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## **Pragmatic Reconstruction of the Philosophical and Pedagogical Foundations of Nigerian Secondary Education for Contemporary Relevance**

**Uyanga, U. D. (Ph.D)**

Department of Sociological Foundations of Education

University of Uyo

08035476078, unwanauyanga@gmail.com

and

**Inyang, Felix Edem**

08039457778, revfelixinyang@gmail.com

Department of Sociological Foundations of Education

University of Uyo

### **Abstract**

Nigerian secondary education continues to face a significant gap between its policy goals of self-reliance, national integration, and functional competence and the prevailing realities of rote learning, examination-driven pedagogy, and skills mismatch. This paper advocates a pragmatic reconstruction of its philosophical and pedagogical foundations, drawing on John Dewey's philosophy of experience, inquiry, and democratic education. Through critical analysis of pre-colonial indigenous systems, colonial legacies, and post-independence reforms, particularly the National Policy on Education, the study highlights persistent challenges such as teacher-centered methods, infrastructural deficits, and weak policy implementation. The proposed pragmatic framework repositions education as the continuous reconstruction of experience for effective problem-solving and democratic living. It recommends problem-centered interdisciplinary curricula, experiential and student-centered pedagogies, authentic competency-based assessment, and robust teacher professional development. By integrating indigenous functionality with 21st-century

demands like digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, this approach bridges theory and practice while respecting Nigeria's cultural diversity. Ultimately, a Deweyan pragmatic orientation offers a coherent pathway to transform Nigerian secondary education into a dynamic tool for individual empowerment and national development. The reconstruction holds important implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and policy reform in Nigeria and comparable contexts.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism, Nigerian secondary education, Dewey, Pedagogical reconstruction, Contemporary relevance.

### **Introduction**

Nigerian secondary education has undergone significant structural changes since its inception in 1859, yet questions persist about its philosophical coherence and pedagogical relevance. The 1977 National Policy on Education affirmed that every educational system requires a guiding philosophy, but policy and practice in Nigeria have remained largely eclectic, drawing inconsistently from colonial essentialism, post-independence pragmatism, and African communal ideals. The result is a system marked by a gap between stated goals of self-reliance, national integration, and functional competence, and the realities of rote learning, inadequate skills development, and weak alignment with societal needs.

This disjuncture reflects a deeper issue, which is the absence of an explicit, critically examined philosophical and pedagogical foundation to inform curriculum design, teacher education, and classroom practice. Without such a foundation, reforms risk becoming cyclical and superficial, responding to immediate pressures rather than shaping a coherent educational trajectory. Pragmatism offers a viable framework for reconstruction. Emphasizing experience, problem-solving, and the reconstruction of knowledge for practical consequences, pragmatism bridges the divide between theory and practice, school and society. A pragmatic reconstruction does not discard ethical and cultural values but re-positions them within a dynamic process of inquiry, reflection, and adaptation. For Nigerian secondary education, this approach provides a basis for rethinking aims, pedagogy, and assessment in light of contemporary demands in technological change, youth unemployment, democratic participation, and global competitiveness.

This paper argues for a pragmatic reconstruction of the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of Nigerian secondary education to enhance its contemporary relevance. Drawing on pragmatist philosophy and insights from the Nigerian context, it

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proposes a framework that integrates intellectual rigor, practical competence, and ethical responsibility. The study contributes to ongoing debates on educational reform by moving beyond structural critique to articulate a coherent philosophical basis for sustainable change.

### **Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Nigerian Secondary Education**

The historical and philosophical foundations of Nigerian secondary education reflect a dynamic evolution shaped by indigenous practices, colonial interventions, and post-independence national aspirations. Scholarly works highlight a transition from functional, community-embedded systems to more formalized structures, with persistent tensions between relevance and inherited models.

#### **Pre-Colonial Indigenous Foundations**

Pre-colonial education in Nigeria was informal, pragmatic, and deeply integrated into societal life. Indigenous systems focused on holistic development, transmitting practical skills, moral values, cultural heritage, and social roles through apprenticeships, oral traditions, and communal participation (Jabaar, 2023, p. 38). Education then prepared individuals for productive membership in their ethnic communities, emphasizing functionality over abstract theory.

Across ethnic groups (Ibibio, Annang, Efik, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and so on), learning occurred via observation, imitation, and direct engagement in agriculture, crafts, governance, and conflict resolution. This approach blended cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, fostering self-reliance and communal harmony (Fafunwa, 1974; Jabaar, 2023, pp. 40-42). Islamic education in northern Nigeria, dating back centuries, complemented this through Quranic schools that emphasized literacy, arithmetic, and religious knowledge (Adeniran, n.d., p. 5). Literature portrays these systems as adaptive and context-responsive, though limited in scalability for a modern nation-state (Mkpa, 2012, p. 15; Joseph, 2007).

