

## **Analyzing the Philosophy of Progressivism in Relation to Contemporary Education Practice in Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract:** Education curricula have been guided by different philosophies of education. Such philosophies are based on the ideas of different philosophers throughout history. These include ideas by Plato, Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, Montessori, Marx and Paulo Freire among others. Apart from the influence of the political ideology of those in power, the educational ideas of these philosophers have influenced contemporary education in many ways. This paper examines the Philosophy of Progressivism within the context of the contributions by Dewey and Rousseau. The paper discusses the main views of the Philosophy of Progressivism, in terms of how these educational ideas are reflected in the Zimbabwean education curriculum. The paper also analyzes the extent to which the Philosophy of Progressivism can be applied in education. Its application is examined in terms of the roles of the teacher, the school and child in the teaching and learning process. While some of the ideas by Dewey and Rousseau can be criticised for being rather extreme, they remain relevant in terms of how the school should contribute to the development of the child. The paper gives an analysis of the Zimbabwean Early Childhood Development (ECD) curriculum as a way of examining the extent to which it has been influenced by the Philosophy of Progressivism. The paper concludes that the Philosophy of Progressivism has influenced curriculum design and implementation at ECD level in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Progressivism, Curriculum, Education Practice, Early Childhood Development

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The paper identifies the major characteristics of the philosophy of progressivism. It focuses on the work of two philosophers namely John Dewey (1859-1952) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). The paper analyses the philosophy of progressivism in relation to contemporary Early Childhood Development (ECD) practice in Zimbabwe. The following key terms are defined; progressivism, philosophers and early childhood development programme.

### **Definition of terms**

Darling [1] defines progressivism as a child-centred educational theory stemming from radical dissatisfaction with traditional practice, and appreciates children as individuals in their development. On the other hand Walter [2] views progressivism as a general political philosophy which advocates for gradual social, political, and economic reform. From the two definitions of progressivism it can be noted that it is a philosophical idea which can be applied in many areas to bring about change. It can be used as an idea to bring about change in education, economics, and politics. This change in the education of young children is guided by the philosophy that change, reform and

development occur through addressing the needs of the children we teach.

According to Atkinson [3] a philosopher is someone who is engaged in the search for truth or enlightenment guided by critical thought. Lukas [4] defines a philosopher as one who inquires into the fundamental nature of the field in question. From the two definitions it can be observed that a philosopher seeks knowledge about an event and comes up with empirical evidence to support the thinking behind the ideas. Within the context of this paper philosopher is used to refer to someone who continually searches for the truth about an event or phenomenon which brings wisdom through the science of knowledge derived from the ideas held, such as progressivism in education.

The Macmillan Dictionary defines a programme as a plan of activities for achieving something. The Word Reference.com Dictionary of English also defines a programme as a plan, schedule or procedure. However, it further gives a definition which is quite relevant to education as it also defines a programme as a syllabus or curriculum. A programme can therefore be defined as a course of action that we

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intend to follow to achieve specific goals in a particular area, in this case in the implementation of Early Childhood Development (ECD) education. An ECD programme therefore refers to government policy, curriculum, activities and resources designed to meet the educational needs of children at ECD level.

### **John Dewey (1859-1952) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778): the Philosophy of Progressivism**

John Dewey was one of the major proponents of the philosophy of progressivism. It was established in the 1920s in the United States of America. It notes that the child should be the centre of our planning in education. In order for children to benefit from education it should be related to their needs. According to the philosophy of John Dewey experimentation by children as they learn allows them to try new ideas. The children should be allowed to discover answers to problems through their interaction with the physical and social environment. Such an approach is seen as developing thinking and problem solving skills in children. Progressivism in education is seen as promoting creativity and freedom among children. Children should be able to use the different tools that support their education. It is not the books that determine what children learn, but rather children have the power to decide. Progressivism was guided by Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism and experimentalism. Through these Dewey came up with four stages that apply to experimentalism. These are identification of a problem, coming up with a hypothesis, experimental testing and inductive argument. It is the child who is involved in all these stages.

According to Darling [1], progressivism in education emphasizes a number of qualities that are important for the development of the child. These include experimental learning, emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking, group work and development of social skills, education for social responsibility and democracy, accommodating each child's personal goal and placing emphasis on different resources rather than textbooks. According to Dewey knowledge is a social construct and the duty of teachers and society is to help children construct their own learning. The teacher is therefore a member of the community who should assist in the development of the child without being authoritarian. The curriculum should reflect the values of society and these should be continuously developed.

