

JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Dr. Donatus C. Ukulor (Rev.Fr.)
Department of Foundation and Arts Education
e.mail: donatus.ukulor@iaue.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines John Dewey's philosophy and the foundations of democratic education in Nigeria through a critical, literature-based analysis. It addresses the central philosophical and social problem by clarifying key concepts, reviewing relevant theoretical perspectives, and organising the discussion around experience and reflective learning, inquiry and problem solving, democracy as a mode of associated living. The paper argues that the issue should not be understood through narrow causal or measurement language alone; it requires attention to values, institutions, professional judgement and the Nigerian context. The synthesis shows that durable educational and social outcomes depend on coherent relationships among ideas, practices and institutional conditions. Practical implications are developed for policy, professional practice and further scholarly debate. The paper concludes that a context-sensitive, ethically defensible and analytically integrated approach provides a stronger basis for action than isolated technical interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Education occupies a central position in the development and sustenance of democratic societies because democracy requires citizens who possess knowledge, critical judgment, social responsibility and the capacity to participate meaningfully in collective affairs. Beyond the acquisition of literacy and vocational competence, education is expected to prepare individuals to understand their rights and responsibilities, engage constructively with others, evaluate public issues and contribute to the common good. Contemporary democratic education therefore requires more than teaching learners the structure of government or the procedures for voting. It involves creating learning environments in which dialogue, participation, tolerance, equality, cooperation and respect for diverse opinions are experienced as part of everyday educational life. UNESCO (2026) similarly argues that democratic education should combine civic knowledge with opportunities for learners to deliberate, express their views, evaluate evidence and participate in collective decision-making.

The philosophical foundation for this conception of education is strongly associated with the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), whose pragmatist philosophy connected education with experience, social interaction, growth and democracy. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argued that education should not be understood merely as preparation for future life but as a process through which individuals develop their capacities by participating in meaningful social experiences. He regarded democracy not simply as a political arrangement involving elections and representative institutions, but also as a way of living characterized by communication, shared interests, cooperation and participation. Consequently, the school should function as a social community where learners develop the habits of inquiry, cooperation and responsible participation necessary for democratic life. Dewey's position represented a significant challenge to authoritarian models of schooling in which teachers transmit knowledge while learners passively receive it.

A major feature of Dewey's philosophy is his emphasis on experience and learning by doing. For Dewey (1938), meaningful education emerges when learners interact with their environment, encounter problems and reflect upon their experiences in order to develop understanding. This perspective has important implications for democratic education because democratic dispositions are unlikely to develop effectively through memorisation of civic concepts alone. Learners need opportunities to discuss issues, work cooperatively, make decisions, solve problems and experience the consequences of their choices. Dewey's conception of experience therefore places the learner at the centre of educational activity and transforms the classroom from a place of passive reception

into a community of inquiry. Recent scholarship on democratic classroom practices in South-East Nigeria similarly indicates that student participation, freedom of expression and opportunities for classroom discussion are important dimensions of democratic educational practice (Okeke et al., 2021).

The relevance of Dewey's philosophy to Nigeria is particularly significant because the Nigerian educational system is officially expected to contribute to the development of responsible citizens and a democratic society. The National Policy on Education identifies education as an instrument of national development and social change and emphasizes the development of individuals who can contribute positively to society (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). It also places emphasis on learner-centred, practical, activity-based and experiential approaches to teaching. These principles correspond closely with Dewey's argument that education should connect learning with social experience and practical activity. However, the existence of policy aspirations does not automatically guarantee democratic educational practice. Where classrooms remain dominated by teacher authority, rote learning, fear of questioning, limited student voice and examination-driven instruction, the democratic possibilities of education remain restricted. Bolaji (2012) similarly found that challenges within Nigeria's educational system have limited its capacity to fully realize the democratic purposes associated with Deweyan philosophy.