#### **Colonial Foundations and Disruptions**

Western education arrived with Christian missionaries in the mid-19th century, beginning with primary efforts and extending to secondary institutions like CMS Grammar School, Lagos (1859). Missionary education prioritized evangelization, English literacy, and clerical training, often marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems (Oyelade & Abolade, 2018, p. 22). British colonial administration formalized control through education ordinances (1887, 1916, 1926), establishing an elitist, literary-

focused secondary education system aimed at producing interpreters and low-level administrators. Access remained limited, particularly in the North due to indirect rule policies (Nanbak, 2020, pp. 128-130).

The Phelps-Stokes Commission (1920s) advocated some vocational elements, yet the dominant philosophy remained assimilationist and essentialist (Molagun, 1999, p. 3). Scholars critique this era for fostering cultural alienation, dependency on white-collar jobs, and a philosophical dualism that disconnected education from local realities (Garba, 2012, p. 55; Adeyinka, 1988). By independence, secondary education retained strong colonial imprints of examination orientation and theoretical bias.

### **Post-Independence Reforms and National Policy Foundations**

Post-1960, Nigeria pursued indigenization to redress colonial legacies. The 1969 National Curriculum Conference critiqued the inherited system's irrelevance, leading to the first National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, revised in 1981, 1998, 2004 and 2013. The policy introduced the 6-3-3-4 system (later evolving to 9-3-4), emphasizing diversification, vocationalization at the junior secondary level, and relevance to national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013, p. 1).

The NPE articulates a philosophy centered on developing the "sound and effective citizen" through national consciousness, value inculcation, skill acquisition, and equal opportunity. It aligns education with five cardinal national goals: a free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society, a united self-reliant nation, a land of bright opportunities, and a dynamic economy (FRN, 2013, pp. 2-3). For secondary education, goals include producing trainable graduates equipped for further education or the workforce. Philosophically, the NPE draws eclectically from idealism (moral and knowledge transmission), realism (structured content), progressivism (learner-centered elements), and pragmatism (functional skills), though implementation often favors the former (Uba, 2022, p. 45; Molagun, 1999, pp. 4-6).

### **Contemporary Philosophical Critiques and Gaps**

Recent literature identifies persistent foundational weaknesses, including examination-driven pedagogy, inadequate integration of indigenous knowledge, and misalignment with 21st-century demands such as digital literacy and entrepreneurship (Okpokpo, 2021, pp. 12-15; Oyelade, 2018, p. 8). Colonial legacies continue to influence rote learning and certification focus, contributing to skills mismatches and youth unemployment. Calls for reconstruction emphasize pragmatic, Dewey-inspired approaches that prioritize experiential learning, problem-solving, and democratic values

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tailored to Nigerian contexts (Akinsanya, 2012; Okpokpo, 2021, p. 18). Equity concerns such as urban-rural divides, gender disparities, and regional imbalances further highlight the need for stronger foundational alignment.

### **Synthesis**

The aforementioned literature converges on the richness of indigenous functionality, the disruptive yet transformative impact of colonialism, and the aspirational yet incompletely realized philosophy of the NPE. Based on that premise, a pragmatic reconstruction is widely advocated to bridge historical foundations with contemporary relevance, honoring cultural roots while addressing global and local challenges (Jabaar, 2023, p. 70; FRN, 2013, p. 5).

### **Current Pedagogical Foundations and Challenges of Nigerian Secondary Education**

The pedagogical foundations of Nigerian secondary education, as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (NPE), emphasize a diversified curriculum aimed at producing graduates (secondary school leavers) equipped with relevant knowledge, skills, and values for personal and national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013, p. 1). However, in practice, pedagogy remains predominantly traditional, teacher-centered, and examination-driven, creating significant gaps between policy aspirations and classroom realities.

### **Pedagogical Foundations in Policy and Practice**

According to the NPE, secondary education comprises a 6-year program divided into 3 years of junior secondary (basic) and 3 years of senior secondary education. The curriculum includes core subjects, pre-vocational electives at the junior level, and specialized streams (science, arts, commercial, and technical) at the senior level (FRN, 2013, pp. 18-20). The intended pedagogy promotes a blend of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development, with an emphasis on vocationalization, entrepreneurship, and national unity.

