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# Postmodernism Epistemology and Nigeria's Educational System

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## Abstract

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*Postmodernism in the educational system is to provide an enabling environment where learners will be able to unfold their freedom. It is charged with considerable level of liberalism which makes it a suitable and fertile soil for critical thinking, pluralism, democracy and creativity in education. Educational dream of the contemporary world emphasises broad-based curriculum which allows various ways of apprehending reality. The impression given by some sections of Nigeria's National Policy on education is that Nigeria's philosophy of education is progressive in character. However, a keen observation revealed that the National Policy on Education evidently contains some elements of essentialism. The study concludes that the role of educational philosophy is not only to connect the socio-political ideology of any given society with aims and objectives of such a society, but to constantly ensure that such a philosophy must readily reflect the reality of ever changing nature of every human society. The study recommended that the National Policy on Education be revised in the light of postmodernism as a philosophy of education, since it possesses a considerable strength to accommodate higher degree of liberal and progressive education.*

**Key word:** *Postmodernism, Epistemology, Educational system, Pragmatism.*

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## Introduction

The process of education as a social institution is hinged on the social, political, economic, religious and philosophical leanings of time and space. It is expected to play vital roles in the survival and good life of individuals or groups of people that pass through the process especially, when the quality of the system of education adopted is guaranteed. The British system of education handed over to Nigeria was considered in several ways to be alien to her beliefs and values system, this prompted the post-independence national curriculum conference in 1969 under which new policies were developed basically for education in Nigeria. The conference was planned as the first indigenous kind to consider the aims and objectives of Nigeria's education, the content, the methods and materials required for the indigenous curriculum to realise the desired aims and objectives. Eventually, the 1969 curriculum conference evoked a National Philosophy for education. Hence, national policy for Nigeria's education is regarded to have been nursed in 1969, fashioned in 1977 and

initially promulgated in 1981. Having acknowledged that it is imperative to fathom the ideals of the society in any given circumstance before a formulation of the goal of education, Fafunwa submits that though, the 1969 conference came close to realising the yearnings for Nigerian philosophy of education but never produced one as specific contents and methodology for system of education in Nigeria was not recommended however, many Nigerians agreed that The National Policy on Education addressed fundamental needs and longings of any civilised nation. This is seen in the way the Policy tends to transform Nigerian schools from state of abstraction to the state of problem solving schools which necessarily leads to a self-reliant society. Examining the ideas in National Policy and Education, one will tend to conclude that Nigeria education is progressive in character as it provides; education as an instrument for national development and social change; education as vital for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria; education maximizes the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society. The impression

given by the above section of the policy document is that Nigeria's educational philosophy is progressive in character and this leads to the question, how and to what extent is Nigeria's educational policy is progressive?

Pragmatism is a synonymous concept with postmodernism. Pragmatism processes both progressivism and reconstructionism as its educational philosophy. Postmodernism and pragmatism are identical on many fundamental assumptions as for an example in the recognition and assertion of differences and otherness. This value of differences, open-ended possibilities and multiple ways of viewing realities are embedded in the conception of democracy.

### Postmodernism Epistemology

The effect of Postmodernism has globally generated topical issues in science, social, political and educational aspects of our lives especially, in contemporary period. The term postmodernism was first coined and used by Rudolf Pannwitz in his 1917s work, *The Crisis of European Culture*. Postmodernism can be better understood in the light of knowing what modernism is all about. Modernism predates postmodernism as it is a reactionary philosophy that emerged after modernism. Modernism emphasises certainty, meta-narrative, and discovery of realities as they really are. This is the position of traditional epistemology as seen in Descartes epistemology as he sought to erect an indubitable foundation for our epistemic claims. Against this background is the contemporary developments in epistemology as represented by postmodernism which emphasises the instability of everything. It is a philosophy which asserts that truth is unknowable. Universality, absolutism is replaced with words like "perspectives", "points of view", "construct" and the likes. For postmodernism epistemology, there are no context-independent observations.