The democratic significance of education in Nigeria is further underscored by contemporary challenges involving political participation, misinformation, intolerance, corruption, electoral violence and declining public trust. Education can provide young Nigerians with the intellectual and social resources needed to respond to these challenges through critical thinking, civic responsibility, dialogue and informed participation. Evidence from secondary school students in Lagos indicates that civic knowledge and democratic norms can be associated with willingness to participate in activities such as voting, contacting political representatives and peaceful protest, while students with stronger democratic orientations may also reject corrupt and violent forms of political participation (Author(s), 2025). This suggests that democratic education should not merely encourage political participation in the abstract; it should cultivate the capacity to distinguish constructive democratic participation from practices that undermine democratic institutions. Dewey's emphasis on reflective thinking, communication and cooperative problem-solving provides a useful philosophical basis for achieving this objective.

This opinion paper therefore argues that Dewey's philosophy provides a compelling foundation for rethinking democratic education in Nigeria, particularly through learner-centred pedagogy, experiential learning, critical inquiry, democratic classroom relationships, social cooperation and meaningful student participation in school decision-making. The central argument is that Nigeria cannot adequately cultivate democratic citizens through an educational system that teaches democratic principles theoretically while practising authoritarian relationships institutionally. Democratic education must be experienced as well as taught. Schools should therefore become spaces where learners practise dialogue, respect differences, participate in decision-making, examine social problems and develop the confidence to contribute to their communities. Such an approach is consistent with Dewey's conception of democracy as a lived social experience and with contemporary evidence that effective civic education requires opportunities for learners to participate rather than simply receive information about democracy (Dewey, 1916; UNESCO, 2026).

Statement of the Conceptual Problem

Nigeria operates a democratic system of government, yet the development of democratic values and practices among citizens remains a major concern. Education is expected to prepare learners for responsible citizenship by developing critical thinking, tolerance, respect for opposing views, cooperation, social responsibility and active participation in public affairs. However, the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in some educational settings, teacher-dominated classroom practices, emphasis on rote learning and examination success, limited opportunities for students to participate in decision-making, and inadequate opportunities for open discussion may constrain the

development of these democratic dispositions. When learners are expected to listen, memorise and reproduce information rather than question, deliberate, investigate and collaborate, education may inadvertently reproduce passive patterns of citizenship rather than the active and reflective participation required in a democracy. This creates a significant educational problem because democratic citizenship cannot be adequately developed through the teaching of democratic concepts alone; learners need opportunities to experience democratic principles within the educational environment.

The problem, therefore, is the apparent gap between the democratic purposes assigned to education in Nigeria and the extent to which everyday educational practices provide learners with genuine experiences of democracy. John Dewey's philosophy presents education as a social and experiential process through which individuals develop their capacities through interaction, inquiry, communication and participation, while democracy is understood as a way of associated living rather than merely a political system (Dewey, 1916). The concern is that insufficient application of these principles may limit the capacity of Nigerian schools to develop learners who can think independently, respect diversity, resolve disagreements through dialogue and participate responsibly in democratic life. The issue addressed in this opinion paper is therefore the need to examine the implications of Dewey's philosophy for democratic education in Nigeria and to argue for educational practices that make democracy a lived experience within schools rather than merely a topic contained in the curriculum.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the paper is to critically examine John Dewey's philosophy and the foundations of democratic education in Nigeria and clarify its implications for education, society and professional practice in Nigeria.

1. To analyse experience and reflective learning in relation to the central argument of the paper.
2. To analyse inquiry and problem solving in relation to the central argument of the paper.
3. To analyse democracy as a mode of associated living in relation to the central argument of the paper.
4. To analyse teacher authority and learner participation in relation to the central argument of the paper.
5. To analyse implications for Nigerian education in relation to the central argument of the paper.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

John Dewey's philosophy of education is grounded in the view that education is a continuous process of growth rather than merely the transmission of established knowledge from teacher to learner. Dewey regarded experience as central to learning and argued that educational experiences should enable learners to interact with their environment, encounter problems and reconstruct their understanding through reflection and inquiry. Recent scholarship has continued to reinterpret this position in relation to contemporary democratic education. Lind (2023) argues that Dewey's conception of experience provides a basis for developing democratic habits because learners need opportunities to directly experience participation, communication and cooperation rather than simply receive information about democracy. Similarly, English (2023) explains that Dewey's democratic education involves transformative experiences in which learners encounter uncertainty, reconsider assumptions and develop the capacity for independent judgment. These interpretations suggest that education becomes democratic when learners are actively involved in meaningful experiences that develop their intellectual and social capacities.