In theory, this reflects elements of progressivism and pragmatism, encouraging active learning and skill acquisition. In reality, implementation favors lecture-based, rote memorization methods rooted in colonial grammar-school traditions. Teachers often serve as primary knowledge transmitters, with students positioned as passive recipients (Nanbak, 2020, p. 129; Ajadi, 2024, p. 45). Assessment is heavily summative, centered on high-stakes examinations such as the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE),

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West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), and National Examinations Council (NECO) exams.

### Major Pedagogical Challenges

Contemporary scholarship identifies several interconnected challenges that undermine effective pedagogy:

1. **Teacher-Centered Methods and Limited Innovation:** Most secondary school instruction relies on traditional chalk-and-talk approaches, with limited adoption of student-centered, inquiry-based, or technology-enhanced methods. The kind of method is described by Freire as “banking education” (Freire, 2005, p71). Large class sizes (often 40-100 students) make interactive pedagogies difficult to implement (Okenwa-Fadele, 2025, p. 12). Many teachers lack adequate training in modern strategies such as project-based learning, collaborative discussions, or differentiated instruction (Ajadi, 2024, pp. 48-50).
2. **Inadequate Infrastructure and Resources:** Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient laboratories, libraries, and teaching materials severely constrain experiential and practical learning. In many schools, especially in rural areas, basic facilities like electricity and functional ICT tools are absent, hindering digital literacy integration (Suleiman, 2020, p. 15; Lohnan, 2019, p. 78). This results in a persistent theory-practice gap, particularly in science and technical subjects.
3. **Teacher Quality and Professional Development:** There is a shortage of qualified teachers, especially in specialized subjects. Many practicing teachers lack ongoing professional development, leading to outdated pedagogical skills and low motivation due to poor remuneration and working conditions (Bodang & Lengkat, n.d.). This contributes to inconsistent curriculum delivery and weak instructional supervision (Suleiman, 2020, pp. 20-22).
4. **Relevance and Skills Mismatch:** The curriculum struggles to address 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, digital skills, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. High youth unemployment rates signal a disconnect between school learning and labor market needs. Vocational components of the 6-3-3-4/9-3-4 system remain poorly implemented, with many schools reverting to academic, examination-focused streams (Ejike & Oke, n.d., p. 10).
5. **Assessment Practices and Equity Issues:** Over-reliance on summative examinations promotes cramming rather than deep understanding or competency development. Equity challenges, including urban-rural divides, gender disparities, insecurity

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(especially in conflict zones), and socioeconomic barriers, further exacerbate pedagogical inequalities (Awoyemi & Ademodi, 2022; Azubuike, *et al.*, 2024).

6. **Policy Implementation Gaps:** While the NPE provides a solid philosophical base, frequent policy inconsistencies, inadequate funding (often below UNESCO's 26% benchmark), and weak monitoring mechanisms hinder pedagogical reforms (Lohnan, 2019, p. 80; Ejike & Oke, n.d.). These challenges reflect a foundational misalignment: education is often viewed as preparation for certification rather than holistic growth through lived, relevant experiences.

### **Implications for Pragmatic Reconstruction: Philosophical and Pedagogical Reconstructions**

A pragmatic reconstruction of Nigerian secondary education, grounded in John Dewey's philosophy, offers a viable pathway to bridge the gap between historical legacies, current challenges, and contemporary demands. Pragmatism views education not as the transmission of fixed knowledge but as the continuous reconstruction of experience for effective problem-solving and democratic living (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 78; Okpokpo, 2021, p. 18). In the Nigerian context, this reconstruction must integrate indigenous functionality, address colonial distortions, and respond to 21st-century realities such as technological disruption, youth unemployment, climate change, and cultural pluralism.

#### **Philosophical Reconstruction**

Philosophically, pragmatic reconstruction requires a shift from the eclectic but inconsistently applied mix of idealism, realism, and limited progressivism in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013, pp. 2-3) towards a more coherent instrumentalist and experiential orientation. First, experience as the core of education must be prioritized. Dewey argued that genuine learning arises from active engagement with real-life problems rather than passive absorption of abstract content (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). For Nigerian secondary education, this implies rooting the curriculum in students' immediate socio-cultural and economic realities in agriculture, local entrepreneurship, environmental challenges in the Niger Delta or Sahel, and digital transformation in urban centers (Oyelade, 2018, p. 12; Jabaar, 2023, p. 65). Indigenous knowledge systems, previously marginalized, should be pragmatically integrated as living resources rather than relics, fostering cultural pride and relevance.

