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The Relevance of Pragmatic Epistemology to Nigerian Education System

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Abstract:

The paper examined the relevance of pragmatic epistemology to Nigerian education system. The purpose was to contribute to the search for ways of achieving the Nigerian national goals for national development through the instrumentality of education. Since independence in 1960 and the publication of the National policy on education in 1977, the much-desired development has virtually remained beyond the reach of Nigeria as a nation. One of the factors identified for this ugly situation is the mismatch between the principles and practices of Nigerian education. Noble principles are formulated, as outlined in the National policy on education, but translating them into action in real life situations has become very difficult. Since pragmatic epistemology is action and result oriented, and is focused on the application of knowledge to real life situations for the purpose of development of the society, it is deemed necessary to consider its relevance to Nigerian education system. After examining the principles and practices of Nigerian education, pragmatic epistemology and its tenets, the paper came to the conclusion that pragmatic epistemology is relevant to Nigerian education system, and that its adoption and application will be of great contribution towards making the system more effective and practical as an instrument for national development.

Keywords: Nigerian education, pragmatism, epistemology, relevance

1. Introduction

All that goes on in the process of education is fundamentally concerned with the acquisition and utilization of knowledge. Without knowledge acquisition and its proper utilization, the world would be in chaos. There would be no development, no enlightenment, no discovery, and no civilization. Education is thus a process of acquiring knowledge, values, norms, skills and competences and their subsequent application or utilization for the solution of social problems and improvement of social wellbeing. According to Ocho (1988:23), 'Education may be defined as the transmission of what is desirable to individuals to make them knowledgeable and contributing members of the society'. For Otite and Ogionwo (2006), education can be conceptualized as the process of the acquisition of knowledge and skills required to adapt to and exploit the social and physical environment in the process of development.

From the above definitions, one can say that education is a process of inculcating social values in the individuals, systematically planned and applied through curriculum, whereby they acquire knowledge, skills and competences required for their meaningful living in the society and to contribute to its development. Knowledge is a central factor in education, and its basis, direction and facilitation are within the purview of epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which deals with knowledge and truth. It seeks answers to such questions as: What is knowledge? What do we know? How do we know? Why do we pursue knowledge? What is truth? What are the ways of knowing? How true and certain is our knowledge? What is the purpose of knowledge? It is believed that education is a sure way of acquiring knowledge and proffering answers to these questions.

Since knowledge is the central concern of education, an inquiry into the purpose of knowledge implies an inquiry into the purpose of education. In other words, to what end is education pursued in the society? The end of education is dependent on the norms and needs of the society. However, norms and needs differ from one society to another, hence every nation formulates or adopts its own ends or goals of education, based on their norms and needs. The goals of education as well as the values to be inculcated in the learners are usually outlined in the national policy on education. Not only is the knowledge acquisition of such values and aims essential, but also their application to real life situations. This is where the pragmatist epistemology is deemed relevant to Nigerian education.

This paper, in the light of the need for knowledge acquisition and application to real life situations, seeks to examine the relevance of the pragmatic epistemology to Nigerian education. In doing so, attention will be given to Nigerian education, with particular reference to its principles and practices. Also, to be considered is the pragmatist epistemology, its major tenets and relevance to Nigerian education. From the discussions, some implications for Nigerian education will be pointed out, and a conclusion drawn thereafter.

2. Nigerian Education: Principles and Practices

When Nigerian education is the object of discussion, there is need for some clarifications, so as to guard against an out-of-context interpretation or understanding. In this paper, by Nigerian education, what is meant is education in Nigerian context. This is education adapted to Nigerian situation, especially as empowered by the 1969 National Curriculum Conference and outlined in the *National policy on education*. To properly grasp the entailment of such education, a consideration of its principles and practices is necessary.

2.1. Principles of Nigerian Education

The word *principle* is one of the terms that are often subjected to multiple analyses. So, it is pertinent to clarify the use of the term in this context. In this regard, principle may be understood as a basic idea, standard or rule which controls or explains how something happens or works (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2018). A principle provides a guide for behaviour and evaluation of a programme of activities. Principles of education are those guidelines on how education is to be run for the purpose of realizing social needs through the instrumentality of education. The principles of Nigerian education are clearly set out in the *National policy on education*, which was first published in 1977. Since then, it has been revised a number of times. The current edition is that of 2014, from which this paper drew much information. The policy is the official statement of aims and objectives of Nigerian education at all levels. These aims and objectives are to be the guiding principles for the government, school institutions and other stakeholders in matters pertaining to Nigerian education.

