

**PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGY: A PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE TRADITIONAL  
APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Unarguably, ideas rule the world. Virtually every meaningful and conscious human action is first conceived as an idea. Ideas become incarnate in actions. In other words, actions are animated by ideas. Against the backdrop that formal education is a value-driven enterprise, it is basically pursued with a view to filling specific human needs. By implication, ideas become incarnated in human situations to improve on them. It is in this sense that ideas rule the world; otherwise, ideas without practical relevance have no value. Nigeria's educational system incidentally finds itself at the crossroads. There is an obvious discrepancy between ideas and the concrete human needs they are meant to address. Little wonder, the large number of graduates it produces has not yielded satisfactory results in terms of socio-economic growth and development. The basic thesis of this discourse is that only a decisive paradigm shift of emphasis from the present status quo to a practical-oriented academic formation, typified by the concept of pragmatist epistemology, can salvage this situation and lead to sustainable development in Nigeria.*

**Keywords: Pragmatism, Epistemology, Educational Approach, Idealism, Nigeria.**

**INTRODUCTION**

The popular philosophical dictum that “ideas rule the world” still remains very factual. A man of great ideas and insights undoubtedly wields far-reaching influence. Indeed, any meaningful and conscious human action is first conceived as an idea. Positive human actions are embodiments of ideas that constitute their life-giving principles. However, very much like theories, the relevance of ideas is demonstrated in concrete human situations; else, they end up as mere principles devoid of practical merits. Without practical relevance, therefore, ideas have no value. On this stress, Immanuel Kant (1781/1998:50) expresses the view that the mutual influence theory and practice wield on each other correlates with the relationship between reason and the senses as expressed in our efforts at understanding the world; hence, he avers, “thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”

The quest for the acquisition of formal education is a very vital feature of the contemporary human society. This is especially occasioned by the sensitive role education plays in an individual's self-realization and national development. As the mother of all disciplines, philosophy plays a very critical role in education. Save its general concern with fundamental existential questions, philosophy assesses educational principles, specifies the ends of education and the authentic means of achieving them. Indeed, every educational system is based on a certain philosophy as its operational principle. Among any given group of people, this finds expression in their social, political, economic, religious, and cultural values, which their educational system embodies. Constant examination, analysis, clarification and validation of the principles of education to ensure their consistency with the people's values and ultimate purpose are therefore an imperative. This is precisely the basic role philosophy plays in education.

The call in this paper is for a more practical-oriented academic formation in Nigeria's Institutions of learning. If Nigeria must meet its development goals, the pace of development must be increased by ensuring that theories are matched with practice. Flaunting ideas without practical relevance is tantamount to maintaining

the nation's present status as a consuming rather than producing economy. This spells doom for the country's growth and development. In fact, this accounts for the slow rate of socio-economic progress in the country. The inculcation and acquisition of knowledge constitute the primary concerns of educators. Through epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with the investigation into the nature, scope and limits of human knowledge, philosophy achieves one of its basic goals, that is, the examination of the fundamental assumptions of other branches of knowledge. Proceeding against the backdrop of a perceived deficiency in the traditional approach to education in Nigeria, this discourse makes a critique of this approach with a view to recommending a more practical philosophy of education.

### **THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW**

With a view to delineating a specific universe of discourse for this paper, it is imperative to clarify its understanding of the concept "educational approach" vis-à-vis the concept "educational system." Ordinarily, whereas the concept "approach" denotes a way of dealing with somebody or something; a way of doing something (Hornby, 1995:49), the concept "system" refers to a group of things or parts working together as a whole or a set of ideas, theories, procedures, etc., according to which something is done. It also refers to the traditional methods, practices and rules existing in a society, an institution, a business, etc. (Hornby, 1995:1212). Although the difference between the concepts "approach" and "system" is subtle, as could be gleaned from the title of this paper, its emphasis is more on "approach," understood basically as "attitude" or "guiding principle." Accordingly, within the context of this discourse, "approach to education" would correlate more with "the general disposition towards education" or "the guiding principle of education" than "the formal system of education" in Nigeria, where the latter would possibly suggest an investigation into the stages or phases of education in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, therefore, one could conveniently say that the pragmatist approach or principle could be adopted for a defined system, or functions within a given system of education.

