

RELEVANCE OF JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S NATURAL LEARNING TO PRIMARY EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the applicability of Jean Jacques Rousseau's Natural Learning to the Primary Education System in south eastern Nigeria. The study was guided by six research questions and six null hypotheses. Data collection involved the use of a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher, as well as personal observation. The questionnaire, comprising 47 items and focusing on Rousseau's Natural Learning, was validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach Alpha. The target population of the study encompassed 50,021 teachers and head teachers from public primary schools in south eastern Nigeria. Data collection was carried out through the direct delivery retrieval method, facilitated by eight trained research assistants. A sample size of 1,001 respondents was derived using a two-stage sampling process. The data collected were subjected to Mean and Standard Deviation analysis to address the research questions, while t-test statistics were employed to evaluate the six null hypotheses at a significance level of 0.05. The findings indicated a limited implementation of Rousseau's natural learning principles in primary schools within south eastern Nigeria. Consequently, it is recommended that the relevant authorities arrange training sessions for teachers to reassess pedagogical practices in Nigerian primary schools.

Keywords: Rousseau's Philosophy of Education, Primary Education System in Nigeria, Education in South East Nigeria, teaching and learning, Childhood Education

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education serves as a fundamental necessity for human progress, equipping individuals with vital knowledge and skills crucial for personal and societal advancement. By empowering individuals to contribute to their nations, education stands as the cornerstone of both individual and national development (UNESCO, 2003). Onwuka and Enemuo (2014:34) aptly argue that a nation's ability to develop its resources hinges on the strength of its educational foundation.

The importance of childhood education is underscored as the initial step in this process. Childhood education encompasses both early childhood education, offered to children aged 0-5, and primary and elementary education, forming the bedrock of genuine learning experiences at an early age (Lawali, 2008). The Nigerian government places a notable emphasis on childhood education in its national policy (FRN, 2012), although private entrepreneurs currently bear the primary responsibility, with limited government support (Maduewesi, 2001).

This study concentrates on primary education as a subset of childhood education. As defined by the International Standard Classification of Education (2011), primary education focuses on imparting fundamental skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, establishing a strong foundation for future learning. In Nigeria, primary education, also known as elementary education, spans six years and commences around ages 5–7 under the Universal Basic Education scheme initiated in 1999. Primary education holds a pivotal role within the education system, nurturing young children with fundamental knowledge, values and skills that form the basis for lifelong learning. It serves as the foundation for further education and future success. Unfortunately, the primary education system in Nigeria, particularly in the South East region, faces numerous challenges. These challenges include inadequate teachers, outdated teaching methods, flawed curriculum, lack of facilities, and corruption, all hindering its progress. Traditional teaching approaches contribute to passivity in pupils, leading to poor performance, content mismatch, dropouts, unemployment, and even criminal tendencies.

Primary education is governed by boards, agencies, and institutions at national, state, and local levels, aligned with the objectives outlined in the National Policy of Education (FGN, 2004). Despite these efforts, the Nigerian education system falls short of its goals. Researchers highlight significant shortcomings in the implementation of the Universal Basic Education scheme, including inadequate qualified teachers, funding insufficiency, scarcity of teaching and learning resources, teacher motivation issues, and absence of guidance and counseling services (Okoroma 2006; Ajala, 2013). Despite government and stakeholder efforts, the education system remains underdeveloped and ineffective. This situation indicates a significant gap that requires attention. The existing primary education model neglects the child's natural needs and treats children as adults. This could lead to potential hopelessness if left unaddressed. Previous research has explored similar issues, using varying methods. A fresh approach is needed, and Rousseau's Natural Learning offers unique qualities for reforming the education system. By examining the Nigerian primary education system through the lens of Rousseau's ideas, the study aims to identify opportunities for positive change and transformation. The study's focus on Rousseau's philosophy seeks to bring about meaningful improvements and overcome the limitations faced by prior research methods.

