

# PRAGMATISM: A CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY THAT PROMOTES QUALITY EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

---

---

*Dr. Charles Nzulumike*  
*Department of Educational Foundations,*  
*Federal College of Education, Pankshin,*  
*Plateau State.*

## **Abstract**

*The paper presented an in-depth explanation on the philosophy of pragmatism. The exposition brought to the fore how pragmatism as a contemporary philosophy promotes quality education and sustainable development. The paper observed that no meaningful development can take place without sound philosophy and quality education. This is explicated in the pragmatists' adoption of scientific method in studying reality and their greater emphasis on child-centred education theory ear-marked by learning by doing. Thus, the paper recommended that to achieve quality education and sustainable development, most of the pragmatic approach to reality and education among others should be adopted.*

Pragmatism is not only a contemporary philosophy but one of the newest philosophies on the horizon. As an American philosophy with prominent exponents such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, it is one hundred and sixteen years old. This deduction is predicated on the fact that Peirce introduced the term “pragmatism” in 1902 and when compared with other schools of thought in philosophy, one will agree to the claim put forward on pragmatism. Such schools of thought include but not limited to Naturalism which dated back to the time of Thales of Miletus in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.; Idealism which originated from Plato who was born in 428/7B.C.; and Realism which was founded by Aristotle who was born in 384/3 B.C. (Copleston, 2003). Pragmatism as a philosophy is influenced by many variables. Such influences according to Okafor (2006, p. 56) include:

- The philosophy of Heraclitus (c504/501 B.C.) who in emphasizing the necessity of change in human condition and in phenomena, stated that one can never step into the same river twice.
- The philosophy of Protagoras (c481 B.C.) the Greek Sophist who said that “man is the measure of all things”.

- The philosophy of positivism founded by Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). Comte in his positivism, reasoned that philosophy should deal only with the positive data of sense experience. This is in line with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1711 – 1766) which held that human reason is competent to attain certitude only with regard to the knowledge of phenomena (i.e. “things-as-they-appear-to-us”).
- The scientific method of philosophizing where experience and overt phenomena were given their pride of place and truth is constructed and determined by them. This means that the empirical method took precedence over the a priori or the traditional method.
- Charles Darwin’s biological theory of evolution which portrayed man as evolving gradually through developmental processes from the simplest cell to the very complex structure that he is now.
- The development of empirical psychology and its application to education which virtually eliminated the age-long belief that education was not for any specific learning but rather, to sharpen the mental faculty without minding the content insofar as it has “disciplinary values”. John Dewey as a pragmatist, used the empirical findings in the psychology of learning and of child development to modify and improve the child-centred concepts of education developed by Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel.

With the above serving as datum, the next task is to address the teaching of the philosophy of pragmatism and how this philosophy promotes quality education and sustainable development.

### **What is the Philosophy of Pragmatism?**

Pragmatism can be called experimentalism or experientialism and instrumentalism. These names are descriptive of its approach to knowledge and to situations. This also means that pragmatism is based on scientific tradition or orientation. Pragmatism whether as humanistic, experiential, nominalistic or biological (Obot, 2015) believes that what counts are the objects of human experience and not metaphysical issues, abstractions or speculations. For them, anything which connotes permanence and absolutism must be jettisoned. In other words, they turned away from abstraction and insufficiency, verbal solutions, bad a priori reasons, fixed principles, closed systems and pretended absolutes and origins, dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth (Nzulumike, 2010). They believe in concreteness and adequacy, facts and action (Orhungur, 2013). For them, man should concern himself only with the things that can be perceived by the senses and not with the abstract and the speculative. All reality should be seen in terms of experiential and

verifiable dimensions; in terms of what can be known through human experience. Reality should be subjected to scientific investigation or verification while the criterion of truth must be found in experience. That is not all. For the pragmatist, ideas are true only when they are instrumental towards the achievement of any specific objectives. Still in line with their philosophy, the universe is characterized by change and constant flux. Change and flux are intrinsically tied to all reality. Man is part of this change. He acts on his environment and changes it and vice versa. This interaction should bring about anticipated consequences if it is to be regarded as intelligent.

The pragmatist recognizes any knowledge that is based on common experience as the true, genuine and worthy knowledge to be acquired. For them, knowledge is truth and truth is basic in the treatment of human knowledge. Truth is inseparable from experience and as such, its criterion must be founded in experience. Truth is relative or contingent and not absolute. It is not some quality hidden in some external object waiting to be discovered. Rather, truth is the idea that has been tested, verified and found effective in solving problems. This means that an idea is true if it works and if it is useful; and false not because it misrepresents reality but when used, does not work out right.

The pragmatists divorced metaphysics or ontology in their treatment of values. This is also in line with their philosophy. For them, fundamental values are not permanent and constant because human values are relative and man is the architect of his values. Man is a progressive animal and does not act instinctively throughout his life. Furthermore, man's values must be proved worthwhile and must be tested out just as truth is tested out in the crucible of experience (Okafor, 2006). Hence, man's rationality demands that he should not be tied down by any absolutes.

The foregoing is in tandem with the principles of sustainable development which is "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations" (Olujimi, 2001; Todaro & Smith, 2003; and Jhingian, 2005). What is implicit in this principle is that development should "keep going"; that sustainable development is everlasting. Thus, sustainable development emphasizes the creation of sustainable improvements in the quality of life of all people through increases in real income per capita, improvements in education, health and general quality of life and improvements in quality of natural environmental resources.