The traditional educational approach in Nigeria is largely based on idealist principles. To be sure, idealism, as a philosophical system, emphasizes the primacy of ideas, concepts, the universals and the metaphysical. In his work, "**An Idealistic Philosophy of Education**," Herman Horne (1942:37) articulates the essential tenets of idealism thus: 1. Idealism is the conclusion that the universe is an expression of intelligence and will, that the enduring substance of the world is of the nature of mind, that the material is explained by the mental. 2. Idealism as a philosophy stands in contrast with all those systems of thought that center on nature (naturalism) or on man (humanism).

The idealist approach to education wielded a lot of influence on Western education, after which the Nigerian system is modelled. The influence of idealism on the western culture is traceable to the fact that its values largely accord with those of Christianity. As a matter of fact, idealism which has its roots in Plato's idealistic philosophy was largely adopted by many of the scholastics in the development of systematic theology, especially given that Plato's world of eternal and immutable ideas is similar to the Christian heaven. Of course, very much like Plato, Christianity accords a transitory status to material things and maintains that only spiritual realities are eternal. Following this line of thought, the idealists maintain that the essence of true education is basically the cultivation of the human mind or psyche. Thus, even with the inclusion of science education and vocational training in the curriculum, the idealist approach places more premium on the study of humanities and social sciences, the content of which revolve around the basic ideas about the universe. The idealist approach therefore places little or no emphasis on the immediate human challenges and their possible practical solutions.

In Nigeria, as in most of the formerly colonized African countries, formal education is principally sought after as a means of attaining a high social status and securing jobs in civil service; hence, the high emphasis on mere certificates and paper qualification. The scientific revolution and the prestigious status it accords to science and technology notwithstanding, the idealist mentality still holds sway. This perspective to education stifles productivity, development and progress, especially given the lack of commitment it ultimately occasions on the part of the civil servant, who is almost estranged from his services. On this note, Oguejiofor (2001:36) observes that from the colonial times till the contemporary times, the civil service is

described in many African languages as the white man's work (Igbo: *Olu Oyibo*, Efik: *Utom Mbakara*, Hausa: *Akin Bature*). With this disposition, one engages in the civil service merely to earn a living. Another unfortunate consequence of the idealist approach to education is the production of half-baked graduates that are virtually incompetent in their purported disciplines or areas of specialization. In many public schools in Nigeria, there is little or nothing done in terms of practical learning. A Computer Science student, for instance, could graduate without the slightest practical experience of the commonest computer programme. Upon graduation, such a student still requires actual practical computer training. Some Electrical Engineers in Nigeria can hardly take care of the commonest electrical gadget in their homes; the same applies to Mechanical Engineers, most of who still heavily rely on the services of artisans to take care of machines. An average graduate in Agricultural science lacks sufficient knowledge of practical farming. Similarly, an average graduate of Banking and Finance sometimes lacks basic knowledge of the banking principles. Such graduates must go for further practical training in their respective academic fields in order to acquire practical knowledge of what they spent years in the university learning. What an unfortunate situation!

Given the large population of Nigeria and the consequent large number enrolling for formal education, especially in the poorly funded public schools, adequate attention is hardly paid to the specific academic needs of the individual students. This too largely contributes to the poor quality of education in Nigeria. Little wonder, the elites insist on either sending their children abroad or to the private schools that provide better learning environment and opportunities but are quite expensive. Except for the few Polytechnics, that are essentially structured to incorporate the practical aspects of the disciplines in their curriculum, and the private schools, many of the public universities hardly live up to the required standards. In recent times, there seems to be a sudden realization of the deficiencies that characterize the old-fashioned idealist approach to education; hence, the move to accord Polytechnics equal status with the Universities. This move has not, however, been matched with proportionate actions. The general psychological orientation of Nigerians has not helped matters either, as the discrimination between University and Polytechnic degrees still subtly holds sway in the labour market, where employers of labour place more premium on university degrees than those of polytechnics even when graduates from the latter express more competence.