Within this context, the focus turns to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy. Rousseau (1712–1778), a French philosopher and educator of the Enlightenment era, presents principles that can enhance primary education in South-eastern Nigeria. While criticisms exist for some aspects of Rousseau's approach, his emphasis on child-centeredness, activity-based learning, learner autonomy, sensory training, play-based methods, and individualized instruction hold promise for enhancing learning outcomes.

Rousseau's pedagogy distinguishes itself by prioritizing the child's perspective over the conventional teacher-centered approach. He contends that the traditional lecture-based method stifles learning, whereas his philosophy fosters practical and active engagement. Learners gain hands-on experience, enabling them to explore their world and develop their faculties. Crucially, Rousseau's method is individualized, in stark contrast to the standardized lecture approach. This research aims to evaluate the applicability of Rousseau's Natural Learning principles to primary

education in South Eastern Nigeria, seeking to address the deficiencies highlighted in the current system.

Significance of the Study

The study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Exploring the combination of Rousseau's theory with educational theories by Steiner, Montessori, and Dewey has implications for Nigerian primary education. It could enhance government policies, benefit educators, inform parents, empower pupils, and support future research. The publication and online availability of the study could shed light on Rousseau's natural learning theory, benefiting educational development. Teachers could use these findings for workshops, enriching their understanding of Rousseau's philosophy and promoting practical approaches. For parents, the study offers insights into child-rearing and education. Pupils could benefit from experiential learning tips, applying knowledge beyond the classroom. Researchers could use the study's outcomes as reference materials for their own work

Theoretical Framework

One theory considered relevant to this study is reviewed. John Dewey's Progressive Education theory (1938): Progressive Education theory was formulated by John Dewey, a prominent pragmatic philosopher and influential figure in modern education history. Dewey, born in Burlington, Vermont, USA, was the driving force behind the progressive movement in American education. His theory emerged as a response to his dissatisfaction with traditional teacher-centered education. Dewey's Progressive Education theory advocates for learning resources tailored to a child's developmental level and it underscores the significance of practical experiences in the learning process. He asserts that curricula must align with learners' needs and stresses the importance of educators understanding a child's potential before dictating what they should know. Dewey emphasizes the interconnection between education and personal experience, criticizing the fixation on what a child should know rather than understanding what they are capable of comprehending.

Central to Dewey's theory is the notion that the curriculum should be relevant to a learner's life, as learning occurs when individuals make sense of their own experiences. He champions active over passive learning, emphasizing interaction between the learner and the subject matter. Dewey places the focus on the child, advocating for educational approaches that consider the child's needs and innate abilities. Dewey's progressive education theory aligns with democratic ideals, promoting equal participation among all participants in the learning process. This theory proves relevant to this study by illuminating the nature of the child and the necessary activities for their educational development. It prioritizes the child's academic growth, emphasizing the need for an appropriate environment and experiences. This perspective sheds light on the challenges and progress within Nigeria's basic education system, offering a framework to comprehend these aspects through Dewey's theory.

Research Ouestions

This research aims to address the following questions:

To what extent is the concept of child-centeredness, as envisioned by Rousseau, applied in teaching and learning in Primary Schools in South Eastern Nigeria?

To what extent is the activity-method, as propounded by Rousseau, integrated into the teaching and learning approaches of primary schools in South Eastern Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

To refine the study's focus, the following null hypotheses will be tested at a significance level of p < 0.05:

There is no significant difference in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers regarding the application of Rousseau's child-centeredness in South Eastern Nigerian primary schools.

There is no significant difference in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers in the application of Rousseau's activity method in South Eastern Nigerian primary schools.