In the *National policy on education*, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014:5), set out the national education goals as follows:

- The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity.
- The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society.
- The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around.
- The acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society.

Following from the above goals, the same Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014:5) states that the quality of instruction at all levels of education has to be oriented towards inculcating the following values:

- Respect for the worth and dignity of the individual.
- Faith in man's ability to make rational decisions.
- Moral and spiritual principle in inter-personal and human relations.
- Shared responsibility for the common good of society.
- Promotion of the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children.
- Acquisition of competencies necessary for self-reliance.

Taking a close look at the above education goals and values to be inculcated, it can be argued that the policy, in principle, no doubt presented noble objectives, which are rich in meaning, and apparently appealing to Nigerians. The principles outlined in the *National policy on education* represent the needed reformation in Nigerian education system, after the colonial era. The aim has been to propel Nigerian education towards functionality, social progress and stability, thus transforming it from its subservient posture of the colonial experience. Reflecting on this, Alu and Ugwu (1999:105) note that 'the objectives of the policy show that it is geared towards self-reliance, better human relations, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness and unity as well as towards social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological progress'.

Surely, the policy is aimed at ushering in a new educational era for the Nigerian nation, giving it a more sensible direction, which would positively impact on the political, social and economic dimensions of the country. However, how to bring these principles to practical fruition has remained a major dilemma in the Nigerian educational scheme of things. In this regard, Abiogu (2009) is of the view that the above ideas can materialize only if the new policy on education is implemented spiritedly and with a sense of undiluted patriotism.

Principles or policies are meant to be implemented; otherwise they remain sterile, redundant and utopianistic. Implementation here refers to the practices of education. A question may be posed: How well have the policy statements as outlined in the *National policy on education* been put into practice in the process of Nigerian education? In other words, how have the principles of Nigerian education been translated into action? How has Nigerian education practically impacted on the lives and experiences of the citizens and the nation as a whole?

2.2. Practices of Nigerian Education

Before stating the national education goals, the policy document first set forth the five main national goals of Nigeria, which have been endorsed as the necessary foundation for the national policy on education. These five national goals, according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014:4), are the building of:

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

Any country that has the above goals well attained can boast of development anywhere in the world. It is believed that those goals are to be achieved through education, for in Nigeria's philosophy of education, it is believed that

'education in Nigeria is an instrument for national development' (FRN, 2014:4). The implication here is that the attainment of those national goals will stand as evidence and demonstration of the practical application of the principles of Nigerian education. At this point one may ask: To what extent have the Nigerian national goals been achieved through the instrumentality of education? According to Okeke (2003:67), 'It is only after schooling and the learner is living in the society that the degree to which the national goals have been achieved can be ascertained'.

Following from the Okeke's viewpoint, it means that one has to look at the practical life in Nigerian society to ascertain the extent of the achievements of the national goals. If one takes the number one national goal for instance, which is free and democratic society, one would ask: How free has the Nigerian nation been, and how democratic, since independence since 1960, and since the publication of the *National policy on education* in 1977? Nigeria has been subjected to military rule, a veritable instrument of unfreedom and undemocratic governance for the greater part of her years since independence. The nation's nascent democracy is yet to be truly democratic, since military ideas and influences keep weighing it down.

With regard to just and egalitarian society, the situation is still a far cry from what ought to be. Even in the education system itself, injustice is often perpetrated through such policies as 'quota system', 'educationally disadvantaged', and 'quota system'. Such policies have encouraged discrimination, sycophancy and mediocrity. This has adversely affected all the facets of the national life. The situation was summarized by Onwuka (1997:82), thus:

A system that is characterized by discrimination and deprivation through sycophantic designs is evil and ravaging. This is why I have to state strongly that 'federal character' and other allied concepts have retarded rather than enhanced the economic growth of this country. Their perpetuation is a more destabilizing act against the unity and sovereignty of this nation than any form of secession.