The high rate of educational activities in Nigeria finds eloquent expression in the large number of universities in Nigeria, the large number of students that seek admission into these universities, and the number of graduates they produce on yearly basis. The records of the National Universities Commission, NUC (2018) indicate that Nigeria has 153 approved universities. Of this number, 40 are federal universities, 45 are state universities and 68 are private universities. In addition to the large number of Nigerians who graduate abroad and seek for jobs at home, the number of Nigerian university graduates is estimated at 500,000 per annum. In its recent survey, a prominent Lagos-based recruitment agency, Jobberman (2016), indicated that 47% of Nigerian graduates are unemployed. In fact, a considerable number of the graduates in Nigeria do not have decent jobs. Corroborating this survey, the National Bureau of Statistics (2018) reports that Nigeria's unemployment rate increased from 18.8 per cent in the third quarter of 2017 to 23.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2018. According to this report, the total number of unemployed Nigerians increased from 17.6 million in Q4 2017 to 20.9 million in Q3 2018.

Notably, the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria is due partly to the degenerated state of the oil-dependent economy. The fall in global oil prices largely contributed to the depraved state of the Nigeria economy, as adequate attention has not been paid to alternative sources of revenue. There is gross lack of sufficient industries in both public and private sectors to create adequate employment opportunities. The insensitivity of the government to the plight of the suffering masses also accounts for the lack of employment opportunities. Regrettably, greater percentage of graduates largely depends on the government for the provision of jobs. These hardly come on a platter of gold. Consequent upon the high level of corruption that characterizes the administrative system, the limited job opportunities are accessible only to the families and friends of the elites, or the highest bidders.

Unfortunately, many of the graduates can hardly help themselves in the face of these challenges. One then asks: of what practical use is their education if they cannot help themselves unless the government assists? One's inability to be considerably sustained by one's knowledge slightly smacks of incompetence. This calls

to question the employability status of these graduates in the first place. The available few employers of labour often capitalize on this high level of incompetence and lack of relevant skills among many Nigerian graduates which render them “unemployable.” The usual option is either to employ them and re-train them at the expense of the employers or to demand certain years of experience as prerequisite for employment. In essence, the high rate of academic activities in Nigeria does not equal the rate of individual development and socio-economic development and progress. This ugly phenomenon strongly suggests that the traditional approach to education in Nigeria is problematic. It simply reflects a failed approach that produces no practical results. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a more relevant approach to education.

## **PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGY: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

### **The Concept of Pragmatism**

Pragmatism, simply put, refers to character or conduct that emphasizes practicality. It is a philosophical movement or system that generally stresses the practical consequences as constituting the essential criterion in determining meaning, truth, or value (<https://www.dictionary.com>). It can also be defined as the philosophical view that considers practical consequences or real effects to be vital components of both meaning and truth. In other words, pragmatism holds that the meaning of any concept can be equated with the conceivable operational or practical consequences of whatever the concept portrays. (<https://www.philosophybasics.com>).

As a philosophical tradition that began in the United States in the 1870s, pragmatism has its origin in the philosophical works of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859 -1952). Although, as acknowledged by William James, the term was coined by Peirce, it gained popularity through William James’ philosophical address in 1898 entitled “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” Notably, some contemporary philosophers have also expressed a renewed interest in pragmatism. These neo-pragmatists include Richard Rorty, Hilary Putman, Nicholas Rescher, Jurgen Habermas, Susan Haack, Robert Brandom, and Cornel West. For the purposes of this discourse, a cursory look at the basic insights of the major proponents of pragmatism would suffice.

Although the formal origin of pragmatism is traceable to the American philosophical tradition, it could also be said to have its roots in the British empiricist tradition, which holds that the senses are the only authentic sources of human knowledge. Thus, pragmatism basically features a furtherance of the critique of rationalism by the earlier empiricists. To be sure, rationalism is the philosophical view that reason alone constitutes the authentic source of human knowledge. Descartes, like many other rationalists, had situated thought essentially in the mind of the individual, insisting that intellectual certainty is only a function of clear and distinct ideas which the mind conceives by intuition. Against the backdrop of his conception of thinking as an expression of self-consciousness, Descartes views the mind as a theoretical instrument. For him, the mind can function independently of its immediate environment or situations (Descartes, 1637/2006:28-34). On the contrary, Peirce maintains that meanings are context-dependent, and as such are not individual or private but social and public. The meanings of ideas are, therefore, dependent on their social imports or public consequences.