METHODOLOGY

The study examined the relevance of Jean Jacques Rousseau's natural learning philosophy to primary education system in Nigeria. The study was carried out in all the public primary schools in South-East, Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The primary source was administration of questionnaire to respondents. The population of this study was comprised of 50,021 subjects made up of 44,427 teachers and 5,594 head teachers in public primary schools in South-East, Nigeria. The sample for this study consisted of 1,001 research subjects composed of 889 teachers and 112 head teachers of public primary schools. A two-stage sampling procedure was adopted to draw the sample size for the study. To provide answers to the research questions, the data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The hypotheses were tested using t-test.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: To what extent is the concept of child-centeredness, as envisioned by Rousseau, applied in teaching and learning in Primary Schools in south-east, Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviations of teachers and head teachers on the extent to which the concept of child-centeredness, as envisioned by Rousseau, is applied in teaching and learning in Primary Schools in south-east, Nigeria.

S/	Items	Teachers			Head	Head Teachers		
N		MEA N	SD	DL	MEA N	SD	DL	
1.	Formal education often begins only when a child has come of age.	1.89	0.52	LE	1.68	0.5 6	LE	
2.	Child-centred learning programmes are effectively implemented in my primary School	1.49	0.54	VLE	1.58	0.5 0	LE	
3.	Most head teachers don't understand child centeredness in early education.	2.80	0.39	HE	1.79	0.4 0	LE	
4.	Teachers pay adequate attention to pupils' natural abilities.	1.55	0.44	LE	1.42	0.4 8	VLE	
5.	Teachers decide what the children should learn at an early stage.	2.52	0.71	HE	2.16	0.7 4	LE	
6.	The needs of the children are set above everything else.	1.25	0.48	VLE	1.65	0.4 0	LE	
7.		1.50	0.50	LE	1.51	0.5	LE	

beyond their level.					4	
Cluster Mean	1.86	0.51	LE	1.68	0.5	LE
					2	

Key: SD= Standard Deviation, DL= Decision Level, VLE= Very Low Extent, LE= Low Extent, HE= High Extent, VHE= Very High Extent.

Table 1 presents the perspectives of both teachers and head teachers on the degree to which Rousseau's concept of child-centeredness is put into practice in Primary Schools in southeast Nigeria. Items 1 and 7 received low ratings from both groups, with mean scores of 1.89 and 1.68, and 1.50 and 1.51, respectively. This indicates that both teachers and head teachers believe that the application of child-centeredness in teaching and learning is limited. In contrast, there's some disparity in opinions about items 2 and 6. Teachers see child-centered learning programs being effectively implemented and children's needs prioritized with mean scores of 1.49 and 1.25, respectively, implying a very low extent. Head teachers rate the same items with mean scores of 1.58 and 1.65, respectively. Similarly, there's a difference in views regarding items 3 and 5. Teachers rate them highly with mean scores of 2.80 and 2.25, indicating substantial implementation. However, head teachers respond with mean scores of 1.79 and 2.16, which aligns with low implementation. The variation continues in item 4, where teachers rate it at 1.55, suggesting limited implementation, while head teachers rate it at 1.42, indicating very low implementation. Overall, the table presents an average mean score of 1.86 with a standard deviation of 0.51 for teachers and 1.68 with a standard deviation of 0.52 for head teachers. These scores fall within the "low extent" range of 1.50-2.49.

Research Question 2: To what extent is activity-method as propounded by Rousseau integrated in into the teaching and learning approaches of primary schools of south-east, Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean scores and standard deviations of teachers and head teachers on the extent toactivity-method as propounded by Rousseau is integrated into the teaching and learning in primary schools in south-east, Nigeria.

S/ N	Items	Teachers			Head Teachers		
		MEA N	SD	DL	MEA N	SD	DL
8.	In my school, teaching-learning is conducted through practice.	1.29	0.45	VLE	1.69	0.4 6	LE
9.	Students are allowed to perform different activities regarding a concept before a new one is introduced.	1.50	0.42	LE	1.58	0.4 4	LE
10.	Teachers only serve as guide to the children.	1.80	0.39	LE	1.79	0.4 0	LE

