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## Article

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### LIBERAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A DEWEYAN APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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## Abstract

This study is motivated by the persistent dominance of theoretical knowledge over praxis in Nigeria's education system which underscores John Dewey's philosophy of education. This is with particular reference to his integration of liberal and vocational education in his book, *Democracy and Education*, as an approach to educational reform. Dewey's philosophy advocates for a dynamic and experiential learning process that fosters critical thinking, adaptability, and democratic engagement, merging liberal education's emphasis on intellectual growth with vocational education's focus on practical skills. The aim of this study is to describe how to bridge this dominance by applying Dewey's integration mechanism to enhance educational productivity and reform in Nigeria and globally. In the course of this study, the following methods will be used. The historical method to review the related literature, analytical method to analyse Dewey's idea on education, descriptive method to describe Dewey's integration of liberal and vocational education and demonstrate its relevance for Nigeria's educational system as well as evaluation to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the application. The findings of this work is that Dewey's approach promotes a balanced education system that equips individuals with both intellectual and practical skills, enabling them to thrive in complex modern societies. Also, as long as social institutions uphold competence in relation to administration, Dewey's integrative model will sustain relevance beyond 21<sup>st</sup> century no matter the direction of the movement of the global community.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, John Dewey, Educational Reform, Liberal Education, Vocational Education.

## Introduction

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The situation within the country is the prevalence of some graduates not getting jobs even after graduating with good results due to lack of skill and technical- know-how. This situation is not unconnected with our educational system which is more theoretical than practical. Though this is largely due to the curriculum adopted in Nigeria which places more emphasis on theory than hands-on-learning, it has led to a growing disconnect between academic knowledge and real-world application. Education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits through various methods. It is not just based on transferring information but developing the ability to think critically, solve problems and adapt to changing environments. Whitehead (1967, p.1), defined education as “The acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge”. James Majasan (1967, p. 1), defined it simply as “The art of learning”. He further emphasized the relevance to the development of indigenous education in Africa. According to John Dewey (1938, pp. 35-36), education is the process of continuous growth and reconstruction of experience aimed at developing the individual's ability to think critically, solve problems and engage meaningfully within the society. To him, education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but an active, dynamic process of interaction where learning occurs through experiences that promote intellectual, emotional and social growth. Dewey advocated for educational reform because he believed that traditional education was too rigid, authoritarian and disconnected from the real-life experiences of students. For him, the traditional educational system or the banking model of education emphasizes rote memorization and passive absorption of information, where students are seen as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge rather than active participants in their own learning process.

John Dewey's philosophy merged liberal and vocational education. On the one hand, he viewed liberal education as essential for fostering critical thinking, moral judgment and social responsibility while emphasizing that education should be student-centered. On the other hand, his vocational education shifts from the traditional views that often reduces it to mere job training, to “satisfying direction of life activities” asserting that it should cultivate adaptability and critical thinking rather than just preparing them for specific trades. In his progressive education, he rejected the rigid separation between liberal and vocational education as he believed that education should prepare individuals not only for employment but also for meaningful participation in democratic life. This study seeks to evaluate the contemporary divide between liberal and vocational education through the lens of Dewey's educational philosophy. Secondly, it will also examine John Dewey's theory of educational reform as an aid to solving the problems of educational decadence and productivity in Nigeria and globally. This work argues that John Dewey's educational reform will impact greatly on the productivity of education in Nigeria and globally by opening up vistas for innovative diversity. By examining Dewey's ideas on Experiential learning and the integration of different educational approaches, the study aims to explore how his philosophy can inform and guide educational reform through building a non-bound curricular that provide freedom for exploration in learning. The study will adopt the following methods; historical method, analysis, descriptive and evaluative. Through analysis, it will analyze Dewey's ideas on education; historically, literatures will be reviewed to carry the reader along the development of educational system over time, through descriptive method, Dewey's ideas on educational reform with relation to vocational and liberal education will be captured. Then, with evaluative method, the strengths and weaknesses of the application of this reform to Nigeria and global education system will be examined. This method is relevant in this research because understanding the loopholes in models contribute immeasurably to better disposition for consistent improvement.

## **Literature Review**

In *The Republic*, Plato (1997, pp. 514a-521c), implicitly promoted liberal education over vocational education. This is because, liberal education is for the guardian class inclusive of the rulers. This aim of this education is to uphold moral development (cultivating wisdom, courage and ethical integrity) while vocational education is suitable for the artisans, farmers and other tradespeople whose roles support the city's economic needs. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1999, pp. 1337b, 1260a-1262b), distinguished between intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The intellectual virtues are wisdom and understanding while the moral virtues are courage and temperance. For him, liberal education is akin to the development of these virtues to aid individual in living a fulfilling life and make ethical decision while vocational education is a secondary pursuit and essential for those who perform functional roles in the society like the fishermen, traders, and so on. In *Didactic magna (the great Didactic) and Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, Johann Amos Comenius (1887 & 1896, pp. 7 & 51), expressed his acceptance of liberal education. This is due to his interest in developing the intellectual and moral character that fosters rational thoughts and ethical behaviour. He also promoted vocational education since it prepares individual for a productive life. For him, education should involve practical subjects like Agriculture, Craftsmanship, Commerce alongside academic subjects. This is to equip students with skills needed to contribute to society in terms of technique and productivity.