While there is hardly any unified pragmatist creed or doctrine that can capture the diverse interpretations of pragmatism, Peirce (1878:293) articulated a popular “pragmatic maxim” that at least captures its essence thus: “Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object.” By implication, an idea or a word has no meaning if the object to which it refers has no practical consequence. Peirce was particularly attracted by the method of science because of its capacity to transcend individual prejudice. With its experimentation method, one is not only expected to state results but the procedures that led to them so that other scientists could verify such results using the same procedures. For the pragmatist, therefore, the value of ideas, as products of thought, necessarily finds expression in their practical application and utility.

William James conceives pragmatism as a method of achieving the ultimate concerns of human life. However, this ultimate purpose is not clearly defined, and there are no conclusive answers to the existential questions; hence, the pragmatists reject rationalism especially on the ground of its dogmatic approach to the issues of life. For the pragmatist, the formulations of sciences, philosophy or theology are never final but

only approximations; their true meanings can only be discovered in their capacity to solve problems. Indeed, while pragmatism is not strictly in favour of any particular result, it is essentially result-oriented.

For James, therefore, the pragmatic idea simply denotes that which works or that which makes a difference in actual life. In his view, an idea is true only if it has favourable consequences for the one who holds it. Accordingly, James (1907:53) avers, “you must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience.” He maintains that the pragmatic method is applicable even in the case of abstract metaphysical discourses. Thus, the pragmatic import or worth of abstract arguments could be determined by assessing the possible difference that embarking on such arguments could make in actual life. For other pragmatists, however, an idea is true only if it has satisfactory consequences when objectively and, if possible, scientifically tested.

Dewey conceives man as a biological organism continually acting on his environment, changing it, and constantly being changed by it; little wonder, he lays much emphasis on the role of the environment on man’s existential struggles. However, the pragmatist touch is largely felt in his *instrumentalism* or problem-solving theory of knowledge. Here, Dewey advances the view that in addition to man’s social nature, he possesses some inherited traits. Far from being rigid or absolutely determined, the expression of these is largely determined by the environment. Hence, Dewey (1922:69) asserts, “any impulse may become organized into almost any disposition according to the way it interacts with surroundings.” This implies that man’s response to his environment is a function of the interaction of both human nature and culture. The usefulness of man’s attitudes, traits and disposition is determined by the extent to which they help him adapt to his environment. For Dewey, therefore, even abstract metaphysical discourses must be firmly anchored on concrete human problems in order to be relevant.

Remarkably, pragmatists sometimes differ in their methods and conclusions; hence pragmatism has been known by a variety of names including “pragmaticism” (coined by Peirce), “instrumentalism,” “functionalism,” and “experimentalism.” However, pragmatism is usually associated with certain ideas constituting its principal themes and theses. These intricately connected themes, as articulated by George Kneller (1964:13), include: the reality of change, the essentially social and biological nature of man, the relativity of values, and the use of critical intelligence. For the pragmatists, the phenomenon of change is at the heart of reality. In fact, the human nature is ontologically subject to change. As an active organism, man also continually interprets and reconstructs his experiences. The means and ends of education must, therefore, express flexibility and openness to constant adjustment.

In contradistinction to the idealist philosophical system, which explains man’s needs in terms of the metaphysical and the supernatural realities, pragmatism emphasizes human experience as well as relegates permanence and absolutism to the background. William James (1907:51-53) captures this idea thus:

A pragmatist turns his back resolutely... upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.... It means the open air possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth.

Taken together, the pragmatists share the view that the truth of an idea depends on the consequences that are observed objectively when the idea is put into operation. In fact, for the pragmatists, reality is the consequence of man’s interaction with his environment or the totality of his experience. Whatever lies outside man’s experience is not considered meaningful.

### **PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGY: A PARADIGMATIC PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

Philosophy has a primary responsibility of clarifying thoughts. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922:4.112), “a philosophical work consists of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of propositions, but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.” In the light of the foregoing exposition, pragmatist epistemology refers to the philosophical approach to education that evaluates educational principles and

theories on the basis of the success of their practical application. In order to make meaningful impact on their students, it is incumbent on educators to pursue reliable knowledge, especially as founded on objective educational principles. The pragmatist approach to knowledge largely satisfies this need.