11.	Less attention is paid to whether a child is actively participating in the learning process or not.	1.48	0.84	VLE	2.79	0.8	НЕ
12.	In my school, teaching- learning is conducted through observation.	1.71	0.43	LE	1.77	0.4	LE
13.	Teachers make learning engaging for their pupils.	2.59	0.40	HE	1.49	0.4 8	VLE
	Cluster Mean	1.73	0.49	LE	1.85	0.5 0	LE

Key: SD= Standard Deviation, DL= Decision Level, VLE= Very Low Extent, LE= Low Extent, HE= High Extent, VHE= Very High Extent

Table 2 presents the opinions of teachers and head teachers regarding the application of Rousseau's activity-method in teaching and learning at primary schools in South Eastern Nigeria. According to the findings, items 8, 9, 10, and 12 received low ratings, with mean scores of 1.29, 1.69, 1.50, and 1.58 respectively. This suggests that teachers and head teachers believed that these specific items related to the activity method were applied to a low extent in primary schools in the south-east region of Nigeria. However, there was a divergence of views among respondents for item 11. Teachers gave it a mean score of 1.48, indicating very low extent, while head teachers assigned a higher mean score of 2.79, indicating a high extent of application. Similarly, for item 13, teachers assigned a mean score of 2.59 (high extent), whereas head teachers gave it a mean score of 1.49 (very low extent). In general, the table presented an average mean score of 1.73 for teachers (with a standard deviation of 0.49) and 1.85 for head teachers (with a standard deviation of 0.50). These scores fall within the range of low extent ratings (1.50-2.49).

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers in the application of Rousseau's child-centeredness in primary schools in South Eastern Nigeria.

Table 3: t-test Analysis of the Significant Difference in Mean Ratings between teachers and head teachers in the application of child-centeredness in primary schools

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	Sig.	Dec.
Teachers	846	1.86	0.51	0.08	942	0.9	NS
Head Teachers	98	1.68	0.52				

Key: NS = Not Significant, Df = $(n_1 - 1) + (n_2 - 1) = (944 - 1) + (944 - 1) = 942$

The findings in table 3 indicate a t-test analysis aimed at determining the significant disparity between the mean ratings of teachers and head teachers regarding the implementation of Rousseau's concept of child-centredness in primary schools. The analysis yielded a t-value of 0.08, computed with 942 degrees of freedom, and a resulting significance value of 0.9. Since this significance value of 0.9 surpasses the predetermined significance level of 0.05, the outcome is considered statistically insignificant. As a result, we conclude that the null hypothesis, which evaluated the distinction in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers concerning the application of Rousseau's child-centred approach in primary schools within South Eastern Nigeria, is not rejected. This implies that teachers and head teachers share a similar viewpoint regarding the extent to which child-centredness, as envisioned by Rousseau, is put into practice in primary schools in the South Eastern region of Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers on the extent to which activity method, as propounded by Rousseau, is applied within primary schools in South Eastern Nigeria.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of the Significant Difference between the Mean Ratings of teachers and head teachers on the extent to which activity method, as propounded by Rousseau, is applied in teaching and learning in primary schools in South Eastern Nigeria.

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	Sig.	Dec.
Teachers	846	1.73	0.49	0.12	942	0.7	NS
Head teachers	98	1.85	0.50				

Key: NS = Not Significant, Df = $(n_1-1) + (n_2-1) = (944-1) + (944-1) = 942$

Table 4 presents the t-test analysis comparing the mean ratings of teachers and head teachers regarding the application of Rousseau's activity method in primary schools. The results reveal a t-value of 0.12 with 942 degrees of freedom and a significant value of 0.7. Given that the significance value of 0.7 exceeds the predetermined 0.05 level, the findings are not