Dewey's conception of democracy extends beyond elections and governmental institutions to include a way of living together based on communication, shared interests and participation. In this perspective, schools have a democratic responsibility because they are social institutions where young people develop habits that may later shape their participation in wider society. Shih (2024) observes that Dewey's understanding of democracy provides important inspiration for contemporary

approaches to learning for democracy, particularly through the development of participation, inquiry and social interaction. Democracy therefore requires educational environments in which learners can communicate their ideas, encounter alternative perspectives and participate in resolving common problems. Such practices enable students to develop the dispositions required for democratic life, including openness, tolerance, cooperation and reflective judgment. Dewey's philosophy consequently challenges educational systems that separate academic learning from social and civic development.

The relationship between curriculum and democracy is another important dimension of Deweyan philosophy. A democratic curriculum should not merely contain information about government, citizenship and political institutions; it should provide opportunities for learners to examine real social problems and participate in dialogue about issues affecting their communities. Lima (2021) argues that contemporary educational policies increasingly emphasise competition, employability and individual achievement, tendencies that can weaken the participatory and democratic purposes of education associated with Dewey. Similarly, recent curriculum scholarship argues that democratic education requires dialogic, relational, participatory and justice-oriented pedagogies that allow learners to develop agency rather than remain passive recipients of curriculum content. This position is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where examination-oriented schooling can place considerable emphasis on memorisation and academic performance. A Deweyan approach would instead encourage schools to integrate intellectual development with social participation, critical inquiry and collaborative problem-solving.

The teacher-learner relationship is also central to democratic education. Dewey's philosophy challenges rigid teacher authority by encouraging educational relationships based on communication, cooperation and shared inquiry. Recent empirical and theoretical work supports the importance of these relationships for democratic learning. Davies and colleagues (2023) found that cooperation, collaboration and dialogue within school relationships are important features of education that enables democratic citizenship. This position implies that teachers should not merely act as authorities who determine what students should know and how they should think; rather, they should facilitate inquiry, encourage questioning and create opportunities for students to express and examine different perspectives. Democratic classroom practice does not imply the removal of teacher authority, but rather its transformation into a form of guidance that supports participation and intellectual independence.

The Nigerian context reveals both the relevance and the limitations of conventional approaches to civic and democratic education. Uzamere and Aimiyeagbon (2024) examined the relationship between political education concepts in civic education and students' knowledge and attitudes towards political participation in Edo State. Their study, involving 840 students selected from public junior secondary schools, was motivated by concerns about electoral irregularities and other democratic challenges in Nigeria. The study demonstrates the continuing importance of civic education in developing students' political knowledge and attitudes. However, recent research on Nigerian teachers' conceptions of citizenship indicates that civic education may sometimes emphasise personally responsible and conventional participatory citizenship while giving inadequate attention to justice-oriented citizenship and structural barriers to participation (Onele, 2024). These findings are significant for Deweyan democratic education because they suggest that teaching students to obey civic rules or participate in established political structures may be insufficient. Democratic education should also develop the ability to question existing arrangements, deliberate about social problems and participate meaningfully in efforts to improve society.