### **How Pragmatism can Promote Quality Education and Sustainable Development**

There are so many ways in which pragmatism can promote quality education and sustainable development. In the area of education, pragmatism is influenced by the naturalism of Rousseau and Pestalozzi and the evolution of Charles Darwin (Nzulumike, 2010). The educational treatise of Jean Jacques Rousseau the 'Emile' emphasizes the content and method of education being related to the child's natural growth. That is the child's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

This means that education should focus attention on the changing needs, interests and abilities of children as they develop and thus, try to be responsive to those needs and interests.

Charles Darwin on his part will be remembered for his theory of evolution where organisms evolve slowly and gradually, adjusting and adapting their lives to the environment in order to survive. Only the fittest were able to survive. Darwin's theory when applied to man emphasizes the competition of individuals for survival in the challenging and hostile environment. Hostile element within the environment tends to create problems which block the activity of the individual. Such problems must be removed or solved by the individual in order to continue a successful transaction with the environment. The capacity of man to solve such problems is what brings success to the individual and progress to society.

Interestingly, the essence of education for Dewey and the other pragmatists is to be found within the ambit or purview of this transacting process in which the environment acts on the individual and vice versa. Experience, which is entrenched in problems, is the result of the interaction between the environment and man's needs, desires, purposes and capacities. Thus, the essence of education within the context of this interaction has to do with the individual's ability to solve the problems of life since living involves the ability to solve problems. Interestingly, the ability to solve problems made Dewey the great educationist to define the task of education as "an emancipation and enlargement of experience" (Okafor, 2006). What this suggests is that education simply frees individuals from the prejudices and irrational assumptions of everyday life and enlarges their experience.

Another way the philosophy can promote quality education and by extension, brings about sustainable development is that the pragmatists blended their curriculum and methods of teaching in line with the teaching of naturalism and evolutionism. It is self-evident in education that curriculum reflects the ends of education. The school curriculum according to the pragmatists, should focus on growth and development by making sure that all the experiences of living which students receive in school are included in the curriculum. In other words, all the content and vocational subjects and extracurricular activities should be made comprehensible and meaningful to students to promote growth. Students should see in the subjects and extracurricular activities, a relevance to their day-to-day living. The curriculum must be child-centred and constantly reviewed and modified to meet and reflect the changing circumstances. It must constantly be put to the test of experience for validation. The curriculum must be relevant, functional, flexible and child-centred.

The concept of child-centredness brings us yet to another important way the philosophy of the pragmatists can be useful in promoting quality education and in bringing about sustainable development. For the pragmatists, the method of teaching must be child or student centred. This must take into cognisance, the present needs, interests and abilities of the child. Teaching must be learning by doing. It must be

based on problem-solving or activity technique. Problem-solving method places emphasis on the activity of the students and not the teacher. This means that the problems to be worked on are selected by students and they are based on their felt needs. The other methods emphasized by the pragmatists are the group method or cooperative learning, problem method and the project method. All these methods have one thing in common. They all emphasize learning by doing.

The foregoing methods of teaching brings to the fore the role of the teacher. In the views of the pragmatists, the teacher is essentially an organizer, a moderator of the child's learning. His principal roles are anchored on guiding the child's learning activities as he is thoroughly familiar with the psychological development of the child, the individual child's needs and interests. In this context of guiding, the teacher must no longer assume a super eminent position in the classroom situation. Rather, he simply becomes a member of the class (though a more matured and more experienced member) in a problem solving situation. It is in this context that his role as an adviser, a helper, a director, a guide among others, is made obvious.

### **Conclusion**

Pragmatism actually made outstanding contributions both in philosophy and education for sustainable development. Sustainable development is a general outcome of a sound philosophy and quality education. This means that no meaningful development can take place without sound philosophy and quality education. Thus, these outstanding contributions of pragmatism towards quality education and sustainable development are largely due to its adoption of the scientific method in the study of reality. Their emphasis on change is still very relevant in stimulating progress and development. Relevant also, are the greater emphasis on child-centred education theory, problem-solving methods which can be characterized as problem method or project method or core curriculum. Their emphasis on the activity of students in the classroom is also very significant and helpful irrespective of the limitations posed on learning by doing. Learning by doing makes the teachers not to assume a super eminent position in the classroom situation. It also helps the child to discover his weaknesses and to work on them.

### **References**

- Copleston, F. C. (2003). *A history of philosophy* (vol. 1. Greece and Rome). London: Continuum.
- Jhingan, M. L. (2005). *The economics of development and planning* (38<sup>th</sup> ed.). Singapore: Pearson Education.
- Nzulumike, C. (2010). *An introduction to philosophy of education*. Jos: Akins.

- Obot, I. M. (2015). *Philosophy of education: Introduction*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press.
- Okafor, F. C. (2006). *Philosophy of education and 3<sup>rd</sup> world perspective* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Port-Harcourt: Odomezie.
- Olujimi, J. B. (2001). Sustainable development of rural infrastructure in Nigeria: An approach to poverty alleviation. *International Journal of Economic and Development Issues*, 1(1), 148 – 157.
- Orhungur, M. M. (2013). *Understanding the philosophy of education*. Spectrum: Ibadan.
- Todaro, M. P & Smith, S. C. (2003). *Economic development* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Singapore: Pearson Education.