, built her educational policy and practices entirely after the mind of John Dewey. However, a careful examination of the National Policy on Education, and its implementation over the years, reveals that a greater percentage of Nigeria's present educational practices are derived from the thoughts of Dewey. The specific areas of impact are in what Dewey called the constituents of education as a formal institution, namely: the school, child, teacher, curriculum, methodology, discipline and values.

The Nigerian school system as we have it today is modeled, to a great extent, according to Dewey's learning ideas. The recent insistence of ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) and the eventual caving in by the government to massively invest in education is informed by the realization that education is the instrument par excellence, for affecting national

Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

development, as Dewey highlighted. It is the germinal structure of society without which everything is bound to collapse. The current national arrangement of schools into pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions makes it possible to organize schools to represent what Dewey intends as part of the continuum in the process of socialization, where life is presented as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighbourhood, or on the playground.

The idea that the child is the king, and should be the most important factor in education as Dewey stipulated, seems to be appreciated by the manner and form the education industry is run in Nigeria. In some cases, curriculum has been diversified to cater for the differences in talents and opportunities of children, while in others, extra-curricular lessons have been organized to boost the regular programmes and enhance children's assimilation of subject matters. Nonetheless, a lot is still required to be done in this area.

Teachers are the facilitators of education, and without them the enterprise of learning would be arduous, if not impossible. In line with this, the National Policy on Education has called for the recruitment of specialist teachers for specific subjects.¹⁵ This led government to review the qualification level of teachers, improve the facilities in the Teacher Training institutes, float Colleges and Universities of Education, and through the regular Universities provide sandwich programmes to upgrade the knowledge of teachers. All these point to the fact that education administrators in Nigeria seem to cherish dearly Dewey's prescription of highly intelligent teachers who could construct series of educative experiences in order to properly direct the learner prudently.

As we saw earlier, the curriculum, for Dewey, should be child-centred; and all the learning heritage of a nation should be made available to everyone without discrimination so as to evolve in children a development of the skill of their inclinations. This was repeated over and over again in the National policy on Education which summarily concluded in Section 5, 38(ii) thus: "the curriculum will be geared towards producing practical persons".¹⁶ At the moment, this is being experimented: the six-five-four system has been replaced with the six-three-three-four system of education, and attempts are currently underway to move it to nine-three-four system in order to improve on content delivery and assimilation; the 'quota' and 'catchment area' saga are altogether aimed at making education available to all and sundry irrespective of status and location.

In terms of methodology, Dewey recommended child activity and experimentation rather than passivity in the face of 'indoctrinations'. This penchant Dewey has for discovery learning will promote, as the National Educational Policy stated, the graduation of "people who can apply scientific knowledge to the improvement and solutions of the environmental problems for the use and convenience of man."¹⁷ This is perhaps, the brain behind government equipping of libraries and laboratories in schools, and the establishment of technical schools (like NABTEB) to help ground students

Ogbujah Columbus

with the rudiments of science and technology. The recent commitment of government to release the sum of #200billion annually for the next five years to revamp tertiary education is a step towards implementing this methodology, even though a lot needs to be done if Nigeria is to locally turn out experts to compete favourably with the wider world.

Furthermore, Dewey's rejection of externally imposed discipline or authoritarianism has given rise to wild and divergent interpretations. While some have argued that the high rate of indiscipline and lawlessness in the present Nigeria's educational system is traceable to this idea of self-discipline, others have rejected this link noting that the acts of lawlessness experienced in schools have a connection with the situation in the wider society. The school is only a microcosm of the wider (macro) society. All forms of indiscipline and impunity in the wider society definitely influence activities in schools. No wonder then students are generally left alone, and our schools are rife with cases of lawlessness since that seems to be the norm in real life situations within the macro society. A lawless society will always beget lawless schools.