Also, in *Émile on Education*, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1979, p. 60), presented education as means of achieving personal freedom by fostering the individual's capacity for self-governance. He also upholds experiential learning and vocational education. This is because children learn more by interacting with the environment as well as acquire practical skills for self-reliance respectively. This in turn contributes to society's productivity, hence, the interconnectedness of his liberal and vocational education. In *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, John Locke (1989, pp. 105 & 6), saw education as the process of making a man wise and virtuous. Wisdom here accommodates intellectual insights and practical knowledge in preparation for one's life in the society. He encouraged learning of skills like household management, agriculture and trades that provide foundation for self-reliance. This will in turn promote personal freedom and dignity. In his works *How Getrude Teaches her children, and Leonard and Getrude*, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1894, p. 35), explains that education prepares individuals for life by cultivating the head (intellectual development to observe, reason and think critically), the heart (interpersonal compassion and moral action) and the hands to work such that they can be conversant with manual labour. The aim is to prepare children for both intellectual pursuit and practical life.

Furthermore, in his seminal work, *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*, Herbert Spencer (1861, pp. 20-25), a prominent British philosopher and social theorist developed his philosophy arguing for a curriculum akin more to practical knowledge. Some of the related subjects include physics, chemistry, biology etc. The aim is to promote science and technology as it is directly connected to the demand of modern industrial society and invariably will prepare individuals for life. In *The Life of Thomas Arnold*, Thomas Hughes (1795–1842), an English educator, tries to synthesize moral character development and intellectual rigour as well as preparations for practical life. His emphasis on practical skills is particularly for those in public life and civic duties. For him, synthesis of the above two would equip students for practical tasks in society such as public administration, law and religious services (Hughes, 1895, p. 48). From this point of view, one can see that Hughes is in mind disposition more than the actual activity.

Finally, in his works, *The Principle of Psychology and Talks to teachers on Psychology and on students on some of life's ideals*, William James (1907, pp. 45-48), an American Psychologist and pragmatist Philosopher contributed to educational reform by emphasizing the practical consequences of ideas and beliefs. This he demonstrated by arguing that education should

focus more on practical outcomes and real-world application. This is to aid students to think critically in a constantly changing world. This approach promotes development of flexible thinking skills and the ability to adapt to new situation. A position that greatly influenced John Dewey's philosophy of education. Each of these works demonstrated either preference to liberal, vocational education or both but rarely do they advocate that both aspects of education be integrated, hence the expedience of John Dewey's educational reform.

### **John Dewey's Concept of Education**

Education is the process through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, enabling them to function effectively in society. It encompasses both formal and informal learning experiences that shape a person's intellectual, emotional and moral development. John Dewey (1897, p. 77), defined education as the process of living and not a preparation for future Living; "It is not a preparation for life, it is life itself. Instead of preparing students for life after school, he emphasized that education should be a dynamic continuous process of growth and personal development. To him, learning is about interacting with and adjusting to the events of the present world as well as gaining knowledge for the future. According to Dewey (1916, p. 60), education is focused on the intellectual and moral growth of a person and it is fundamentally a social ground for real life experiences. He maintained that the most effective learning occurs when it is based on real world experiential activities that the learner finds relevant. For him, education must be based on the principles of learning through experiences.

### **John Dewey's Educational Reform**

John Dewey was an exceptional supporter of modern academics and social reform. He gave a new direction to educational thoughts and processes. He also rejected the authoritarian structure and the traditional teaching methods in schools describing them as being aloof from the demands of society and of individuals. His educational reform focused on transforming traditional education into progressive model that would integrate liberal and vocational education. His main aim was to create a system that fostered critical thinking, creativity and democratic participation. In *Democracy and education*, he criticized the traditional educational system for being authoritarian and disconnected from the needs of the modern society (Dewey, 1916, p. 13). He further argued that schools should act as "microcosm" of a democratic society, that is, an environment where students learn to collaborate, communicate and solve problems together as he believed that this system would prepare students for active participation in civic life (Dewey, 1916, p. 10). Vocational education was also a key aspect of his educational reform. Unlike other traditional vocational training that focused more on the acquisition of skills, He advocated for an integrated approach. For him, vocational training should develop transferable skills, encouraging critical thinking as well as provide opportunities for personal growth (Dewey, 1916, p.12).

