

PRAGMATISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

Joseph Olusola Adeleye
Department of Educational Foundations College, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: The problem surrounding what to teach and how to teach in our schools has been a lot of concern to the philosophers of education, school administrators, policy formulators, parents, teachers and the students as well. Plato, an Idealist, believes that teacher should be at the centre of teaching activity in the school while Rousseau an advocate of child centred education is of the view that student should be given consideration and allowed to contribute his ideas during classroom activities. Pragmatists strike a balance between the two positions. They believe that teaching should pave way for both the teachers and the students to take active participation in the teaching and learning processes. Based on these assumptions, this paper examines principles of pragmatism and its influence on teaching and learning.

Keywords: teaching, learning, pragmatism

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically the word pragmatism is derived from the Greek word 'Pragma' which means activity or the work done. Some other scholars think that the word pragmatism has been derived from the word 'Pragmatikos' which means practicability or 'utility'. Thus, according to this ideology, great importance is laid upon practicability and utility. Pragmatists tenaciously hold the view that activity or experiment is done first and then on the basis of results, principles or ideas are derived. Pragmatism is also known as experimentalism or consequentialism. It is called experimentalism because pragmatists believe experiment constitutes the only criterion of truth. To them 'truth', 'reality', 'goodness' or 'badness' are all relative terms. These concepts are not predetermined and absolute. They are proved by man's own experiences. Moreover, pragmatists believe that truths are many and they are in the making. Man researches these areas only by means of his own experiments and experiences. Hence, only those things which can be verified by experiments are regarded to be true.

Pragmatists hold that whatever was true yesterday; need not to be the same today. Under these circumstances no definite and determined principle or current use can stop the world from moving forward on the path of progress. Pragmatism is called consequentialism, because any human activity is evaluated in terms of its consequences or results. If the activity results in utility, then it is true. It may be noted that the fundamental start of pragmatism is "change". In this sense no truth is absolute and permanent. It is always changing from time to time, from place to place and from circumstance to circumstance. Thus, those ideas and values which are useful in certain circumstance, time and place, need not prove to be the same in changed circumstances, places and times. Hence, pragmatists do not uphold any predetermined philosophy of life. To them, only those ideals and values are true which result in utility to mankind in certain circumstances, places and time.

It is therefore obvious that pragmatism is very intimately connected with human life and human welfare. The chief proponents of pragmatism are C.B. Pearce, William James, Shiller and John Dewey.

Principles of Pragmatism

The following according to Singh (2007) are the principles of pragmatism.

The changing nature of truth: Pragmatists do not believe in predetermined truths. According to them truth always changes according to time, place and situation. They also believe that a thing which is true to an individual at a specific time, place and situation, need not be true to others or to anyone else at some other place or time. Hence, a certain thing which was true to a person yesterday, need not be the same for him today or will remain the same for tomorrow. In short, according to pragmatism, truth is always changing according to times, places and situations.

Truth is formed by its results: Pragmatists uphold that truth is not a fixed and definite entity. It is a relative term which can be changed according to the stages of development and situations which confront a person in his process of growth and progress. The reason for this is that change in situations throws up new problems to be solved by new thoughts and new efforts. Out of these thoughts, only that thought of the whole lot is true which serves to solve the problem and attain the desire results. Hence, pragmatists firmly hold that it is the result which goes to

form or build a truth. Only those things are truth for the individuals which develop their personality to the full and which promote individual good and welfare of others as well.

Democratic social value: Pragmatism holds that man is a social being. He is born into society and all his development takes place in and through society. Hence, pragmatists uphold democratic social attitudes and values. Pragmatists also laid emphasis on the principle of utility. Pragmatism to a reasonable extent shares utilitarian ideology which holds that the reality of a principle lies in its utility. Any idea or thing which is useful to individuals, is proper and right. In case it is of no use, it is improper, wrong and untrue. In other words, only those ideas and things are true, when they have a utility for man. Things are true because they are useful.