Second, democratic values and social intelligence should form the ethical foundation. Nigerian education must cultivate active citizenship, collaboration, and

critical inquiry to support national unity and democratic consolidation (FRN, 2013, p. 5). A pragmatic philosophy rejects authoritarian transmission models in favour of classrooms as miniature democratic communities where students co-construct knowledge (Okpokpo, 2021, p. 22). This addresses colonial legacies of elitism and passivity while responding to contemporary issues such as insecurity, ethnic tensions, and governance challenges.

Third, instrumentalism and adaptability replace absolutist truths. Knowledge is valued for its practical consequences: “what works” in solving Nigerian problems (Molagun, 1999, p. 7). This philosophical shift moves away from certification obsession toward education as preparation for lifelong learning in a volatile knowledge economy. It demands continuous policy review mechanisms that treat the National Policy on Education as a living document, open to reconstruction based on empirical outcomes and societal feedback (Uba, 2022, p. 48).

### **Pedagogical Reconstruction**

Pedagogically, pragmatic reconstruction calls for transformative practices that operationalize Deweyan principles of “learning by doing” and reflective thinking in Nigerian secondary schools. Attempts at achieving this should concentrate on the following:

1. **Curriculum Reconstruction:** The curriculum should become integrated and problem-centered rather than fragmented and subject-dominated. Core academic subjects must connect with pre-vocational and technical modules through interdisciplinary projects. For example, science education could center on local challenges such as renewable energy solutions, climate-smart agriculture, or public health issues (Ejike & Oke, n.d., p. 14). Digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and sustainability should be mainstreamed across all streams, modernizing the 6-3-3-4/9-3-4 structure while retaining its diversification intent (FRN, 2013, p. 19; Ajadi, 2024, p. 52).
2. **Teaching and Learning Methods:** Teachers must transition from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of inquiry. Student-centered approaches such as project-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, simulations, field trips, and technology-enhanced blended learning should predominate (Okenwa-Fadele, 2025, p. 15). Reflective journals and action research by both students and teachers would promote metacognition and continuous improvement. This directly counters the current teacher-centered, lecture-based dominance documented in Nigerian classrooms (Nanbak, 2020, p. 130).

3. **Assessments Reform:** Assessments should balance formative and summative practices, emphasizing authentic demonstration of competencies through portfolios, exhibitions, peer reviews, and real-world problem solutions rather than sole reliance on high-stakes examinations (Suleiman, 2020, p. 23). Such a shift aligns with pragmatic evaluation of learning by its practical fruits, reducing examination malpractice and promoting deeper understanding.
4. **Teacher Education and Professional Development:** Reconstructed teacher preparation programmes must emphasize pragmatic pedagogies, reflective practice, and action research. Continuous professional development should be mandatory, supported by mentoring and communities of practice, to equip teachers for facilitative roles (Bodang & Lengkat, n.d., p. 9).
5. **Contextual and Technological Integration:** Reconstruction must address equity by leveraging low-cost technologies and community resources while bridging urban-rural divides. Indigenous pedagogies (storytelling, apprenticeships) should be blended with modern tools for hybrid effectiveness (Jabaar, 2023, p. 68).

### Overall Implications

This dual philosophical and pedagogical reconstruction positions secondary education as a dynamic instrument for national development rather than a static colonial inheritance. It requires political commitment, increased funding, stakeholder collaboration (government, schools, communities, private sector), and pilot implementation with rigorous monitoring. Success would yield adaptable, innovative, and socially responsible secondary school graduates capable of driving Nigeria's progress in a complex global landscape.

### Implementation Considerations and Barriers

Successful pragmatic reconstruction of Nigerian secondary education demands careful attention to implementation processes. While philosophical and pedagogical shifts inspired by Dewey offer a compelling vision, translating them into practice requires systemic coordination, resource mobilization, and adaptive management. This section outlines critical implementation considerations and identifies major barriers, drawing on pragmatic principles of experimentation, reflection, and contextual responsiveness (Dewey, 1938, p. 45; Okpokpo, 2021, p. 25).

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## Key Implementation Considerations

Effective implementation should follow a pragmatic, iterative approach that treat reforms as experiments to be tested, evaluated, and refined based on real outcomes rather than top-down imposition.