Richard Rorty has been said to be the most influential advocate of postmodernism. As a postmodernist, he had forerunners whose fountain of ideas has stimulated him. Hence, Rorty's position is not completely novel. In

Rorty's famous work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he argues that traditional epistemology assumed wrongly the causal process of acquiring knowledge with questions about the justification of knowledge. This wrong assumption leads to viewing the mind as a mirror that reflects the external world therefore, knowledge is constructed to be an accuracy of representations. Rejecting the traditional notion of epistemology which is based on the notion that we can arrive at ideas or statements that will give us the one, true picture of reality, Rorty drew on the insights of Thomas Kuhn's view which sees knowledge as *context-dependent* and calls attention to the social context of justification. Having agreed that mind does not mirror reality and by implication, statements do not correspond to external world, the question could be asked; is there any possibility for this notion of objective truth? Responding to the question is Rorty's suggestion of replacement of the epistemologist's objectivity with the pragmatist's inter-subjectivity. The desire for inter subjectivity is the desire to extend the reference of "us" as far as we can. Rorty therefore, sees the truth and rational certainty as a matter of social practice and consensual agreement because both cannot be discussed apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures which are justified by the epistemic norms of the relevant society. While rejecting traditional epistemologist's view on knowledge, Rorty alternates it with what he calls *epistemological behaviour* which according to him implies that the study of the nature of human knowledge is just as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact.

Now that Rorty's view has posited that mind is naturally incapable of representing nature in accuracy, the question then is, of what value is philosophy if philosophical discourse cannot accurately present realities as they really are? Rorty responds thus:

*To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to*

*sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately.<sup>8</sup>*

### **Aims of Postmodernism Education**

One of the cardinal aims of postmodernism's goal on education is the attainment of egalitarian and democratic society. In the history of modernity, this aim has not been achieved owing to marginalisation of social groups for examples, by racism, nationalism and so on. The domination of a specific culture will forever remain as an obstacle for a real democracy. This is the reason why postmodernists' aim of education is to institutionalise pluralism which will naturally give birth to various cultures among learners hence, development of social responsibility.<sup>9</sup> This is a desirable aim of education since it is the sense of social responsibility that will develop acknowledgement and appreciation of numerous identities of students, and therefore fundamental human rights are established.

Modernism has been criticised on the ground that it promoted western Eurocentric view points since it was rooted in the Enlightenment and this Enlightenment philosophy was dominated by the elites who were in an influential camp. Reacting to this position is the postmodernism education which aims at providing a uniquely inclusive and democratic theoretical position in which non-elite or marginalized groups are considered as having equally valid perspectives, Brian Duignan stated that;

*Postmodernists regard their theoretical position as uniquely inclusive and democratic because it allows them to recognise the unjust hegemony of Enlightenment discourses over the equally valid perspectives of non-elite groups.<sup>10</sup>*

In the light of the above, the development of individual and social identity is what Giroux refers to as "border pedagogy." While explaining this concepts, he vehemently asserts that border pedagogy instills in students not only ability to familiarise with different cultures but also in their context-dependent attitudes in a critical way. In other words, their ability to critically contextualise their knowledge. This would disallow them from accepting their ancestral heritage dogmatically and enable them to clearly see the relation between knowledge and power and clear their border.<sup>11</sup> Giroux concludes that any thought or philosophy that does not concern itself with human, social and cultural issues is bound to fail. The second half of twentieth century generation, according to Berger<sup>12</sup> has been nicknamed quintessential postmodernists, this is not unconnected with the fact that their thoughts and education are in consonance with the postmodernist ideals, in terms of representing the progressive ideals which is bound to yield a great deal of change with a holistic approach where reality, knowledge and individuality are all parts of a larger whole rather than separate entities.