Placing high premium on activity: The pragmatists also attached importance to activity. This is, because it is their belief that ideas are born out of activities. Man is an active being, he learns by his activities, which he always engaged in on his path of life. Thus, the greatest contribution of pragmatism to education is this principle of learning by doing.

Influence of Pragmatism on Teaching and Learning

Pragmatists generally believe that experience is the source of all knowledge. In the same way, they define education in terms of experience. Education comes as a result of experience, it is a lesson learnt from experience. But it is not every experience that is education. The experience that is educative is the type that makes possible other experiences in future. The experience must be productive and must not be a limiting experience. An experience is limiting, if it hinders other possible experiences. For example, the armed robber who faced the firing squad on the Lagos bar-beach was having an experience, but for him it could not be an educative experience, since the firing terminated any possibility. This could be the reason John Dewey, as cited by Akinpelu (1981), defined education as the continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. Since knowledge comes through the processing of experience by intelligence, using the problem – solving method, the aim of education is therefore the development of learner's ability to deal with future problems. Education is the process of developing the habit of problem-solving, and there is no limit to the development of this ability. The more varied and the more complex the problems that a learner solves, the greater the growth of his intelligence is. Hence teacher must develop this in the learner. Thus, education is also defined as growth, the growth is not a biological or physical one, but rather mental, it is the growth in intelligence. Since the problems to be solved arise in the course of daily living, it means that the child is learning as he lives from day to day, and each day's experience, if it is educative, increases his power of solving his problems. Learning in this sense is not an activity that should take place in a secluded spot or isolation from the child environment.

John Dewey, a pragmatist prefaced his own recommendations on education with a stringent criticism of many aspects of the formal education of his days. First, the traditional school, which is somehow, seems to be in practice in Nigerian educational system treats the immature experience of the youngster as something to be quickly passed over so that he may quickly grow up as an adult. In the traditional school, education becomes a preparation for a future adult life: the child is to be equipped with the skills of an adult, he is given 'a set of notes' as Dewey graphically described it, which he is to be redeemed when he reaches maturity, but which unfortunately he may not live long enough to redeem. He is being educated for the future, being equipped for the life, he will lead as an adult, while he misses the joy of learning, and the skills of coping with his present problems. The teacher according to the pragmatists ought to prepare his student to solve their present problems.

Pragmatists attacked also the contents of curriculum that are traditionally the same for every child. It is their belief that the children are all massed together and uniformly taught as though they want the same things and are learning at the same rate. What is more, they are all fed on dead information which, being remote from their life experience, has to be memorized and absorbed. The dead information is parceled out in little bits of knowledge in the name of disciplines. The relevance of these disciplines and life are not clear to the children. The result is what Akinkuotu (1996) quoting Whitehead described as little bits of knowledge from which nothing follows. Thus, the experience of the children which is normally an integrated unit is fragmented for him as he changes from one unrelated subject to another unrelated subject and switches his thinking from religion to mathematics at the sound of the bell. Another point is that in that type of school, knowledge is imparted into the students as the finished product of other people's experience and students are not allowed to realize that they too can produce knowledge from processing their own experience.

The method of the teaching itself is not such that can motivate the pupils. The children learn more from the fear of the teacher who talk to the students rather than with the students. Since the teacher towers so much above the

students and exercises so much an authority, the pupils have no option but to sit quietly, listen passively and absorb the facts passively as a sponge absorbs water. What is most important to the teacher in such a school is the presentation of subject-matter while the psychological conditions of learning, in terms of the child's interest, ability and stage of development and the sociological factors in terms of the relevance of the subject for the social life of the child and the community are of secondary importance. The child is supposed to see the relevance for his life at some future date, and integrate the fragmented pieces of learning all on his own. Finally, this type of education naturally breeds a type of attitude and disposition that is anti-social. This is because the child is made to learn in isolation and to achieve results only through individual efforts rather than group learning or co-operative efforts, only his individualistic rather than social nature is fostered. Dewey (1959) believes that mere absorption of facts and truths is so exclusively individual, an affair that it tends naturally to pass into selfishness.