Pragmatists are generally progressives and so conceive the mind as an active rather than a passive faculty. They also hold the view that the mind is intricately connected with the world and its experiences. For them, therefore, the acquisition of knowledge is a function of the interaction between the mind and its environment. In other words, the pragmatist adopts the scientific method, which locates the starting point of knowledge in experience and man's interaction with his environment.

In addition to highlighting the imperative of improving man's cognitive faculties, pragmatism, as a practical philosophy of education, emphasizes the practical ends of education. For the pragmatist, education should aim at enhancing man's comprehensive growth and development; it is about life. As a means of achieving this end, experience is considered to be of immense essence. The teacher guides the student in the development of relevant skills and attitudes, which of course should constitute part of the educational curriculum.

From the pragmatist perspective, the acquisition of knowledge is best achieved through the problem-solving method. Any hypothesis that solves a problem most successfully is considered to have offered the best explanation to the facts of the problem. Dewey (1938:4) refers to this as a "warranted assertion", that is, a claim to knowledge that has been confirmed objectively and operationally and may serve as a basis for generating further hypothesis for further problems. For the pragmatists, instead of the traditional method of concentrating on abstract subjected matter, the construction of learning situations around particular problems whose solution will lead to better understanding of the social and physical environment is an ideal approach to knowledge.

Save being a criterion of meaning, pragmatism is an independent system of philosophy and wields considerable influence on other disciplines or fields of study. In social sciences, pragmatism is essentially humanistic in the sense that it considers the satisfaction of human nature and needs the basis of utility. In other words, pragmatism holds that the subject matter of education should be relevant to immediate societal concerns. In Philosophy, for instance, pragmatism could be employed as a method of clarifying difficult metaphysical and epistemological arguments, especially by identifying the possible practical relevance of the arguments advanced on both sides. In the absence of any practical difference, it could be concluded that there were no genuine problems after all. Pragmatism, therefore, evaluates theories based on their practical consequences and not necessarily in relation to their connection with antecedent data or facts. Similarly, in Public Administration, policies and programmes are jettisoned if they do not work, that is, if they do not produce practical results. Facts and values are considered meaningful and useful to the extent we have sufficiently good reasons to hold them as such. From this perspective, pragmatism largely correlates with utilitarianism, given that it considers the satisfaction of human needs paramount in the determination of the usefulness and the truth value of a principle.

In physical sciences, too, pragmatism has always provided a practical philosophy. As a practical-oriented philosophy of science, it maintains that concepts and theories can only be considered useful to the extent they have practical consequences. In other words, since the pragmatist view of usefulness of knowledge is relative to human interest, the relevance of theories is largely dependent on the extent to which they aid inquiry. Given the centrality of the experiential method in modern science, only facts that are empirically verifiable and practically useful are considered true. Pragmatism in modern science is, therefore, basically experimental.

Considering education as a social process of development, pragmatism emphasizes experiences and experiments as well as the need that the learner participates in such experiments. It is against this backdrop that Dewey insists that learning must issue from action. In his view, learning by doing fosters creativity, confidence, and co-operation of the student with the teacher in the education process. This approach to learning also enhances the child's capacity for original thinking, social skills and more purposeful disposition. Indeed, with such personal experience the individual makes necessary adjustments of his personality and values.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF PRAGMATISM FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

The reasons for the proposal of the pragmatic approach to education for the Nigerian educational system are not far-fetched. There is a remarkable similarity between the Nigerian culture and the pluralist and heterogeneous American culture in which pragmatism flourished and recorded huge success. Very much like the American culture, the Nigerian culture has neither a national religion nor ancient monarchy; the Nigerian society is characteristically dynamic and so more likely to embrace a philosophy of change rather than of permanence. Quite unlike idealism, pragmatism, as a philosophy that conceives man as a bundle of infinite possibilities, would naturally be congenial to an ingenious, enterprising and optimistic set of people like Nigerians.

The relevance of education in the modern day human society cannot be overemphasized. This is more so in the developing human societies, where education serves as a veritable means of facilitating development. For Francis Bacon (1597:79), "knowledge is power." The Hobbesian (1651/1994: xiii.13) state of nature in which man is characterized as wolf to man could be transcended with the enlightenment, intellectual, socio-political, and ethical re-orientation provided by education. Indeed, education is key to social development. On the role of education in effecting a positive change of habit, self-actualization, and social development, Okafor (1981:19) maintains that "education is the process of acculturation through which the individual is helped to attain the development of his potentialities, and their maximum activation when necessary, according to right reason and to achieve thereby his perfect self-fulfillment."