Postmodernism has been criticised on the ground that its embrace of communities is a direct opposition to individualism. It is a known fact that societies play very important role in determining reality and values. No previous generation is more globally connected than this generation owing to the fact that postmodernism sees globalisation as a means through which it can achieve its aims. It is to be noted that the said globalisation should not be misconstrued for universality. While universality teaches of absolute truth, metanarratives and inherent meaning, globalisation is meant to enhance access to varied perspectives within a single, global community.<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture, and for the purpose of convenience, it is deemed fit to briefly explain the four most prominent progressive methodologies and pedagogical models of postmodernism's education namely; competency-based learning, problem-based learning, place-based learning and self-directed

learning. Competency-based learning involves the mastery of specific learning objectives. Students are given multiple and varied opportunities to advance through course work while frequently receiving feedbacks from the facilitators. This is why the method is described as student-centred since the learners are allowed to proceed at their own pace without any interference or imposition on the part of facilitators. Problem-based learning posited that rather than mere regurgitation of concepts or facts, facilitators organise their lessons based on case studies in which the learners are given a concrete or real-world problems and together, they develop and proffer applicable solutions to them. This method is student centred as well. Place-based learning is a method that expands the scope of learning beyond the world of classroom to local community, society, culture, or the ancestral heritage in terms of the positive contributions they can possibly make. Self-directed learning has been regarded to be the most important of all the postmodern-inspired pedagogies. In its broadcast conception, self-directed learning employs a way in which individuals is free to take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in dissecting their learning, making choices and devising appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes." One of the reasons this method is effective is the fact that it allows the learners to explore how to learn, and dissect the purpose of learning. The self-knowledge and understanding of one's self is the cardinal objective of self-directed model. The self-knowledge begins with the ability to ask and engage oneself with critical questions that will eventually yield the identification of what is worth understanding. This is what Richard Rorty proposed and called the idea of "Ideal human" that is more "self-creating", and the adoption of self-creation should be part of ultimate aims of education. Any viable educational system should stand as a fertile ground where the seed of critical capacity germinates and grows into changing, enhancing social and political order instead of adapting to them.

### **Implications of Postmodernism in Contemporary Nigeria's Education**

The National Policy on Education begins with general and specific statements of the orientation and philosophy of Nigerian educational system. The five national objectives of the second National Development Plan from 1970 to 1974 were made the official philosophical base for Nigerian education. These five main national goals of Nigeria as stated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are the building of: a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy; and a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens"

The cardinal reason behind the National Policy on Education is the radical departure from the colonially inherited education as Fafunwa" describes and asserts that Nigerians have practically made themselves slaves of a system which may be working remarkably well in meeting the needs of the British but which is in fact unsuitable in Nigeria. many Nigerians agreed that the National Policy on Education addressed fundamental needs and longings of any civilised nation. Just as Enoh" observes that "...schools therefore cease to be abstractions but are created to solve the problems of society". While appraising for instance, the objectives of primary education as provided in the National Policy on Education, Wokocho elucidated that:

*The objectives of primary education in Nigeria as enunciated (in the National Policy on Education) are so functional in their orientation that if they are successfully achieved, they form the basis for a very enlightened, self-reliant, healthy, disciplined and in fact, well roundly developed citizenry."*

Taking a cursory look at the ideas in the national policy in question, one will tend to conclude that Nigerian education is progressive in nature

however, this has provoked the question; does Nigeria have a philosophy of education worthy of the name? To which philosophical school of thought (if it has) does it belong? Is it idealism school of thought of which perennialism is the educational philosophy or realism of which essentialism is the educational focus, or pragmatism which both progressivism and reconstructionism serve as its educational philosophy. An attempt to answer these questions has attracted numerous numbers of philosophers of education as the questions have been answered divergently.