After this thorough criticism of the traditional and discipline – centred school education, Dewey also sketched out the pragmatic view of what the school, the curriculum, the teaching method and the role of the teacher.

The school must essentially be an extension of the home so that the experience of the child both at school and in the home, can be related and continuous. School is a specialized agency set up by society to facilitate acquisition of experience by the child by making the process of learning more fast and thorough. As Dewey himself describes it:

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 their race, and to use his own powers for social ends.

The school, therefore, cannot be isolated from the community, nor should it removed the child from the community in which life, the child is expected to participate. The school is not only a part of the community; it is a community itself, a mini-community in which the child is to experience group-living and co-operative learning activity. The school is only to simplify the existing complex social life so as to make it easy for the child to absorb. The school cannot directly change society, but it can reform it by equipping the children with social intelligence, and by holding up the ideas of the life in that society. All these can only be actualized through a professional teacher. The pragmatist's position in determining a professional teacher can be analysed based on the pragmatic principles earlier mentioned.

First on the issue of changing nature of truth. It is established by the pragmatists that truth is not constant; it is not every time a teacher could behave professionally and one could not see him as always reliable since truth itself is not constant. Therefore, a teacher must be ready to change in his act of teaching, knowing the appropriate method of teaching because the situation may change and students may also change. Teacher may not claim to know everything and even the subject content may change going through pragmatists' principles. Hence, he is bound to change since the students too are constantly changing, teacher must be prepared to change and be flexible in his teaching. For example, the way Mathematics was being taught in the olden days by the professional teachers could not be the same in this era of computer. In determining the experience to use, what worked for teaching yesterday may not work today, and the students' experiences are not the same. Since topic is not always the same, a teacher may teach a topic today proceed to another topic tomorrow. Hence, the assessment of the students' performance must not be constant. So also, there are individual differences in the students. Teacher should not be dormant but always ready to change to enhance his professionalism.

On the second principle that truth is formed by its results. This implies that, what is true is what has consequences from the society's aspiration. True knowledge for the teacher is what the society expects him to know. For example, in the society we are in today, a teacher is expected to have good knowledge of computer since that is the present need or expectation of the society. Teacher has to teach what is relevant and he has to know the relevant method to use and this has to be done with relevant experience in order to be a professional teacher, and making relevant assessment of himself and the students to know the need of the society in which he finds himself.

On the principle of democratic social value, the teacher should understand the democratic value of the society of his immediate environment in order to know the appropriate things to teach and learn the appropriate instructional methods acceptable by the society.

On the principle which attaches importance to activity, this entails that for anything to be pragmatic, it has to be practical and activity controlled. This is in the sense that a teacher must understand what he is to teach practically and also understand its relevance to the society. He should understand the practical ways of teaching it too. Teacher should also make use of practical knowledge demonstrated by his students. He should make his assessment on what the students can do and not the ideas they exhibit.

With the teaching described in these ways, the curriculum is nothing more than the social life of a community, simplified and translated into the classroom. The school selects what to include in the curriculum on three criteria: these are psychological, the sociological and the logical criteria. The psychological and the sociological factors seem to be most important. The psychological relates to the interest, the problems and the needs of the child as a determinant of what should be offered to him. His needs are not just what he feels as his needs, important as this is, but also what he will need as a participating member of the society. What will promote the harmony and welfare of the society are thus equally important. The forms into which the required experiences are cast, and the arrangements of the learning task in each form constitute the logical dimension. In other words, the traditional subjects or academic disciplines must be organized in such a way as to start from the present experience of the child and gradually lead to new experiences.

In specific terms, the contents of the curriculum will be those that involve the child in exploring and discovering knowledge by himself. The sciences are much favoured in this type of curriculum, and they will be taught not in the ways of learning the laws and theories in physics and chemistry, but by ways of the child exploring and being aided to discover new knowledge by himself (Ayeni, 2013). The social sciences are important as representing the social environment and the factors that affect human behaviour in the community. The humanities are not to be left out because they deal with the cultural heritage of the child's race. History, for example, is to be regarded and treated as the record of man's social life and progress; while language is to be taught as an instrument of communication. The aesthetic subjects like arts, drama, literature, music and among the others are to be included for the development of the creative abilities of the child. In all cases, the subject should be taught with a view to helping him solve his problems, rather than store up information to be reproduced on demand.