Articulating the implication of pragmatism for education, John Dewey (1916b:331-332) expresses the view "that knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meanings in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes, and methods of behaving toward facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification." Thus, the art of knowing expresses a mutual interaction between man and his environment as well as indicates a cognitive process that necessarily involves action. However, the process is completed through problem analysis, hypothesis and the provision of ultimate solution. For the pragmatists, therefore, the essence of education is located in this symbiotic process in which the environment acts on the individual and vice versa, culminating in the resolution of some problems. Accordingly, Dewey (1916a:89) affirms that education is "that reconstruction or re-organization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."

For the pragmatists, the curriculum should consist of the activities concomitant with living. As against the traditional curriculum which emphasizes mere preparation for adult life, the pragmatists maintain that the content of the curriculum should not only be a means to an ultimate end; it should practically and concretely reflect life itself. Accordingly, the traditional subject matter areas like history, geography, mathematics, must be made comprehensible and more meaningful to day-to-day life. Students must be availed of the opportunity to have practical experience in their discipline while the period of study lasts. With such practical experience, value is added to the student's life and he or she is better disposed, upon graduation, to contribute meaningfully to the nation's development and progress.

More still, in the learning process, the activity technique, for which the pragmatists advocate, places emphasis on the activity of the student instead of the authority of the teacher. In other words, the curriculum must be student-centered and must be flexible enough to accommodate individual differences of the students. Thus, the teacher plays the role of a helper or a guide as the child's special abilities – his aptitudes and talents – are taken into consideration. On this note, Okafor (1981:78) articulates the basic principles of the pragmatist approach to education thus:

The learning process is organized in such a way that the child's natural impulses are not inhibited. Rather, the child's nature is allowed to exhibit itself by way of untrammelled curiosity and guided trial-and-error. The child is guided to discover his own truth and to test its validity in the open domain of experience. He is to be disposed in such a way as to be prepared to dump his "truth" as soon as it ceases to work. This process of "learning by doing" is to replace mechanical memorization and the traditional lecture method or "learning by instruction." Where text books are used, the traditional approach of using just

one text or reference is not adequate for the progressivists. The student must be prepared to use a wide variety of sources and must be disposed to test the validity of the pieces of information provided by the sources.

A bold step in the direction of adapting the pragmatist principles and recommendations in the Nigeria educational system would require the enlargement of academic curriculum to include some of the useful school activities traditionally characterized as “extracurricular,” such as dramatics, athletics, and training in practical skills. Likewise, the status of some vocational subjects ought to be elevated to equal that of the usual academic subjects. In the education of girls, for instance, courses in home management or home science should be of immense relevance, given their strategic roles in home making.

Another obvious implication of pragmatism for the Nigeria’s educational system is that it takes cognizance of the dynamism of life itself. Pragmatism proposes the abandonment of obsolete idealist educational approaches and values, aims at constant reconstruction and re-organization of human experiences with a view to surmounting contemporary challenges and situations. It focuses on the development of the individual’s inherent interests, capacities, and aptitudes. In addition, given that every stage of human development is associated with some dominant interests, the curriculum is to be structured in a way that such interests are taken into consideration in order to facilitate learning. In his educational treatise, *Emile*, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1889:113-119) maintains that man is in chains because of the neglect of the “way of nature.” For him, education has failed because we have treated children as adults in miniature and stuffed their minds with material which is of little interest to them. Hence, he proposes that the content and method of education should be related to the child’s natural growth that is, attuned to his physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. In his view, education should focus on the changing needs, interests and abilities of children as they develop. Accordingly, such areas of interest in early stages of human development as investigation, construction and creative expression are essential considerations in the learning process. At this stage, reading, counting, art, simple practical works are well-suited for young pupils.

In essence, with a view to ensuring positive educational outcomes, pragmatism proposes that educational curriculum should be flexible, dynamic, adaptable and modifiable. It should include only subjects of practical consequences for the student and the society. In other words, the immediate needs of the individual and the society must be taken into consideration in curriculum development for the institutions of learning. Thus, the pragmatist approach ensures that the best in the individual is assisted to flourish thereby ensuring proper development of the individual and ultimately the progress of the society as the individual contributes more meaningfully to it.