Dewey was therefore concerned with participatory learning. Dewey as cited by Vashishtha, Khandai and Mathur [5] action must precede knowledge and that knowledge is a result of the child's activities with the environment. Furthermore they note that the function of education according to Dewey was to help

children grow into happy, moral and efficient human beings.

On the curriculum, Dewey noted that it had to grow out of the child's interests. Vashishtha et al. [5] identify the main characteristics and principles of the curriculum, which include the need for the curriculum to reflect the social life and social activities, the curriculum should follow progressive organization of knowledge based on the educative experiences and problems of the learner, which should be flexible.

Apart from his concern for the curriculum, Dewey was equally concerned with the role of the teacher, methods of teaching and discipline. Under the philosophy of progressivism, Dewey recommended three methods of teaching. These were learning by doing, learning by integration and learning through productive and creative activities (ibid). The teacher was there to guide the children and discipline would be derived from the activities the children engaged in.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was viewed as the Father of Progressivism. Dewey's ideas on children's education were not as radical as Rousseau's. As noted by Darling [1] Rousseau argued that "the study of the child should be made the foundation on which a sound education is built, and such a study shows that much of the subject matter of conventional education is taught at an inappropriately early age". In that regard, formal teaching has to be delayed until the child is ready. Rousseau identified the main sources of education as nature, men and circumstances. For Rousseau it is the adults who spoil children through their teachings. As such he advocates for negative education, where children are guided against evil. In Darling [1] Rousseau divides the aims of education according to stages of human development. These stages are the infancy, childhood, preadolescent period and adolescent period. At the first two stages of development the emphasis was on development and attainment of freedom. These are the stages that are covered by the ECD programme in Zimbabwe. On the curriculum, Rousseau believed that it should be related to the age groups referred to above. At 0 to 5 years the curriculum should be concerned with the physical development of the child and the second stage should be concerned with the development of senses. This second group is in the 5 to 12 years age group. The child should be allowed to explore the environment and make discoveries and judgements.

On teaching methods Rousseau emphasized the need to teach without books, observation, provision of opportunities related to the children's experiences but not books, provision of real objects and sense training. The role of the teacher was not to teach, but rather to guide the children and create opportunities for them to develop at their own pace. Rousseau identified three

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major sources of learning. These are nature, people and things. Nature is viewed as influencing the other two aspects of education. The role of education according to Rousseau is to develop people to fulfil their roles in society as human beings.

Rousseau's ideas on education and how children learn have been found to be taking extreme positions. For example his criticism of the use of books cannot be supported in modern education. The criticism on the use of books was based on the notation that they tended to enslave children as they were perceived as reinforcing the artificialities of civilisation [6]. In analysing the role of books in teaching and learning, it is important to consider at least two factors. These are the content in the books and secondly the source of the content in the books. By source of content in the books we are considering the writers, the publishers and the reviewers of the content in the books. If these are from the child's environment and culture then they become tools or things that contribute to the development of the child. What has to be guided against is the use of irrelevant books that have no bearing on the child's environment and culture. It can be argued that books have important roles to play in the development of the child. Books are important for the development of the child right from age zero, as adults can read stories to the child and as the child develops he/she can identify pictures and colour them.

#### **An analysis of progressivism in the context of Education in Zimbabwe**

The philosophy of progressivism as expressed by the two philosophers has influenced the education curriculum in Zimbabwe. The position taken by Dewey was not as radical as the one by Rousseau. Rousseau's ideas were so radical that he advocated for negative education. Despite that there are elements of progressivism that have been applied in the ECD programme in Zimbabwe today.

The philosophy of progressivism has been found relevant in the education of young children at ECD in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe ECD curriculum uses the child-centred approach. An examination of the ECD syllabus in Zimbabwe shows that some of the aims of the ECD programme are to develop in learners: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, sensory skills and body co-ordination; concepts, generalizations, applications, logic, language, problem solving and thinking skills and psycho-social skills (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2011). These aims relate well to the role of education as advocated by the two philosophers in the early years of child development. At the same time the skills to be developed are clearly stated as physical health practices, physical skills, emotional skills and well-being, social skills, cognitive skills, and technological skills. The ECD syllabus caters for individual differences and

individual growth as advocated by the progressivists. The curriculum areas of the ECD programme include Expressive Arts, Language Arts, Mathematics and Science, Social Science and Technology. The five curriculum areas are designed to suit the development level of the child. To cater for different ages ECD children are categorized into groups which are ECD-A, which is the 3 to 4 years age group and ECD-B which is the 4 to 6 years.