Finally, we noted earlier that Dewey did not admit of any static value system. All values for him are relative, including moral values. This cannot be true in the Nigerian case. We have a stable value system. This is why the national policy on education repeatedly emphasized that the quality of instructions at all levels of education has to be oriented towards inculcating, among other things, moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations. Admittedly, some school administrators still make full use of this opportunity for religious instructions and value orientation. But sadly too, others perhaps, taking refuge in the valueless mantra of Dewey, have turned our institutions of learning into a nursery for future atheists and secular humanists.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

It will not be preposterous to say that John Dewey has wielded influence in educational theories and practices of the United States of America and other parts of the world more than anyone else. It is common knowledge among educators that he is called, even though contested in some quarters, the father of progressive education.¹⁸ Both the national policy on education and the various national development plans which were later enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, have their foundation in the works of Dewey. Even the recent standoff between Federal Government and ASUU over the non-remittance of grants for educational development, and the eventual release of funds is a clear case of Nigerian academics insisting that the educational system must be modeled after their counterparts in the United States of America that are shaped after the mind of John Dewey.

Impacts of Dewey's Educational Ideas on Nigeria's Educational System

Hence, no one can underestimate the significance of the works of Dewey on Nigeria's educational system.

However, in his criticism of traditional education, Dewey rejected the 'either – or' position in relation to 'progressive' education since that would amount to some form of dogmatism which he vehemently abhorred. But his avowal that education must be exclusively earthbound, limited to the experiential world, needs to be revisited, because it is in itself an extreme position, an inflexible claim which puts a stain on the consistency of his system. His projection of the scientific method as the only genuine technique for problem-solving tends to be a new type of authoritarianism which he spent a great deal of his time and energy condemning in traditional education.

Dewey's theory, obviously does not allow for any ultimate value because of its negation of supra-sensible realities. In consequence, it has no room for the religious instruction of the youths. But one important question one may ask here is: are there realities which are not proximately perceptible to the physical, senses experience? For, if in fact there are spiritual realities, and if such realities are important to man, should the child not be directed towards them? Dewey's approach, it must be stated, fits perfectly well with the general trend of pragmatism of his time which viewed reality in terms of its practical uses and successes rather than in terms of representative accuracy. Thus, blinded by a value, Dewey tended to ignore other values.

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle, *The Nicamachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. (Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1932), Bk.I & VI
2. J. Dewey. *Essays in Experimental Logic*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), pp. 65-70
3. S. Okafor, and F. Quist. *Philosophy of Education for Beginners*. (Onitsha: Etukokwu Press, 1988), p. 20.
4. J. Dewey. *Essays in Experimental Logic*. Ibid.
5. J. Dewey. *The Sources of a Science of Education*. (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), p. 129.
6. J. Dewey. (1938) *Experience and Education* in Mortimer A. J. (Ed.) *Great Books of the Western World*. (Chicago: Ency. Britannica Inc., 3rd edition, Vol. 55, 1992), p. 120.
7. J. Dewey. (1938) *Experience and Education*, cited by S. Okafor, and F. Quist. *Philosophy of Education for Beginners*. Op. cit. p. 25
8. J. Dewey. (1938) *Experience and Education*, cited by S. Okafor, and F. Quist. Ibid.

Ogbujah Columbus

9. J. Dewey. (1938) Experience and Education in Mortimer A. J. (Ed.). Op. cit. p. 100
10. J. Dewey (1938). Experience and Education in Mortimer A. J. (Ed.). Op. cit. p. 118
11. J. S. Bruner. (1961). The act of discovery. Harvard Educational Review **31** (1), p. 26.
12. J. Dewey. (1938) Experience and Education in Mortimer A. J. (Ed.). Op. cit. p. 101
13. Federal republic of Nigeria. National Policy on Education. (Lagos: Ministry of Education, 1981), p. 7.
14. Federal republic of Nigeria. Op. cit. p. 12.
15. Federal republic of Nigeria. National Policy on Education. p. 14.
16. Federal republic of Nigeria. National Policy on Education. p. 24.
17. Federal republic of Nigeria. National Policy on Education. p. 28.
18. S. Okafor, and F. Quist. Philosophy of Education for Beginners. p. 31.