### **A CRITIQUE OF THE PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGY**

Generally speaking, flexibility and adaptability constitute the major merits of the pragmatist approach to education. As an open-minded principle, pragmatism maintains that the human world is constantly changing, especially in terms of aims and values; it is always in progress and ever-evolving as humans seek to adjust to their changing environment. Accordingly, pragmatism makes education adaptable to the ever-changing human needs and human environment, thereby ensuring the constant relevance and usefulness of education. From the pragmatist perspective education is considered a process of preparation for life in the wider human society and a means of enhancing man’s immediate living conditions. The knowledge and skills acquired are all geared towards making the individual practically useful to himself and the society at large.

Pragmatism approaches learning from the progressivist perspective. As a considerably satisfactory philosophy of education, it stands between idealism and materialism. It emphasizes action over thought as well as the critical roles practical activities and experience play in the learning process. It has to do with constant reconstruction of human experience, especially through its empirical and experimental approach to the process of learning. Being, basically oriented towards problem solving, pragmatism considers belief and ideas true only if they are workable and profitable; otherwise, they are considered false. Pragmatism, therefore, proposes a project method of learning requiring that the child engages in various creative activities



with a view to providing solutions to immediate problems and ensuring the development of the human society.

In spite of its obvious merits, pragmatism has been criticized for its position that workability or usefulness constitutes the basis for the determination of truth and values. This view ultimately culminates in the relativisation of truth and human values, given that they would constantly change depending on individuals, circumstances, times and places. Moreover, it may be argued that the problem-solving method does not exhaust all feasible approaches to learning, and that there is no guarantee that whatever works or is useful is objectively true. On this note, too, pragmatism seems to oppose eternal and objective truths, as well as predetermined ideals and values. An unguided application of this principle may not be altogether fitting for education. It would imply the jettisoning of any pre-determined and definite aims and objectives of education in a bid to ensure that it remains flexible and adaptable to ever-changing human situations. To forestall this, a balance has to be struck by allowing some basic educational values to guide learning even while they remain subject to review.

With regard to the insistence of pragmatism on experience, it may not be correct to subsume all reality under overt phenomena. As a matter of fact, experiential reality is only a part of reality. Man's needs and goals have always been explained in terms of the physical and social as well as the metaphysical or the supernatural. Accordingly, one cannot justifiably rule out metaphysical realm from the domain of reality. The immediate concern here is to observe that pragmatism is neither a perfect philosophical system nor an impeccable approach to education. Just as it has its obvious merits, it also has some remarkable limitations. However, the fact cannot be unmade, given the foregoing exposition, that its merits supersede its demerits. Hence, it is considered feasible and strongly recommended as a practical alternative to the traditional idealist approach to education in Nigeria.

## **CONCLUSION**

The traditional approach to education in Nigeria is undoubtedly deficient. This accounts for its low educational outcomes. The philosophical assumptions about human nature and the nature of reality that underlie the principles and practice of education in Nigeria have not been rightly assessed. A proper assessment would immediately indicate an urgent need for a new philosophy. As a practical-orientated philosophy of education, the relevance of pragmatism to the theory and practice of education in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. It raises practical concerns with a view to making an objective assessment of the educational problems militating against satisfactory educational ends in Nigeria. With its emphasis on the practically relevant approach to education, pragmatism is considered an ideal for the Nigerian educational system.

The merits of pragmatism lie especially in its scientific orientation and approach. With the dawn of scientific revolution, with its attendant technological progress, the modern man's interest in science gained ascendancy. Since pragmatism accords with the methods of science, it is in turn appreciated. Its import is, however, felt more in the field of education, especially in its advocacy for child-centered education and the need to take individual differences into consideration. The problem-solving method is also a welcome innovation as the pedagogical value of using direct experience in teaching and learning is creditable.

In essence, even while it is acknowledged that a number of the academic values for which pragmatism stands feature in Nigeria's academic system, the fact remains that they have not been effectively implemented. Little wonder, obvious inefficiency still bedevils the system. If the numerous merits of pragmatism are applied in Nigeria's educational programmes and policies, it would undoubtedly yield more positive results for the individuals and ensure considerable development for the nation at large.

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