It can be argued that true democracy, true freedom, justice, self-reliance, dynamic economy and bright opportunities have been eluding the Nigerian nation. The activities and life styles of most of the leaders and elites are not helping the situation either. Sometimes some of the atrocities such as embezzlement of public funds, thuggery, hired assassinations, ritual killings; political unrest, kidnapping and other forms of criminal activities are masterminded by those who should know better on how to maintain orderliness and security of lives and property of the citizenry. These are the people who have passed through the process of education and are therefore believed to have acquired the values outlined in the *National policy on education*.

Could it be said that the education system did not inculcate in them those required values, but their opposites, instead? This is unlikely, considering the assertion made by Okoro (2009:37) that 'the normal conception is that education should transmit what is worthwhile, intentionally and by action. There is no known educational institution where evil is intentionally taught to the learners. If this is the case, one continues to wonder why and how come it that most of the educated leaders in the country fail to make relevant value judgments, policies and decisions that that would take the nation to the haven of her desired aspirations. According to Onwuka (2009:7), 'the making of value judgments involves the ability of the individual to bring to bear the whole range of ideas upon the area of experience, relating theory to practice, relating abstractions to facts, and thoughts to actions'.

The achievement of the set goals in Nigerian education has been an uphill task. Akinsanya (2015:156). 'The mismatch between setting of goals and achievement of set goals has been the reason behind the recorded failure of some national education policies'. The implication is that the practices of Nigerian education have failed to match its principles. In other words, there has been the inability to bring the whole range of ideas acquired through education to bear upon the real-life experiences in the country. There seems to be a failure to prove that 'the outcome of education may be considered as the demonstrable showing, in action, at any point in time, that one has gone through a certain system of education' (Okoro, 2006:35).

The net observation is that despite the fact that nation's policy on education is a splendid attempt to move from the aristocratic stance to effective education, the attempt has not succeeded in practice. Perhaps Nigerian education needs a touch of pragmatic epistemology, which can stir it into greater application of knowledge to real life experiences.

3. Pragmatic Epistemology and Its Tenets

3.1. Pragmatic Epistemology

Epistemology is branch of philosophy that conducts inquiry into the nature and grounds of knowledge, experience and truth. The question of what we know, how we know and for what purpose has been a central one in philosophy. For the traditional philosophers, we can have absolute knowledge through ideas, so that 'an item of knowledge is accounted as true if it agrees with the system of concepts and relations already accepted as true' (Okafor, 2006:164). The emphasis in this approach to knowledge is on rational coherence, whereby there is an already rational standard for the acceptance of something as true or false.

For the pragmatists, however, knowledge is attained through scientific method, and must be generated through the power of ordinary human experience. Consequences or results are the criteria for truth, as held by the pragmatists. For them, any knowledge acquired is meant to be put into use so as to produce the desired result. Without knowledge being put into action and thereby yielding the desired result, such a knowledge is inconsequential and of no value. The pragmatists maintain that knowledge or truth must receive its validity and confirmation in its consequences. In this regard, Okafor (2006:65) cites Dewey as saying that 'the hypothesis that works is the true one; and truth is an abstract noun applied to the collection of cases, actual, foreseen, and desired, that receive their confirmation in their consequences'.

The approach of the pragmatists is to interpret every notion by tracing its respective consequences. A thought is true if it has valid consequences when applied to some specific situation, otherwise it is false. The pragmatists maintain that the meaning of any intellectual conception depends on its practical consequences, and that the totality of such consequences constitutes the whole meaning of the conception (Okafor, 2006). For the pragmatists, all beliefs, customs, morality, attitudes, skills and even aesthetics are to be validated in the light of their consequences.

3.2. Tenets of Pragmatist Epistemology

The kernel of the pragmatist epistemology consists in this: Practical consequences of knowledge. From this kernel spring the tenets with which pragmatist epistemology is known and identified. The tenets find expression in the pragmatist education, that is, the pragmatists' approach to education, especially their ideas of the learner, the teacher, the curriculum, validation of knowledge and aims of education.