The methods of learning used in the ECD programme in Zimbabwe include discovery learning, experimentation, field trips, song and dance, problem solving, puzzles and group projects. The ECD programme has adopted the philosophy of progressivism in terms of the teaching methods. The methods give the child an opportunity to develop freely. Experimentation as a teaching method adopted at ECD is another name for progressivism. It has now been adopted in the teaching of the sciences and at early childhood learning level. The discovery method and experimentation make learning stress free to children at ECD level.

The role of the teacher at ECD level is very much different from the traditional teacher's role. This is very much in line with the role of the teacher as advocated by Dewey and Rousseau. In Zimbabwe, children at ECD level learn through play and the teaching is child-centred not teacher centred. The ECD syllabus states the methodology as "the pace of learning will be determined by the individual child's readiness to absorb a concept or master a skill, not by a teacher-centred timetable" (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2011). The role of the teacher is to create a conducive environment for the child to develop through exploration and experiment. The teaching at this level is characterised by use of real objects and children's activities. The use of punishment as a way of disciplining children is not allowed. This is in line with Rousseau's ideas who argued that children are naturally good and such they learn from natural and logical consequences.

To make teachers aware of their roles at ECD level the government of Zimbabwe has embarked on the training of ECD teachers at teachers colleges. There are also courses at university to develop teachers who are already in the teaching field. This is to equip them with new teaching skills as required at ECD level.

The teacher assists children in the different forms of development which include physical development, psychological development, social development and emotional development. Progressivism in education reminds us that whatever we do should be child centred. Children at ECD are actively involved in their learning. They determine their activities to a large extent, and the role of the teacher is

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to offer guidance. Progressivism, as applied at ECD allows children to explore the environment and make discoveries.

The ECD curriculum in Zimbabwe addresses children's needs as advocated by the progressivism philosophy. These needs include the need to play. It is a requirement that every ECD centre should have a play centre. The play centres are equipped with outdoor play equipment. Such equipment includes swings, slides, sand play, riding horses, climbing ladders, tunnels and tyres among others. Other needs include activities that give them freedom to explore the environment. Children also need rest and this is provided for in the curriculum and the ECD syllabus. All these activities develop the child mentally, physically and socially.

Despite the extreme position that the Philosophy of Progressivism appears to take, its contribution to education is quite significant. From the educational ideas of such Philosophers as Dewey and Rousseau, modern education has evolved. These ideas that have shaped modern education in the following areas: the recognition that children develop at their own pace; that children go through different stages of development and these have to be catered for; the need to take cognisance of individual differences in class; the need to make use of the environment in order for children to learn better; to provide for innovation and creativity and the need to let children explore as they learn. These educational ideas have seen education curricular moving away from the traditional teaching approaches which viewed the teacher as the centre of knowledge and children as empty vessels.

### **Limitations of Progressivism**

Whilst the child-centred approach to learning as advocated by progressivism, has a number of advantages when dealing with young children at ECD level, it has its own limitations. Children need to learn in a disciplined environment. Allowing children to engage in activities at their own pace and at will may create disorder. The ECD programme has a curriculum that has to be completed within a specified time. Focusing on the approaches as advocated by progressivism may be time consuming. The project method of teaching may be limited to specific subjects and may require more resources than ordinary approaches. It demands hard work and commitment on the part of the teacher and the extent to which children can explore and discover is limited if the teacher is not committed. In most public schools the number of children per ECD class exceeds the recommended. This makes it difficult for the ECD teacher to plan for individual children as expected. To manage and control children is necessary; there is therefore need for rules and regulations in the classroom. There is need to guide children and education has a role to help children to develop as expected by society. Relying on the child

experiences alone may limit the child's development. There is need to create and impose the experience for the child to develop socially. The experience has to be guided so as to understand personal relationships. The ECD programme in Zimbabwe makes use of books which include syllabi, activity books, and picture books.

Limited resources in schools have affected the extent to which children can develop at their own pace. Some schools do not afford to provide meals as required by the curriculum. Children are also limited by the location of the school or centre. To develop their technological skills children need exposure to modern technology that includes computers, e-learning and the internet. Such limitations in technology affect children's development.

### **CONCLUSION**

Key terms which were identified and defined are progressivism, philosophers and ECD programme. The paper presented the ideas of John Dewey and Jean Jacques Rousseau. The paper has identified some of the major contributions that Progressivism has made in modern education. It further analyzed the ECD programme in Zimbabwe in the context of the progressivism philosophy. In the analysis, examples were drawn from the ECD curriculum. It may be concluded that progressivism has greatly influenced the ECD programme in Zimbabwe in terms of the aims, teaching methods, skills to be developed, the role of the child and the teacher. The major task of the teacher as a curriculum implementer is to ensure that the curriculum achieves its intended goals in the development of the child.

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