### **Dewey's Liberal Education**

Liberal education refers to an educational approach that focuses on developing the intellectual and moral capacities of students, preparing them for thoughtful and active citizenship. Liberal education focuses on developing a broad range of knowledge and skills. It is often associated with the humanities and the social sciences but it can also include courses like the natural sciences and mathematics. The goal of Liberal education is to produce well-rounded individuals who are able to think critically, communicate effectively and solve critical problems. Liberal Education to Dewey, is an education that promotes the growth of individuals as a reflective and

an engaged member of the society, unlike the traditional models that focus on the acquisition of knowledge (Dewey, 1900, p. 78). He critiqued traditional education that compartmentalized knowledge into distinct, unrelated subjects. For him, education should not be about passive absorption of knowledge which involves just reading of books, rather, it should engage students in real-world issues thereby, fostering a continuous interaction between their learning and experiences on the one hand. On the other hand, in concord with his ideas on democracy, education plays a fundamental role in creating individuals who are equipped to engage with and improve the democratic community. This is because a true democratic system requires citizens who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of critical thought, moral judgement and social responsibility (Dewey, 1916, p. 43).

### **Dewey's Vocational Education**

Vocational education refers to a type of education that focuses on preparing individuals for specific trades, careers or professions and unlike traditional education, which lays more importance on general knowledge and theoretical concepts, vocational education emphasizes practical skills and training that are directly applicable to particular job roles. John Dewey viewed vocational education not just as a means to prepare individuals for specific trades or careers but as an important aspect of an educational philosophy that aims to foster both personal and societal development. He rejected the traditional view of vocational education which focused on just technical skills, since for him vocational education should not just teach practical skills but it should also cultivate an understanding of the social context in which these skills would be applied (Dewey, 1938, p. 52). In his seminal work, *Democracy and education*, Dewey argued that vocational education should be seen as part of a larger process of developing individuals who could think critically and adapt to changing social conditions. His vocational education was not limited to technical proficiency but was set as a tool for both personal development and the betterment of the society (Dewey, 1899, pp. 48-50). He further criticized the traditional vocational education system that was being practiced, for he believed that it frequently produced an education that was isolated from larger intellectual and social settings. According to Dewey, traditional vocational training concentrated only on technical abilities and did not give students the tools they needed to participate meaningfully in the society. He advocates that vocational education should concentrate on helping students acquire a versatile set of skills that can be used in a range of situations rather than just training them to do only a particular task.

### **Integration of Liberal and Vocational Education**

In *The School and Society*, Dewey illustrated how schools could effectively integrate vocational and liberal education by focusing on hands-on learning and democratic participation. He suggested that schools should not only teach practical skills but also engage students in projects that required them to think critically, solve problems, and work collaboratively. By doing so, vocational education could transcend its traditional role and contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals who were prepared to participate in the democratic processes of their society. (Dewey, 1900, pp. 87-90). Dewey believed that a key strength of vocational education was its ability to connect students with their immediate social environment. This connection was essential for developing a sense of responsibility and community. He argued that vocational education should not be seen as inferior to liberal education but should be considered complementary to it. According to Dewey, liberal education emphasizes the development of intellectual and moral capacities, while vocational education focuses on practical skills. However, when combined, they offer a more holistic approach to education that prepares students for



both personal fulfillment and societal contribution. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey argued that vocational education should be part of a broader, more inclusive educational system that treated all students as equally capable of intellectual and practical growth. For Dewey (1938, pp. 27-30), the integration of vocational and liberal education was essential for creating a democratic society where individuals were prepared to contribute both intellectually and practically. Dewey saw vocational education as a means of social mobility and a way to promote social equality. By offering students practical skills in addition to intellectual and ethical training, vocational education could help break down class divisions and create opportunities for all individuals to participate fully in society. This vision of vocational education was aligned with Dewey's broader philosophy of education, which emphasized the importance of experiential learning and the connection between education and social life.

### **Implications of John Dewey's Concept for Educational Reform**

- i. **Promoting active and sustainable democratic principles:** Dewey's principles include intimate connection of education to democratic process of society. As a principle that promotes agency of change, it is undeniable that it will contribute immensely to the democratic awareness of citizens especially the youths when appropriately imbibed. The youths when educated in integrated education will not just overcome disillusionment and skepticism that accompany unfair democracy with right attitude to governance, they will also be financially independent to take and stand firm in their decisions and not swayed by material enticement.
- ii. **Revitalizing the Nigerian Educational System:** The level of unemployment rate in Nigeria has invariably led to less regard for formal education. But with Dewey's integration model in Nigerian educational curriculum which ushers in self-reliance, the appeal for education is likely to increase within the country. This is because, it will not only prepare graduates as innovators and entrepreneurs, it will motivate them to develop the right attitude to education thereby killing two flying birds with one formidable stone.
- iii. **A Path Towards a More Productive and Innovative Society:** Dewey's philosophy of education will help create a more innovative and productive society. This is largely due to his emphasis on integrative intellectual and practical knowledge/skills. This implies then that, it will help reduce crime in the society especially now that fraudulent activities are on the increase. This is because when citizens utilize their strength in innovation, entrepreneurship and production backed by moral consciousness and responsibility, there will be less or no time for criminal indulgence. Afterall, an idle mind is a devil's workshop and so on.