The philosophy underpinning Nigeria's educational philosophy, National Policy on Education, states that Nigeria's Philosophy of Education is based on the following set of beliefs:

*Education is an instrument for national development and social change;*

*Education is vital for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria;*

*Education maximizes the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society;"*

The impression explicitly given by the section of the National Policy on Education is that Nigeria's Philosophy of education is progressive in character. How progressive and to what extent is Nigeria's philosophy of education are the questions to be attempted shortly.

Primarily, postmodernism has been said to be marked by descriptive theories of the way the world is, unlike a critical theory of how to act in the world. Going by this notion, it could be concluded that postmodernism does not offer useful and normative directions for education. It is in view of this conception that pragmatism that has both progressivism and reconstructionism as its educational philosophy has been considered very useful especially, in contemporary

educational discourse. In spite of this conception, postmodernism and pragmatism share many of the same fundamental assumptions, yet, pragmatists retain a moral dimension as seen in the pragmatist notions of democracy and the possibility of progress. Be this as it may, on many counts, pragmatism parallels postmodernism. For examples, both postmodernists and pragmatists are skeptical of grand theories and static epistemological claims, they both conceived all theories as partial view and hypothetical, and therefore, conceive knowledge to be socially constructed, see the world to be uncertain, open-ended, unstable and pluralistic, and stand antithetical to representationalism. Both postmodernism and pragmatism are on the same page in the celebration of difference and otherness. This is seen in the pragmatist conception of democracy as it is premised on the value of differences and open-ended possibilities which recognises and promotes the power of every individual to contribute to the enrichment of the whole society.<sup>28</sup>

In addressing the question on how progressive Nigeria's education is, the National Policy on Education that is meant to be essentially progressive in character, reveals elements of essentialism. An example is seen in subjects like Mathematics and English language which are prescribed for the students both in the junior and senior secondary schools in the policy document as compulsory subjects. The curriculum for Junior Secondary School Education provides for English Studies, one Nigerian Language, and Mathematics, while that of the Senior Secondary Education consists English Language, General Mathematics.<sup>29</sup>

In this connection, essentialism conceives education as a central body of essential knowledge that must be transmitted to all who come to school. The implication of this is that the position of the teacher is central in that his major role is that of a deposition whose instruction is passively absorbed by the learners to be reproduced in examinations.

Another example of the unprogressive character found in the National Policy on

Education is the constant use of the word 'inculcation'<sup>23</sup> which possesses elements of indoctrination that is antithetical to scientific and reflective thinking which is supposed to be one of the progressive goals of Nigeria's education. This is so because indoctrination is associated with dogma which connotes an unquestionable body of belief characterised by threats and coercion in order to be accepted hook, line and sinker.

### Implications for Curriculum Development

Postmodernism educational curriculum attempts to put students in the process of 'becoming'. This concept of 'becoming' in the way Deleuze conceives it, is linked to 'rhizome', meaning the secondary roots, which are not main roots.<sup>24</sup> While explaining further, since rhizome is a secondary root, it neither has a determined nor clear path. The concept of 'becoming' conceives a system which doesn't follow fix rows but allows plurality and diversity of method. For Deleuze, thinking without 'becoming' is impossible, the lack of ability for 'becoming' is the lack of ability for thinking. Thinking, for him, is the result of been different from others.

Postmodernity theory emphasises the individual interests of student and practical activities. This individual interests necessitate the diversification in the postmodern curriculum for the purpose of reckoning with the plurality of interest and abilities. The Nigerian curriculum tends to be postmodern-inspired, it will be a great challenge if not contradictory, when juxtaposing the emphasis Nigerian educational system puts on science and technology as provided in the National Policy on Education and the postmodern curriculum;

*A sizeable proportion of expenditure On university education shall be devoted to science and Technology. Not less than 60% of places shall be allocated to science and science-oriented courses in the conventional universities and not less than 80% in The universities of technology and*

### *Agriculture.*<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the above provision, the interest of the students as concerned by postmodern and progressive curriculum has been undetermined. The pertinent hypothetical question could be: when 60% as above of the students are not interested in science and technology oriented courses, what will be the consideration of those students? Has their freedom of choice not been hindered? Since postmodern curriculum emphasises the child's interest and needs, the policy document in question which proclaims to have embraced this progressive philosophy must adhere to it as a matter of logic and coherence.