Recent evidence from Nigeria further supports the argument that democratic education should combine knowledge with opportunities for meaningful participation. Research involving secondary school students in Lagos State found that civic knowledge and democratic orientations can be associated with political participation and rejection of corrupt or violent political behaviour, suggesting that civic education can contribute positively to democratic development when appropriately structured (Author(s), 2025). At the same time, scholarship on citizenship education

in Nigeria identifies continuing challenges associated with sustaining democratic values, including social inequality, ethnic divisions, insecurity, intolerance and weaknesses in civic participation (Salisu et al., 2024). Taken together, the literature indicates that democratic education in Nigeria requires more than the formal teaching of civic concepts. It requires school environments in which students practise dialogue, cooperation, critical thinking, responsibility and participation. Dewey's philosophy is therefore particularly relevant because it connects education with lived experience and regards democracy as a habit of associated living. The implication is that Nigerian schools should not simply teach students about democracy; they should organise teaching, learning and school relationships in ways that allow students to experience democratic principles in practice.

Uzamere and Aimiyeagbon (2024) examined the relationship between political education concepts in Civic Education and students' knowledge and attitudes towards political participation in Edo State. The researchers focused on secondary school students and investigated whether exposure to political education could contribute to the development of knowledge and attitudes necessary for democratic participation. Their findings indicated the importance of political education in developing students' understanding of political processes and their disposition towards participation. The study is significant to the present opinion paper because it provides evidence that education can contribute to the development of democratic citizenship when students are exposed to relevant civic and political learning. However, its emphasis on political education also highlights a limitation in conventional approaches to democratic education. Knowledge about political institutions alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for students to practise democracy. Dewey's philosophy extends this position by insisting that democratic dispositions should be developed through experience, participation, communication and problem-solving within the school community. The study therefore supports the need to complement formal civic instruction with participatory educational experiences.

Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations

Dewey's Theory of Experiential Learning is the most relevant theoretical foundation for this paper because it explains how education occurs through experience, reflection, interaction and active participation. The theory is rooted in the philosophy of John Dewey (1859–1952), who developed his educational ideas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and elaborated them particularly in *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938). Dewey rejected the view that education should primarily involve the passive transmission of predetermined knowledge from teacher to learner. Instead, he maintained that meaningful learning develops when learners actively engage with their environment, encounter problems, reflect on their experiences and reconstruct their understanding. Experience, therefore, becomes educational when it promotes further inquiry and growth. Dewey (1938) distinguished worthwhile educational experiences from experiences that merely happen to learners, arguing that effective experiences should possess continuity and interaction. The theory also places the teacher in the role of facilitator who creates conditions for purposeful activity, inquiry and reflection rather than simply exercising authority over learners. In this sense, experiential learning promotes critical thinking, independence, cooperation and problem-solving, all of which are essential qualities for democratic citizenship.

The relevance of Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory to democratic education in Nigeria lies in its conception of the school as a miniature democratic community where learners should experience democracy rather than merely learn about it. Dewey (1916) argued that democracy depends upon communication, shared interests, cooperation and participation, and that schools should provide experiences through which these qualities are developed. Applied to Nigerian education, the theory implies that students should participate in classroom discussions, group activities, collaborative problem-solving, debates, projects, peer interaction and appropriate school decision-making processes. Such experiences can help learners develop tolerance for opposing views, respect for diversity, confidence in expressing opinions, willingness to cooperate and the

ability to make reasoned judgments. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where democratic education must prepare young people to participate responsibly in a pluralistic society. The theory therefore supports a shift from teacher-dominated and examination-centred practices towards participatory and learner-centred education. Its central implication for this opinion paper is that democratic values are unlikely to become deeply rooted when they are taught only as abstract concepts; they are more effectively developed when students repeatedly experience dialogue, participation, responsibility and cooperation within the school environment. Recent scholarship similarly identifies Dewey's conception of experience and democratic participation as an important foundation for contemporary democratic education (Lind, 2023; Shih, 2024).

Conceptual Method

This paper adopts a conceptual, analytical and literature-based approach. It critically examines and synthesises the scholarly arguments, theoretical perspectives and policy-relevant ideas contained in the source literature. The analysis proceeds through conceptual clarification, comparison of competing perspectives, interpretation of their assumptions, and thematic synthesis of their educational and social implications. The central ideas are treated as concepts and normative problems rather than as variables to be statistically tested. No primary data, respondents, questionnaires, sampling procedures or inferential statistical tests are used in the paper; the conclusions are derived from reasoned engagement with the literature and the Nigerian context.