considered significant. This indicates that both teachers and head teachers hold similar opinions about the extent of applying Rousseau's activity method in teaching and learning within South Eastern Nigerian primary schools. The empirical evidence strongly supports the non-rejection of the null hypothesis, which sought to assess the divergence in mean ratings between teachers and head teachers concerning the application of Rousseau's activity method in South Eastern Nigerian primary schools.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Research question one examined the application of Rousseau's child-centred approach in teaching and learning in primary schools. The findings indicated a limited implementation of Rousseau's child-centredness in South-Eastern Nigerian primary schools. The prevailing approach is more teacher-centred, as teaching prioritizes the teacher's perspective over the individual student's natural abilities. Rousseau and Bloom's viewpoints emphasize that children should be educated according to their understanding and innate capacities. The benefits of child-centred teaching include nurturing children's innate potentials and allowing them to engage actively in their development. This approach contrasts with traditional systems that focus on conforming to adult standards. Consequently, child-centred teaching enhances both learning outcomes and the exploration of individual talents, aligning with prior research by Cendana (2019).

The researcher conducted a study to compare the mean scores of teachers and head teachers in primary schools in south-east Nigeria regarding the application of child-centeredness, as described by Rousseau, in the classroom. The results of the test indicated that the hypothesis was not rejected. This outcome is unsurprising, given that primary school teachers tend to overlook students' natural abilities by dictating what they should learn at this stage. Consequently, the educational needs of students at the primary level may not receive adequate attention. Students are often directed to conform to adult preferences and societal demands, which can hinder their holistic growth. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Odionye and Okpara (2015), revealing limited implementation of child-centered learning in public primary schools. Child-centred learning is vital for nurturing students' innate potentials during the foundational phase of education. This assertion is further supported by the responses from teachers and head teachers in south-east Nigeria.

The analysis of research question two revealed that teachers and head teachers in primary schools believe that Rousseau's activity-method of teaching is not widely applied. Respondents indicated that teaching and learning through practice, engaging pupils in various activities, and acting as guides were not extensively practised. This suggests that many primary schools in south-east Nigeria do not align with Rousseau's teaching approach. The researcher's personal observations in classrooms also reflected this misalignment, where teachers dominated and active student participation was lacking. This situation contradicts Rousseau's ideas of hands-on learning. This outcome could hinder students from reaching their potential and aligns with previous research indicating the benefits of activity-based teaching. The question arises whether the limited adoption of the activity-method in primary schools leads to post-primary students' inability to learn through self-discovery. Ugwu's study supports this, highlighting the effectiveness of activity-based learning in post-primary education. This resonates with Okimedim's findings that hands-on activities enhance learning. Rousseau's perspective emphasizes nurturing a child's natural activities during development.

The data analysis concerning hypothesis two indicates that the viewpoints of respondents regarding the implementation of Rousseau's activity method in primary schools do not show significant differences. This suggests that there isn't a noteworthy distinction in the mean scores between teachers and head teachers of primary schools in south-east Nigeria regarding the extent to which the activity method, as advocated by Rousseau, is applied. This outcome is to be expected, particularly considering that primary school teaching often involves lectures rather than facilitating active learning. Practical activities and experiential learning opportunities are lacking, limiting the scope for discovery-based learning. This alignment with expectations is logical since Rousseau's activity-based method emphasizes engagement from both teachers and students, fostering practical experiences rather than relying solely on lectures and reading materials. The absence of emphasis on activity-based learning may be a contributing factor to poor academic performance, even extending to post-primary education.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study has examined the relevance of Jean Jacques Rousseau's natural learning principles within the primary education system of south-east Nigeria. Through an exploration of educational concepts and various theories, the research addressed two research questions and hypotheses. The findings unveiled that while aspects of Rousseau's child-centredness and activity-method are recognized, their application remains limited within the primary school environment. These outcomes highlight the potential gaps between theory and practice in South East's educational landscape. It is evident that further attention and efforts are needed to bridge this divide and fully integrate Rousseau's principles into pedagogical approaches. The implications of this study extend beyond the classroom, resonating with educational policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders alike.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that the government through local government authorities should organize training for teachers to reappraise the pedagogical practices in primary schools in Nigeria. This will upgrade their skills and knowledge and make them more efficient and effective. In addition, the government should prioritize the needs of the learners and ensure that all instructional activities in the primary schools revolve around them.

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