The core spirit of a postmodern philosophy of education holds that all students' interests and needs must be given equal opportunity to learn though, the learning may be undertaken in different ways. In postmodernist education, differentiation in course of study and method of instruction must be considered in the light of the peculiarity and uniqueness of each student. Contemporarily, this position has become an accepted trend as some scholarly works have established it. A work by Guilford titled *Structure of the Intellect*<sup>26</sup> and another written by Howard Gardner; *Multiple Intelligences*<sup>27</sup> established that what is called talent exhibits itself in multifaceted ways since intelligence lacks monolithic structure. The import of this is that curriculum should be guided in the direction that learners will be understood from the point of view of their interests, needs and strengths.

What is the content for postmodernist educational curriculum? Going by the original ancient Greek word "curriculum"- *curreere*, meaning direction, the content of education should be capable of leading and directing the student. the term is said by Pinar to be synonymous with curriculum which is flexible and tentative enough to accommodate regular revisiting of any educational experience in order to be up to current educational challenging.

### Conclusion

The study has focused on the philosophy

guiding Nigeria's education as contained in the National Policy on Education. It considered the extent to which it is in agreement with postmodernism as an educational philosophy. It is the cardinal concern of postmodernism philosophy of education to be critical of what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught with the aim of ensuring that the learners are equipped with democratic, open, heterogeneous and self-reflexive cultural identities. Therefore, the paper critically examined education in the post-independence era of Nigeria. It did examine the policy document and posits that the role of educational philosophy is not only to connect the socio-political ideology of any given society with aims and objectives of such a society, but to constantly ensure that such a philosophy must readily reflect the reality of ever changing nature of every human society.

### Recommendations

The study has established that the philosophy of postmodernism teaches non-racist, open, heterogeneous and democratic tendencies. Therefore, the study recommends that educational opportunities be given to all citizens in respect of their needs and interest.

The progressive tendency of the National Policy on Education provides that it is the interest and need of the learners that will determine their direction in education. On the contrary, it is the same policy document that emphasises science oriented subjects over and above other subjects among other anomalies and contradictions contained in the policy. The study, therefore, recommends that the policy be reviewed for the purpose of correcting the identified incoherencies and contradictions.

The open, heterogeneous and democratic tendencies of post modernism frowns at any bureaucratic hierarchies. Hence, the study recommends the top down approach be deconstructed and decentralised so that every stakeholder in school organisation will be active partakers in the decision-making process, and as a result, this will enhance creativity on the part of learners.

Postmodernism schools are mirrors of

family and society as it echoes the values and sentiments of family. The study recommends that schools be structured along postmodernism pattern as it is capable of transforming school premises to become the abode of shared parenting, mutual love, flexible boundaries between home and public life. Nigeria school environment should be friendly to all and sundry of learners and should not restrict anyone. Punishment should not be administered constantly and indiscriminately while discharging their duties in order to capture the interest of the student and enhance positive interactions between schools the learners.

Reliable and true learning should be based on humanism not data because to actualise true learning, knowledge of how human beings interact with one another is central. The human factors such as intention, motivation, context are very important in dissecting and interpreting the data of which the hard data are incapable. It is only capable of revealing one side of the fact. This is humanistic and existential form of education for which postmodernism stands.

The Nigeria educational system should not conceive the goal of education only as acquisition of skills and knowledge but also and utmost important, to activate learners to embrace what Richard Rorty proposed as the idea of 'ideal human' who is more 'self-creating' in developing critical capacity to create fundamental transformations in the miserable and marginalised existing social and political lives of the country instead of adapting to the status quo.

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