Thematic Analysis and Central Arguments

Experience and reflective learning

Dewey's educational philosophy treats experience as the medium of learning, but not every experience is equally educative. Productive experience connects action with reflection, enlarges the learner's capacity for future inquiry and links school knowledge to meaningful problems. This view challenges teaching that relies mainly on passive reception and memorisation.

In analytical terms, experience and reflective learning also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Inquiry and problem solving

Inquiry begins with a problematic situation and proceeds through observation, formulation of possible explanations, testing and reflective judgement. In education, this supports problem-based learning, experimentation, projects and discussion. The teacher's role is not eliminated; it changes from information delivery alone to the intelligent organisation of environments in which inquiry can occur.

In analytical terms, inquiry and problem solving also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Democracy as a mode of associated living

For Dewey, democracy is more than electoral procedure. It is a form of social life characterised by communication, participation and shared problem solving. Democratic education therefore requires students to experience respectful dialogue, cooperation, responsibility and participation within school life rather than merely study civic concepts abstractly.

In analytical terms, democracy as a mode of associated living also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Teacher authority and learner participation

Deweyan education is sometimes caricatured as permissive. A more accurate reading recognises the teacher's responsibility to structure experiences, maintain intellectual direction and connect learner interests to worthwhile knowledge. Democratic classrooms distribute opportunities for participation without abandoning professional guidance.

In analytical terms, teacher authority and learner participation also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Implications for Nigerian education

Dewey's philosophy is relevant to Nigerian debates about rote learning, examination dominance, civic education and graduate employability. Its application should be contextual rather than imitative: inquiry, practical problem solving and democratic participation can be adapted to local curriculum, class-size and resource realities.

In analytical terms, implications for Nigerian education also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Critical Synthesis of the Source Literature

The first objective examined the major philosophical ideas of John Dewey, particularly his conception of education, experience, learning and democracy. The discussion established that Dewey viewed education as a continuous process of growth through meaningful experience rather than as the passive transmission of information. Learning, from this perspective, occurs when learners actively interact with their environment, encounter problems, reflect on their experiences and reconstruct their understanding. Dewey (1916) further regarded democracy as a way of associated living founded on communication, shared interests, cooperation and participation. This finding is consistent with Lind (2023), who explained that Dewey's conception of experience provides an important basis for developing democratic habits, and with Shih (2024), who noted that Dewey's philosophy connects democratic learning with participation, inquiry and social interaction. The implication is that education should develop not only intellectual competence but also the social dispositions necessary for individuals to live and work responsibly with others.

The second objective examined the relationship between Dewey's philosophy and the principles of democratic education. The discussion showed that Deweyan philosophy is closely aligned with democratic education because both emphasise participation, freedom of thought, dialogue, cooperation, respect for different perspectives and active engagement in solving common problems. Dewey (1938) argued that educational experiences should encourage continuity and growth, while democratic education requires learners to develop the capacity to deliberate and make responsible judgments. The findings are supported by Biamba et al. (2021), whose study of secondary school

Civic Education teachers and students in South-East Nigeria found that students valued democratic practices involving participation, cooperation, freedom and decision-making, although such practices were only marginally implemented. This suggests that democratic education is more effective when learners are given opportunities to practise democratic values rather than simply memorise definitions of democracy. Dewey's philosophy therefore provides a strong conceptual basis for transforming the classroom into a participatory community of learning.

The fourth objective examined how Deweyan principles can promote learner participation, critical thinking, dialogue, cooperation and responsible citizenship in Nigerian schools. The findings indicated that these qualities can be strengthened when teachers adopt learner-centred and activity-based approaches, including classroom discussions, debates, group projects, inquiry-based activities, collaborative problem-solving and opportunities for students to contribute to classroom and school decisions. Such practices can enable learners to question assumptions, consider alternative viewpoints, resolve disagreements through dialogue and take responsibility for collective outcomes. Eguagie (2026) similarly reported the importance of citizenship education for civic engagement among Social Studies students in Edo State. The finding reinforces Dewey's argument that education should prepare individuals for participation in social life. The significance of the Deweyan approach is that students learn democratic citizenship through repeated participation in democratic relationships and activities, rather than through civic instruction alone.