### **Evaluation**

John Dewey's philosophy of education focused on educational reform, thereby shifting focus from rote memorization to active engagement with real world experiences (Dewey, 1916, p. 78). Its relevance is expressible in the ability of adaptation skills and problem-solving tendencies which aid in retention rates and versatility (Kolb, 1984, p. 45). Furthermore, education for him, should engineer critical thinking and inquiry (Dewey, 1938, p. 23). This will in turn promote intellectual independence, self-confidence and creativity. Put succinctly, for instance, going beyond dates of historical events of social dynamics to researching deeper on causal factors leading up to such events. In a far-reaching effect, when students become intellectually free, self-confident and decision-making agents. It will enlarge possibilities for democratic sustenance allowing for free positive thinking for the stability of the society (Gutek, 2004, p. 107). More so, Dewey's concept of education presents the two types of education as complimentary and not

separate. This helps to prepare the students for both personal development and professional success. For instance, combining mathematics and science education with designing sustainable energy solution or combining philosophy of mind with practical updates on neural research. This is expedient especially in our globalized economy where jobs demand both technical expertise and creative thinking.

This study aims to show that with these core values in Dewey's principles, one can considerably argue that Dewey made a landmark contribution in his philosophy geared towards educational reform. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his principle of education is much more relevant promoting project-based learning and collaborative classroom. This is a pattern known to prepare students for the complexities of contemporary life such as climate change, technological innovation and social inequality. However, critics may argue that there are challenges confronting Dewey's philosophy of education in relation to their implementation, theoretical assumptions and cultural adaptability. For instance, Hirsch (1987, p. 37), is of the position that Dewey's approach de-emphasizes the acquisition of essential foundational skills and cultural knowledge necessary for intellectual growth and society's functioning. This entails that foundational knowledge such as literacy, numeracy and historical awareness on which critical thinking and problem-solving are built will lack relevance. Eventually, it will lead to excellency in innovation and creativity but inadequate in core competencies needed for academic and professional success. This is because, experiential learning without structured instruction is unbalanced and risky thereby reversing the challenge of gap in theory and praxis by praxis and theory (Akpan, C, 2005, p. 102). However, a better observation will demonstrate otherwise. This is because, Dewey's emphasis is not one-sided. Dewey's focus is on an integrative model and not intermittently switching sides.

Secondly, Bestor (1984, p. 102), argues that students' autonomy without proper management can weaken academic standards and lead to shallow learning. For instance, in Nigeria, where we have over-crowded classrooms in some areas and teachers rely on strict, organized methods, Akpan (2005, p. 145), is of the opinion that Dewey's pattern is prone to create confusion and make teaching less effective. This will eventually worsen the challenge in education system while still in the bids to solve them. Here, the problem is not Dewey's model but the incompetence of the Government to provide the basic amenities for education in the adequate proportion. When we observe some private-owned schools, they abide by non-crowding of classrooms that will help to avoid confusion, invariably demonstrating that Dewey's model is tenable. Thirdly, Dewey's educational philosophy has been criticized as overly idealistic, especially in countries with limited resources. According to Onwuka, (2005, p. 110), for Dewey's reform to be successful, especially in developing nations, there is need for significant investment in areas like teacher training, better school infrastructure and modern curriculum development on the one hand. On the other hand, Olutayo (2006, p. 98) adds that systemic challenges like corruption and inadequate funding make it even harder to implement Dewey's ideas effectively. Until these confrontations and more are handled, an optimal utilization of Dewey's philosophy will be far from possibility, especially in developing countries. However, these ills may not be tackled once and for all. So, it is only fair that this model is followed gradually as the societal ills are eliminated gradually too.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, efforts have been made to espouse one of the challenges facing development especially in developing nations which centres on disparity in intellectual and practical knowledge. Contributions have also been made to demonstrate how Dewey's educational

reform can help bridge this gap between theory and praxis in the curriculum of education. One of the contributions includes integrating liberal and vocational education. However, from this paper, one is convinced that if the challenges are well managed, Dewey's educational philosophy will continue to be relevant beyond 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because, no matter the direction the global community and economy is going, it will continue to utilize the two.

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