In pragmatist education, the learner is the beginning, Centre and end of education, since his needs and problems are the reason for education, while his performance is the measure of the degree of success in education. Regarding the teacher, the pragmatists maintains that he should know the importance of creativity, experience, learning by doing and problem solving, and guide the learner accordingly, availing him the activities that would promote this. Curriculum, for the pragmatists, is not a preparation for life, but life itself; hence curriculum should consist of all the experiences of living which the youngsters undergo under the auspices of the school. The subjects taught in the school must be relevant to the day-to-day living. Learning should involve action and be based on problem solving. In this way, an educated person is one who can perform (Anadi, 2019).

The point to be borne in mind is that, for the pragmatists, all learning must be validated in the open domain of experience, that is, in practical life situations, through its consequences or results. The end of education is development, which is achieved in the sphere of experiences when the individual acquires the ability to perceive the relationships and interconnections between various experiences in the different aspects of the learning process. Pragmatists are always open for changes that can bring about practical results. Since the world is always changing, full of uncertainties and a shifting future, educational experiences are bound to change accordingly (Creswell, 2009). According to Kabolo (2015:155), 'Pragmatism signifies practicality, compromise, prudence, and a clear goal orientation in dealing with problems'. Interaction with the environment is very important in pragmatist epistemology. Dewey (1944) has already pointed out that interaction is a necessary component for one to acquire the necessary knowledge to solve problems.

4. Relevance to Nigerian Education

Pragmatist epistemology emphasizes development as the end of education, and this is attained by acquiring the ability to see connections between various aspects of learning. In the process of education, it is expected that students are helped to know how best to connect what is learnt in the school to true life situations. Nigerian as a nation has remained underdeveloped due to the disconnection between school learning and real life in the society. In this regard, the epistemologists' insistence that the curriculum is life itself is a food for thought for Nigerian education. Learning by doing as emphasized by pragmatist philosophers, problem solving, child-centred education and application of knowledge to real life situations are worth giving great emphasis in Nigerian education system. It has been noted that there is a mismatch between the principles and practices of Nigerian education, and this has been largely responsible for the foot dragging in the effort to achieve its national goals and other developmental indices.

Bringing epistemology to bear on Nigerian education can play a significant role in bridging the gap between its principles and practices. Pragmatists are always hopeful for progress even in the midst of human errors. Unlike the traditional philosophers who argue that from the premises that can give us absolute certainty in order to reach the truth, pragmatists that even when we go wrong, engaging in further investigation and discussion can clarify issues and eliminate errors. Pragmatist epistemology is particularly is deemed particularly relevant to the education system of developing or underdeveloped countries. Such countries (and Nigeria is one of them) need effective knowledge application so as to facilitate development. This might have been the reason for Okoro (2006:35) to state 'it may be desirable that the learner in the underdeveloped society gets conscious of the idea that the attributes of education – skills, knowledge, understanding and cognitive perspectives – are expected to be applied'.

The framework of pragmatist epistemology rejects the dichotomy between principle and practice, and stresses that the function of intelligence is more of knowing to act than knowing to find. It also rejects representationalism and its pillars of foundationalism and dualism (Yonder, 2016). Pragmatism has remained dynamic in its approach to issue of knowledge. According to Lieu (1995:12), 'Pragmatism shifts our epistemological aspiration from finding objective truth to sustaining a meaningful conversation'.

5. Conclusion

It has been seen that principles of Nigerian education are noble, but they fall short of practical manifestation. On that note, the relevance of pragmatist epistemology to the system becomes obvious. With the adoption and practice of pragmatist epistemology, the Nigerian education will no doubt yield the desired outcomes in ways that can accelerate the attainment of the national goals in concrete terms. It is therefore expected that Nigerian education should be more tilted towards being more practical than theoretical, translating principles to techniques of doing things, and generation of ideas and knowledge that are amenable to practical applicability and acceleration of development.

Again, there is need for Nigerian education system to strike a balance with regard to the three domains of educational objectives: Cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. Presently cognitive and psychomotor domains

appear to be getting greater attention than the affective domain. Adequate emphasis on the affective domain will enhance the attitudes, interests, feelings and modes of the adjustments of the individuals in accordance with the shifting exigencies and experiences of life.

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