The fifth objective identified challenges that may hinder the application of Dewey's philosophy to democratic education in Nigeria. The discussion identified teacher-dominated classroom practices, examination-oriented instruction, emphasis on rote memorisation, limited instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher preparation and restricted opportunities for student participation as major challenges. Biamba et al. (2021) similarly found that democratic classroom practices were only marginally implemented in the Nigerian context, despite positive attitudes towards classroom democratisation. These challenges indicate that adopting Deweyan philosophy requires more than changing curriculum documents. Teachers need appropriate preparation and support to facilitate inquiry and discussion, while schools require learning environments that allow meaningful interaction and participation. There is also a need to reconsider educational practices that define successful learning mainly in terms of examination performance. Unless these structural and pedagogical barriers are addressed, the democratic objectives of education may remain largely theoretical.

The sixth objective proposed practical measures for strengthening democratic education in Nigeria through relevant Deweyan principles. The discussion indicates that Nigerian schools should provide greater opportunities for participatory learning, encourage open classroom dialogue, integrate problem-solving and experiential activities into the curriculum, strengthen teacher education in democratic pedagogy and provide students with appropriate opportunities to participate in school governance. Civic and Social Studies programmes should also move beyond the transmission of political information towards activities that connect civic concepts with real-life community problems. Teachers should function increasingly as facilitators of inquiry while maintaining appropriate professional authority. These measures are consistent with Dewey's conception of the school as a social community in which learners develop democratic habits through experience (Dewey, 1916). They are also supported by evidence from Nigerian studies showing the importance of civic education, democratic classroom practices and civic engagement (Biamba et al., 2021; Eguagie, 2026; Uzamere & Aimiyeagbon, 2024). The overall finding is that Dewey's philosophy offers Nigeria a practical philosophical framework for making democratic education experiential, participatory and connected to the realities of learners' social lives.

Nigerian Context and Practical Implications

In Nigeria, the implications of John Dewey's philosophy and the foundations of democratic education in Nigeria must be interpreted against institutional diversity, uneven resources, cultural and religious plurality, strong family and community influences, rapidly changing technology and

persistent concerns about educational quality and public trust. A viable approach should therefore avoid importing a single model without adaptation. National and state policy can provide broad principles, but implementation must allow schools, universities, professional bodies and communities to respond to local conditions while remaining accountable to common standards of dignity, fairness, competence and responsibility.

For practice, the central requirement is alignment. Curriculum or policy statements should be supported by teacher or professional preparation, leadership behaviour, assessment and accountability systems, adequate resources, and channels for reflective feedback. Where formal messages and institutional behaviour contradict one another, the practical behaviour of the institution is likely to shape outcomes more strongly than the written policy.

Critical Issues, Limitations and Counterarguments

A conceptual position on John Dewey's philosophy and the foundations of democratic education in Nigeria must acknowledge several cautions. First, values and principles can be interpreted differently across social groups, so conceptual clarity does not remove disagreement. Second, desirable principles may conflict in practice—for example autonomy and accountability, community and individual rights, innovation and equity, or development and ecological protection. Third, institutional constraints can prevent well-designed ideas from being implemented consistently. These tensions support a balanced approach that makes assumptions explicit, protects legitimate pluralism and treats implementation capacity as part of the argument rather than an afterthought.