In teaching of any subject, one of the important things to be considered is the method of teaching. The teaching must be child-centred, that is, it must take the child as a person in his own right. If the child is treated as a means to an end or as someone else advantage, then one could not claim that the child is at the centre of the education. In addition, the child readiness and development should be also taken into consideration. There is no point assuming that the child is able to do this or that, if he is psychologically incapable to do so on, the ground of efficiency and common sense. It should be realized that each child is a unique individual and as such should be treated differently. The present needs, interest and ability of the child, must also be taken into consideration though this should not stop with the present needs alone.

Also, teaching must also make the child actively involve in class activity. Learning by doing is a method which uses more than one of the senses in the process of acquiring knowledge and it is one in which the child obtains his theoretical knowledge abstracted from the solution of problems. Hence, what is taught must involve practical activity or practical application of his knowledge. The subject must be brought to the level of the child, and the examples used must be within his present experience.

Group method or co-operative learning should also be encouraged. The project-learning, in which problems to be tackled are set for groups, is the best method of encouraging group learning. The method has the advantage of allowing the children to display their free initiative and native intelligence in solving problems. More importantly, it is the major ground for the development of social and co-operative living, and of organized social intelligence. The method of teaching necessarily leads to the role of the teacher. The idealist and realist "schools" of philosophy of education have made the teacher into an authority figure, the embodiment of all wisdom, and the custodian of knowledge. Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel had portrayed the teacher as an interested, but passive observer of the child's learning activities. This is supported with the analogy of the gardener, whose contribution has nothing to do with the growth of the garden; in the same way, the child's natural abilities unfold on their own.

The pragmatists strike a middle path between these two conceptions of the role of the teacher. He is not the authoritarian and fearful figure as presented in the traditional education, but also not the dispensable element in the Rousseau's type of child-centred education. The teacher is essentially an organizer and a moderator of the child's learning in the pragmatists' view. By reason of his superior natural experience, and expert training, his principal role is that of guiding the child's learning activities. He must be thoroughly familiar with the individual child's needs and interest, and with what types of experiences are of greatest use to him in his society. The teacher is to select the learning tasks on the basis of these, and moderate the interaction between members of group, for

the best gain by each member. Thus, the teacher is not a spectator but rather a participant in the learning activity, sharing experiences among them, fostering their problem – solving abilities and promotes the development of intelligence of the Nigerian learners.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above principles and practices of the pragmatists, one may conclude that teaching should pave ways for democratization of ideas in which both the teachers and the learners would have their interest considered in the classroom activities. This could be seen as the only means of making teaching a problem-solving activity.

RECOMMEDATION

This paper consequently submits that the pragmatists position that teaching should neither in totality be teacher-centred as idealists recommended nor in extreme sense, child-centred as postulated by the naturalists. Instead, striking a balance between the two positions looks more plausible and realistic to meaningful education growth and total involvement of the two major participants in the educational enterprise.

REFERENCES

- Akinpelu, J. A (2005). *Essays in Philosophy and Education*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd.
- Ayeni, J. O (2001). *Rudiments of Philosophy of Education*: Ibadan leadway Publishers.
- Ayeni, M. A (2003). *Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*. Ado Ekiti. Petoa Educational Publishers.
- Berlinger, William (2007). Teacher Training in www.google.com
- Dewey, J. (1948). *Education and the Philosophic Mind*. New York The Macmillian Co.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2008). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC.
- Jekayinka, A. A (2011). Cited in Adeyinka (1988). *Development of Teacher Education in Nigeria*. Retrieved from www.google.com
- Singh, J. A (2007). *Philosophical Foundation of Education*. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation.