

## Exploring Core Facets of (the Philosophy of) African Indigenous Education in the light of Dewey's Philosophy of Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the (philosophy of) African indigenous education in the light of John Dewey's philosophy of education by focusing on some core aspects of African indigenous education and Dewey's educational thoughts. Referring to the model of education practiced in and by the African continent before the era of colonization, African indigenous education preceded the westernization of African educational systems. Looking at distinctive aspects of African indigenous education that depict some basic pillars of Dewey's philosophy of education, the study tries to show the extent to which many of Deweyan educational concepts are inherent in this indigenous model. Following Dewey's philosophy of education, the African indigenous education model appears to put the learners at the center of the learning process where transmission of knowledge is based on experience and is pragmatically oriented for the good of the learner and the learner's community. The paper highlights that the democratic side of African indigenous education should be reinforced to fully spouse the Deweyan approach to education, which may posit it as an effective instrument for the reform of any contemporary education systems in crisis due to authoritarian (non-experience-oriented and non-learner-centered) structures and methods of education.*

**Keywords:** African indigenous education, Dewey's philosophy of education, experiential education, learner-centered education, democracy

### INTRODUCTION

African indigenous education is often described as a traditional and informal form of education. It is an indigenous mode of education that existed in Africa before the era of colonization and westernization (Sambuli, 2000; Mosweunyane, 2013). There were no schools of the modern type or as found in the western system in African indigenous education. However, there were centers of initiation and the adult members of the community served as teachers for the young (learners) (Boateng, 1985). African philosophy of traditional education is described as pragmatic and aims to provide a gateway to the life of the community (Sambuli, 2000). Knowledge, skills, and attitudes were transmitted from generation to generation mostly through word of mouth within traditional activities in African societies (Mosweunyane, 2013). This work aims at analyzing some core aspects of African indigenous education in the light of Dewey's philosophy of education to see whether the African indigenous education can be posited as a prominent model for the reforming of education systems in crisis, considering that Dewey's approach to education is given a prominent consideration worldwide (Synytsia, 2020). Considered as the pioneering educationist of the 20th century, Dewey's thoughts on education are considered to be very crucial to measure and reform the quality of education systems and theories all over the world (Aliya, 2015). It is widely known that "all the leading educational theories in the world are to

be characterized and positioned according to how closely they appear to align with Dewey's theory or depart from it" (Žlebňik, 1983). The present work gives prominence to the relationship that Dewey establishes between education, experience, democracy, and society, as well as his consideration of education as a means to serve the democratization and the development and emancipation of the society (Dewey, 1916; Synytsia, 2020). In his philosophy of education, Dewey suggests the shaping by the education of a society in which the common goods, among which are the knowledge and social intelligence, are distributed fairly and democratically among all who participate in that society (Berding, 1992). This work firstly explores the concept of experience in education. Secondly, the place of the teacher and the learner is examined. Thirdly, the concepts of curriculum and the social dimension of learning are analyzed. Finally, insights from Dewey's philosophy of education are presented to deepen the democratic characteristics of African indigenous education.

### **Education and Experience**

Experience has an important place both in the African indigenous' and Dewey's philosophy of education. In his preferred educational approach, pragmatism, Dewey views experience as a medium of true knowledge and a prerequisite for critical thinking and therefore considers true learning as a reconstruction of experience (Synytsia, 2020). "Such a view of education connects ends and means, unifies thought and action, and links past, present, and future" (Hansen, 2006). In the African indigenous consideration of education and Dewey's theory of education, a key idea is that interaction and continuity are two core characteristics of effective teaching and learning through experiences. The interaction characteristic highlights the importance of the dialogue and communication underlying learning; the continuity characteristic emphasizes that the individual learner must be viewed as the key design element. In other words, instruction must be designed so that individual learner can effectively build on what he or she knows, and have the resources and assistance to learn. Interaction and continuity in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience (Dewey, 1998).

### ***Experience and Interaction***

African indigenous education makes learners conscious of their social and ecological interdependence. Therefore, things are seen less in a cause-effect or linear mode and more in a systems-mode. One of Dewey's premises is that the learner's experience results from the interaction between the learner and the environment. This is Dewey's principle of interaction. According to the principle of interaction "experience is truly experience only when objective conditions are subordinated to what goes on within the individuals having the experience" (Dewey, 2015). That is, true experience is when there an interaction between the environment and the learner. Factors that affect the learning experience include those that are internal to the learner and those that are "objective" parts of the environment (Dewey, 1916). For Dewey, everything the teacher does, as well as how the teacher does it, incites the students to respond in some way or another. This is the case with the African indigenous education where interaction is going on between individuals, objects, and other persons. The concepts of situation and interaction are therefore inseparable from each other. In Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, an experience "is when we do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return. Experience as trying involves change [...] when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us; the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something" (Dewey, 1916). That is why communication is very important both in Dewey's philosophy of education and the African mode of education. The African indigenous education, therefore, advocates that interaction is very necessary to have an educative experience or a true experience which "is always what it is because of a

transaction taking place between the individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (Dewey, 1998). Each individual’s experience is, in this way, complex spatially, the result of an exchange between the learner and his or her environment. That is, learning in its broadest, no-school sense, is a reconciliation of tension, an interaction between the self and its surroundings.

### ***Experience and Continuity***

The other premise of Dewey’s theory of experience is called the principle of continuity. The principle of continuity advocates that discontinuity is not a possible characteristic of true knowledge (Synytsia, 2020). Dewey’s principle of continuity highlights that every experience perspective, the quality of those that come after (Dewey, 1998). Experiences are complex temporally, penetrating one another, earlier ones leaving deposits or residues which influence later ones. Dewey explains that people develop habits of emotional response, perception, appreciation, sensitivity, and attitude. These habits, developed from past experiences, affect future experiences (Dewey, 1916). Similarly, every experience has continuity within the African indigenous education: it is permeable, taking something from the past and leaving tracks that shape the future. As such, future educational stages particularly rely on the previous stages and the journey or the route of experience never ends. Sambuli (2000) makes it clear that in the African traditional society, learning starts at birth and ends at death (Sambuli, 2000). For Dewey, any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. In *Democracy and Education*, he points out that “the measure of the value of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities to which it leads up” (Dewey, 1916). For him, the principle of continuity which is very essential in the African indigenous mode of education, also called the *experiential continuum*, is involved in every attempt to discriminate between experiences that are worthwhile educationally and those that are not.

The African indigenous use of experience to educate therefore meets Dewey’s requirements for an educative experience. Dewey argues that educative experiences could be judged by whether or not: the individual grew, or would grow, intellectually and morally; the larger community benefited from the learning over the long haul; the situation resulted in conditions leading to further growth, such as arousing curiosity and strengthening initiative, desire, and purpose. In interactive and continuous experiences (each experience leading to another), the indigenous African learner learns for the good of the entire community. In this way, “Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual” (Mbiti, 1969).

### ***Experiential Education and Communication***

The essence of experiential education is captured by Dewey’s philosophy of education with the consideration that experience always happens; it is unavoidable. The problem for teachers and students is how to make meaning out of the experience. In its purest forms, experiential education is inductive, beginning with “raw” experience that is processed through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, useable knowledge (Dewey, 2015). It is important to note that Dewey articulated his theory of experience as a critique of the then Western traditional education which is similar to the so-called modern western model of education that was imposed on many African countries since the era of colonialism. Traditional (Western), classroom-based education, he argued, developed in response to the demands of urban-industrial capitalism, is based on the dualisms of mind and body, mind and world, and on deductive logic that works from the general to the particular (Fishman et al., 1998). It assumes the ignorance of the learner and the wisdom and authority of the teacher and is premised on a belief in bodies of knowledge or disciplines that the student should

acquire. This *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2001) is not welcome in the African traditional education where knowledge obtained from experience must have a beneficial effect both on the learner and on the entire community. Here, there is no dualism or opposition of mind and body, mind and community and this strong unity between them is a result of effective communication or interaction. In this sense, Dewey suggests that a goal of experiential education is that we learn how to transform experience into knowledge, that we use this knowledge for our individual and collective development (Dewey, 1916).

Experiential education differs from much of traditional education in maintaining that knowledge is individually and communally constructed by people as they reflect on the world around them. In short, experiential education replaces the dualisms of experience and knowledge, mind and body with an emphasis on a unifying process of communication. In African traditional education as well as in Dewey's philosophy of education, communication plays an essential role in the renewing existence of the community. In fact, since a group of people does not become a community by living in physical proximity, but through communication which is the bedrock for transmission of knowledge from generation to generation through experience (Bray et al., 1986). This is why in the first chapter of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey puts communication at the center of the existence of any society. Dewey insists that "society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" (Dewey, 1916). One value of community is that it provides a place in which this communication also known as dialogue can take place. It is this process of dialogue, most commonly referred to as "reflection", through which the unification of experience and knowledge, mind and body, individual and community is realized. This cycle of experience and reflection grounds all forms of experiential education.

## **The Status of the Teacher and the Learner**

### ***The Teacher as a Facilitator***

In the African indigenous mode of education, the teachers (parents, grandparents, elders, etc) are not seen as dominant persons in the education setting who deliver the planned subject content teaching, by providing conditions for order and discipline while lecturing and by hierarchical communication with the students (Illich, 1971). The emphasis is that student-centered learning needs educators who create conditions for open and responsible interaction and enable the intellectual autonomy of students. Such educators should encourage the initiative, critical thinking, and inquiry of learners and their independent learning while representing a model for students' behavior. They should as well respect learners' individual needs and capacities while making conditions for learners to develop their attitudes and applying different strategies towards students' assessment and self-assessment (Sambuli, 2000). The responsibility of the educator for Dewey is to create the conditions for experiences that would result in this kind of growth, a responsibility that required: knowledge of the students; understanding of the types of experience that could help them learn; the ability to anticipate and respond to the particular situations that developed as an experience unfolded (Dewey, 1966). All these features are in line with Dewey's ideas that the teacher has a complex and responsible task to be "an intelligent medium of action" (Dewey, 1974a) which implies that he needs to know his students well and to direct their experience development in accordance with their individual intellectual and character traits.

The African indigenous mode of education stresses the sensitivity of educators towards learners' needs and their individual differences as well as their belonging to the whole community (Sambuli, 2000). For Dewey, learning processes should be planned considering the aptitude of learners, their former experiences, and their present experiences. The teacher

should therefore observe the interest of the students, observe the directions they naturally take, and then help them develop problem-solving skills. A teachers' primary purpose is to increase the freedom of the children to enable them to explore their environments. This is also how learning takes place in the African indigenous education environment where learners are allowed to freely move all over the learning environment, as they pursue their interests and construct their own paths for acquiring and applying knowledge by means of communication (Boateng, 1985). Teachers as members of the community of learning are engaged with the learners through interaction, which is a social process: they do not cease to learn (Mosweunyane, 2013). As stressed by Koma (1976) knowledge was continually modified and innovations renewed, which strengthened the conviction amongst the African societies that life is a process of learning (Koma, 1976).

### ***The Learner as the Center***

The child-centered approach, which is employed by the African indigenous educational model, put in front individualization as a basic principle in the organization of teaching or educational life. It means respect for the uniqueness of each student and creating conditions for their optimal and overall development (Burke, 1996b). This happens while the teacher is engaged, through the dynamic implementation of a variety of methods, to create conditions for each student to find their own way and pace of learning. Respecting students' individual needs, abilities and interests are one of the key features of Dewey's educational philosophy and his laboratory school in Chicago (Illich, 1971). The realization of the individual treatment of students is closely connected with their active engagement in different activities, because "the moment children act they individualize themselves, they cease to be a mass and become the intensely distinctive beings (...)" (Dewey, 1949). The African indigenous mode of education advocates that the child must not be authoritatively told beforehand what is good or evil, but should discover these opposite realities for himself. Like in Dewey's philosophy this mode of education is most concerned about the development of the individuality of children who, of course, belong to the whole community (Sambuli, 2000). In chapters three and six of *Democracy and Education* (e.g. *Education as Direction; Education as Conservative and Progressive*), Dewey makes it clear that the learner should be considered as the center in the "teaching-learning relationship" (Dewey, J., 1966). In this relationship, the learner is viewed as "an engaged, purposive agent, desirous of exploring and gaining facility with his or her surroundings" (Hansen, 2006). Although the "customs and rules of adults" actually have an impact on the young, "the young, after all, participate in the direction which their actions finally take" (Dewey, 1980). This process should therefore be guided by the principle of "autonomy" according to Dewey. The Deweyan concept of "autonomy" can be considered similar to the African theory of *self-reliance* (Nyerere, 1967) where the learner is viewed as an active self-reliant agent during and after the process of learning (Mukhungulu, Kimathi & K'Odhiambo, 2017).

Indeed, a child is by nature curious, social, and constructive, and possesses inherently the raw material to be developed by an experienced guide and mentor. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to plan a positive and constructive environment for the students to create positive learning experiences for them (Djiraro Mangué & Gonondo, 2019). Such environments are built in the joint partnership of teachers and students, where together they try out effective techniques of teaching and learning. The objective is to make students more self-reliant. In this way, the learning community is a place where the students become active members (Dewey, 1916).

### **The Curriculum and Social Dimension of Learning**

#### ***A Humanized Curriculum***

Although the African indigenous education model does not occur in a classic setting, it however utilizes a curriculum. Indeed, it is clear that “one cannot teach or learn without teaching or learning something”, which is the subject matter or the curriculum (Hansen, 2006). The subject matter in the African indigenous education can be disclosed within the different strategies employed by indigenous educators: initiations, rites and rituals, traditional games, diverse traditional events, and oral literature (e.g. tales, legends, proverbs, riddles) (Boateng, 1985; Sambuli, 2000). The African indigenous mode of education makes use of the curriculum to connect man with the social environment by emphasizing common human interests, hence, the concept of a “humanized curriculum” which is very fashionable among the African traditional centers of education (Nyerere, 1987). This way of viewing the curriculum converges with Dewey's considerations on this matter. For Dewey, a *normal society* particularly depends on a “humanized curriculum” in which knowledge becomes meaningful to the learners as it “connects with the common interests of men as men” (Dewey, 1916). Here, the school curriculum never ignores people's “longing for connection between knowledge and action, self and other, and mind and heart” (Hansen, 2006). For Dewey, as well as for the African indigenous philosophy of education, failure to humanize the curriculum or its dehumanization results in ineffective learning, because it creates a gap between theory and practice and depraves education of its pragmatic and democratic values, making it almost meaningless for the learner and useless for the society (Synytsia, 2020; Mukhungulu, Kimathi & K'Odhiambo, 2017).

Moreover, just as Dewey requires in his philosophy of education, African traditional education employs an interdisciplinary curriculum or a curriculum that focuses on connecting multiple subjects. Therefore, instead of the traditional western fashion of class organization with different unrelated subjects and prescribed time limitation of classes, different subject areas are linked, and the content and the activities are realized within a flexible daily schedule that takes into consideration students' interests and personal choice. In this way, learners can properly play the two fundamental roles they need to have in the teaching-learning process. Thus, learners can effectively play the role of *thinkers*, which enables them to reflect on their actions and connect the previous with the new knowledge, and the role of *problem-solvers*, which helps them find alternative solutions for the difficulties they face while looking at the problems as opportunities for discovery (Burke, 1996b).

This approach reflects to a great extent Dewey's ideas of unity of life and the natural unity of the studies which claim that “all studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it” and that “when the child lives in varied but concrete and active relationship to this common world, his studies are naturally unified” (Dewey, 1949). The integrative curriculum employed by the African indigenous mode of education is in close association with the holistic approach that Dewey advocates and his quest for a linkage between school and life (Aliya, 2015).

### ***The Social Dimension of Learning***

The African indigenous educationist all agree that the preparation of citizens who will actively participate in the creation of a democratic society means not only preparing for critical thinking and capacity for problem-solving but also developing social skills (Mukhungulu, Kimathi & K'Odhiambo, 2017). This requirement is especially in accordance with Dewey's philosophy of education, which states that as the prerequisite to becoming valuable members of the society, students have to develop some fundamental faculties. For example, they should be able to have empathy for others. Learners are also supposed to have “a sense of efficacy, a feeling that participation in the affairs of the community is worthwhile; a sense of the meaning of one's life in relation to the historical moment; a sense of integrity

between one's beliefs and one's actions" (Dewey, 1916). The African indigenous education is therefore based on the following fundamental concepts: care for self, for the others and the environment; communication as an important instrument for overcoming misunderstandings and community building; connection, which refers not only to new information and previous knowledge but also to the connections between different individuals and elements of the environment; community, which develops the sense of belonging and the need to be useful for the others (Boateng, 1985; Nyerere, 1987). In this indigenous environment, it is essentially believed that "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969). This implies that individuals exist by belonging and participating in the building of their society; their individual existence depends on the collective existence of the whole society, and vice versa.

Stressing the necessity for the development of these values, the African indigenous mode of education puts great attention to cooperative learning, the role of the individuals during group work, and the relationship between the young as well as the young and the adults or educators. Learners are stimulated to work daily in groups of different sizes and structures. They are regularly engaged in debates, discussions, and problem-solving situations during which they learn to build their own opinion and to respect others, to help each other, and to develop tolerance and patience to listen to others. These attitudinal and behavioral components that constitute a sense of social responsibility pointed out in Dewey's interpretation of democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" and to the social and moral ideal of education in a *humanized* or democratic community (Dewey, 1916). Indeed, "education should create an interest in all persons in furthering the general good so that they will find their own happiness realized in what they can do to improve the conditions of others" (Eames, 1977). By stimulating the social dimension of learning, schools create individuals who will be aware of the role and responsibility they have regarding the community they live in. This is very relevant for the African traditional society where the young are considered as the adults' substitutes. Here, of course, there is nothing like the social contract advocated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau: the African indigenous kind of socialization is not "the result of independent, pre-social individuals coming together to form a covenant, whether it be among themselves or together in contract with the sovereign" (Hansen, 2006). But, it is actually, the kind of socialization where numerous and various interests are consciously shared and which meets Dewey's prescription of educational success in expanding the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic horizons of the young while developing in them an awareness of connections and interrelations with others (Dewey, 1916). One of the main goals of African indigenous education is to obtain social efficiency which permits different facets of the environment (physical objects, social objects, and community events) to be experienced as meaningful. In the same vein, in Chapter 9 of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey defines social efficiency as "nothing less than that socialization of mind which is actively concerned in making experiences more communicable; in breaking down the barriers of social stratification which make individuals impervious to the interests of others" (Dewey, 1916).

### **Reinforcing the Democracy of African Indigenous Education: Some insights from Dewey's Conception of Democratic Education**

The African indigenous education needs to be enriched and deepened by taking into consideration all the dimensions of Dewey's conceptualization of democratic education and democratic society. Though there is recognition of existence of democracy in the African endogenous education where free and personal experience, free interactions, and communication are given central importance in teaching and learning, one can still see that there are certain limits that somewhat affect democracy. These limits are usually related to

the existence of a kind of authority in education on the one hand (e.g. at certain levels of initiations, the teacher-learner relationship sometimes can become a vertical relationship, even if this, most often, happens punctually, not permanently nor continuously), and social control and discipline on the other hand. In the African indigenous educational approach, adults (teachers) consider the young (learners) as their only hope for social renewal. They sometimes tend to always *have an eye* on the young in terms of social control and discipline (Koma, 1976). Hence, it is crucial to get some insights from Dewey's democratic conception in education in order to add to the freedom and communality which already exist in the African indigenous education, the idea of "fullness" which is very essential in the Deweyan conception of a worth and desirable society (Dewey, 1916). The African indigenous education should therefore totally encompass Dewey's considerations of the democratic ideal and self-control and discipline if it is to be used as an instrument for education reform.

### ***The Democratic Ideal***

According to Dewey, one of the most important concerns should be about the rights of the child as an individual, his right to exercise his decisions, choices in learning and education, and his participation in a democratic learning process. This can permanently be allowed only in an ideal democracy. In chapter seven of *Democracy and Education (The Democratic Conception in Education)*, Dewey makes it clear that "a society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secure flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic" (Dewey, J., 1916). Therefore, democracy is not a vertical or hierarchical, but a horizontal arrangement in which freely reflecting individuals can work together as equals to propose and realize individual and social aims (Dewey, 1966). In any society, democracy, therefore, requires education in the way that learning should be viewed besides content and should consist of habits of openness, reflection, and dialogue. In abiding with these Deweyan democratic norms, the African indigenous education will be more than up to date, since it will not be able to give "individuals a personal interest in social relationship and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" but will also provide a platform for coexistence of "the fullness and freedom" required by Dewey as far as interactions within different social groups are concerned (Dewey, 1916). This will of course lead to a wonderful situation where free intercourse and communication of experience will eternally exist between the *majority of minds* in the African society.

### ***Self-control and Discipline***

In African indigenous education, there seems to be external enforcement of rules, a great concern for order. But there is not such kind of top-down, compulsory, and punitive nature of classroom discipline which currently exists in the imported western model of education, which affects African students negatively, creating an aversion to studying and leading to an education crisis. However, Dewey finds this external enforcement of rules and great concern for order contradictory to an education designed to prepare learners for active participation in a democratic society. This kind of control seems to be very limited in terms of good effects on society life: there is a need for a different type of control named *self-control*. For Dewey, democracy must be viewed as not only a way of life, an ethical ideal, but also as a personal commitment (Dewey, 1916).

Following Dewey's philosophy, the African indigenous society will totally idealize its education in terms of democracy by making it a way of life in which individuals are presumed to be self-directing and able to pursue their personal goals and projects. The Deweyan democratic ideal assumes that citizens not only have rights but also responsibilities.



As Dewey requires it in *Democracy and Education*, African indigenous education should also aim at creating the power of self-control within the community, since the best educational experience should create confident, self-controlled, and capable citizens. Self-control does not mean the simple and only total removal of external control. Since freedom should be tied to self-control, it is important to keep in mind that the control that matters is derived from "high-quality" educational experiences, i.e. experiences where continuity and interaction are seriously taken into account in terms of fullness and freedom (Dewey, 1966).

## CONCLUSION

It is very important to conclude by indicating that Africa had its own form of education that made pre-colonial African citizens live in a harmonized, convivial, and peaceful society before the westernization of their education system. This paper has explored the philosophy of African indigenous education in light of the educational theory of John Dewey. This discussion focused on some core facets of African indigenous education and Dewey's related educational theories. By studying distinctive learning aspects of African indigenous education, it reveals that many of Dewey's educational concepts are inherent in the philosophy of African indigenous education. Dewey's educational theory is largely and deeply integrated into the educational policy and teaching and learning practices within the African indigenous mode of education. This could be seen when exploring the concept of experience in education, the place of the teacher and the learner, and the concepts of curriculum and the social dimension of learning. However, the discussion highlights that the democratic aspect of African indigenous education should be reinforced to totally spouse the Deweyan approach to education, which may posit it as an effective instrument for the reform of any contemporary education systems in crisis due to authoritarian (non-experience-oriented and non-learner-centered) structures and methods of education.

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