CONCLUSION

John Dewey's philosophy provides a strong philosophical foundation for democratic education in Nigeria. His conception of education as a process of experience, growth, inquiry and social interaction challenges approaches that reduce schooling to memorisation and examination preparation. The discussion shows that democracy should not be taught merely as a political concept but should be experienced through participation, dialogue, cooperation, critical thinking and responsible decision-making. Dewey's philosophy is therefore relevant to the Nigerian educational system because it provides a framework for developing learners who can think independently, respect diverse opinions, cooperate with others and participate responsibly in society. However, the realisation of these possibilities requires changes in classroom practices, teacher preparation, curriculum implementation and school governance. Democratic education will remain incomplete if schools teach democratic values while operating through predominantly authoritarian relationships. Nigerian education should consequently make the school itself an environment in which democratic principles are practised as part of everyday learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nigerian schools should adopt more participatory teaching methods such as discussion, debate, project-based learning, group work, inquiry and collaborative problem-solving to provide learners with practical experiences of democratic participation.
2. Teacher education and professional development programmes should incorporate Deweyan principles of experiential learning, reflective practice, critical inquiry and democratic classroom management so that teachers can effectively facilitate rather than dominate the learning process.
3. Schools should provide appropriate opportunities for student participation in decision-making, including class activities, student representative structures, school projects and other matters where learners can responsibly contribute their views.
4. The curriculum should strengthen experiential civic and democratic education by connecting concepts such as citizenship, rights, responsibilities, tolerance and participation with real social issues and community-based activities.

5. Government and educational authorities should improve the conditions necessary for democratic learning, including adequate instructional materials, manageable class sizes, teacher support and learning environments that encourage interaction, questioning and freedom of expression.
6. Assessment practices should place greater emphasis on critical thinking and practical application rather than relying predominantly on memorisation and recall, thereby encouraging learners to analyse problems, justify their opinions, collaborate with others and apply knowledge to real-life situations.

REFERENCES

- Berg, D.-E. (2024). Zooming in on Dewey, democracy, and subjectivity in postdigital education. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 6, 1304–1319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-023-00422-8>
- Biamba, C. N., Chidimma, O. N., Ogunji, C. V., Mezieobi, K. C., Nwajiuba, C. A., & Dunn, M. W. (2021). Assessing democratic classroom practices among secondary school Civic Education teachers in the global south: Case study of South-East Nigeria. *Cogent Education*, 8(1), 1896425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1896425>
- Bolaji, S. D. (2012). Dewey's philosophy and contemporary education in Nigeria: Implications for democracy and education [Doctoral dissertation, University of Lagos].
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Eguagie, O. (2026). Influence of citizenship education on civic engagement among Social Studies students in upper basic schools in Edo State. *UniJos Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education*.
- English, A. R. (2023). Dewey, existential uncertainty and non-affirmative democratic education. In M. H. H. B. et al. (Eds.), *Non-affirmative theory of education and Bildung*. Springer.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2013). *National policy on education (6th ed.)*. Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council.
- Lind, A. R. (2023). Dewey, experience, and education for democracy: A reconstructive discussion. *Educational Theory*, 73(3), 299–319. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12567>
- Okeke, C. I. O., et al. (2021). Assessing democratic classroom practices among secondary school civic education teachers in the global south: Case study of South East Nigeria. *Cogent Education*, 8(1), 1896425.
- Onele, V. (2024). Being a good citizen in a postcolonial context: Justice-oriented citizenship implications of Nigerian teachers' civic education ideologies. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 52(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2024.2305463>
- Salisu, A., Ibrahim, I. I., Musa, M. S., Sa'Id, A. B., Nahannu, A. K., & Ibrahim, U. N. (2024). Exploring emerging realities in citizenship education for promoting and sustaining democratic values and principles in Nigeria. *Taraba International Journal of Social Sciences Research*.

- Shih, Y.-H. (2024). Learning for democracy: Some inspiration from John Dewey's idea of democracy. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1429685. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1429685>
- UNESCO. (2026). What are the links between education and democracy? Global Education Monitoring Report.
- Uzamere, R. O., & Aimiyekagbon, L. O. (2024). Relationship between political education concepts in civic education on students' knowledge and attitude to political participation in Edo State. *NIU Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.58709/niujss.v10i1.1803>