1. **Policy Alignment and Legal Framework:** The National Policy on Education (NPE) must be revised to explicitly embed pragmatic principles, with clear guidelines for experiential learning, interdisciplinary curricula, and competency-based assessment (FRN, 2013, p. 5; Uba, 2022, p. 50). Implementation requires harmonization across federal, state, and local governments. A dedicated Pragmatic Education Reform Framework could operationalize recommendations through phased rollouts, starting with pilot programs in selected states representing Nigeria's diverse geopolitical zones.
2. **Funding and Resource Allocation:** Sustainable financing is essential. Government should meet or exceed the UNESCO 15-20% benchmark for education budgetary allocation, with specific ring-fencing for infrastructure, teacher development, and technology (Lohnan, 2019, p. 82). Public-private partnerships (PPPs) involving technology firms, banks, and philanthropists can support digital tools and vocational workshops. Funding models should prioritize equity, directing more resources to underserved rural and conflict-affected areas.
3. **Teacher Capacity Building:** Teachers are central to pragmatic reconstruction. Pre-service and in-service training programmes must be redesigned around Deweyan facilitation skills, action research, and reflective practice (Ajadi, 2024, p. 55; Bodang & Lengkat, n.d., p. 11). Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should be mandatory, supported by mentoring networks and digital platforms. Incentives such as improved remuneration, career progression, and recognition for innovative teaching can enhance motivation and retention.
4. **Infrastructure and Technological Integration:** Addressing infrastructure deficits requires a multi-year modernization plan. This includes building or upgrading laboratories, libraries, workshops, and reliable internet connectivity. Blended learning models using low-bandwidth technologies (for example, offline digital content, solar-powered devices) can bridge access gaps (Okenwa-Fadele, 2025, p. 18). Community involvement in maintenance and utilization of school facilities aligns with indigenous communal education traditions.
5. **Curriculum Development and Assessment Reform:** Curriculum agencies like Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should lead collaborative reviews incorporating local problems into learning modules.

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Assessment systems must shift toward continuous, formative, and authentic methods, including project portfolios and community impact assessments. Stakeholder consultations with parents, employers, and civil society ensure relevance (Ejike & Oke, n.d., p. 16).

6. **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Scaling:** Implementation should incorporate pragmatic feedback loops. Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks using mixed-methods data can track progress and enable mid-course corrections. Successful pilot outcomes should inform national scaling, with flexibility for regional adaptations.
7. **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Broad ownership is vital. This includes partnerships between government, teacher unions, school administrators, NGOs, traditional institutions, and the private sector. Community engagement ensures cultural relevance and sustainability.

### Major Barriers to Implementation

Despite the promise of reconstruction, several entrenched barriers persist:

1. **Chronic Underfunding:** Nigeria's education sector remains chronically underfunded, with competing national priorities often taking precedence. This limits infrastructure development and teacher welfare (Suleiman, 2020, p. 25; Lohnan, 2019, p. 81).
2. **Resistance to Change:** Teachers, administrators, and parents accustomed to examination-driven systems may resist student-centered approaches perceived as risky or time-consuming. Entrenched colonial-era mindsets and fear of lowered standards pose cultural barriers (Nanbak, 2020, p. 131; Oyelade, 2018, p. 15).
3. **Capacity and Human Resource Constraints:** Shortage of adequately trained teachers and educational friendly leaders hampers reform. High teacher-pupil ratios and poor working conditions exacerbate implementation difficulties (Ajadi, 2024, p. 50).
4. **Infrastructural and Digital Divide:** Uneven development between urban and rural areas, coupled with unreliable power supply, creates practical obstacles to experiential and technology-supported pedagogies (Okenwa-Fadele, 2025, p. 14).
5. **Political and Administrative Instability:** Frequent policy changes, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and corruption undermine continuity. Insecurity in parts of the country further disrupts schooling (Amnesty International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).
6. **Equity and Inclusivity:** Addressing gender, disability, and regional disparities requires additional targeted resources that are often unavailable.

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### Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Pragmatic implementation demands flexibility and persistence. Pilot testing in diverse contexts can generate evidence to build political will. Advocacy campaigns highlighting successful case studies (both local and international) can reduce resistance. International development partners can provide technical and financial support during the transition phase, while strong accountability mechanisms minimize corruption.

### Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that Nigerian secondary education's persistent challenges: rote learning, examination-driven teaching, skills mismatch, and limited experiential learning arise from the absence of a coherent philosophical foundation. Though the National Policy on Education sets ambitious goals, its eclectic approach has yielded fragmented outcomes still shaped by colonial legacies. A pragmatic reconstruction grounded in John Dewey's philosophy provides a viable, context-responsive pathway. By prioritising active experience, reflective inquiry, problem-solving, and democratic values, it transforms education from passive knowledge transmission into a tool for developing adaptable, innovative, and socially responsible citizens. This framework effectively integrates indigenous functionality with 21st-century demands such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. Successful implementation demands political will, adequate funding, teacher retraining, and stakeholder collaboration. In true Deweyan spirit, the ultimate test lies in practical outcomes: whether the system produces competent graduates capable of advancing Nigeria's development. Reconstructing secondary education on pragmatic foundations is thus an urgent national priority.

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