CONTEMPORARY DILEMMA OF EDUCATION IN AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

By

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Abstract
The rather phenomenal but unplanned expansion of higher education in Africa in the past two decades has now landed the continent into some intractable quagmire. This can be observed in the unfolding crisis of general systematic collapse afflicting African institutions of learning. This paper analyzes the current dilemma facing education in Africa which ranges from literacy rates, enrolment in basic education, quality of teachers, participation of women and girls, government funding of education and the crisis of war in the region.

An educated population remains the fundamental platform for meeting most of the development goals and therefore a well-oiled education system is very necessary. It is a driving force for any future development. A good education system is crucial not only for maintenance of socially responsive economic and political system but also for human development. The educational system in some African countries are still in poor state of affairs. This paper is concerned with the general overview of education in Africa. This is done by embarking on an excursion into the various forces which have contributed to brutalize education in Africa, such as irrelevant curricula to the manpower needs of Africa, quality of teachers, participation of women, literacy and numeracy rates, the crisis of civil strife and political instability in the region and the quality and quantity of research in Africa. The purpose of the entire exercise is to chart a new course for the regeneration of education in Africa.

Conceptual Analysis of Education
Fafunwa (1979) defined education “as the aggregate of all the processes by which a child develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of
positive value to the society in which he lives, that is to say, it is a process of disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or to guarantee rational direction of the society or both.”

Obanya (2004) viewed education as something that includes (but transcends) mere schooling and should be seen as an articulation of informal structures for the inculcation and sustenance of basic and post-basic life skills and formal systems for the awakening and continuous development of the human potentials. Peters cited in Enoh (2003) defined education as “the transmission of what is desirable or worthwhile to individual members of a society to make them have adequate knowledge that will enable them to contribute their quota to the overall well-being of the society.”

Factors Which Have Shaped the Course of Education in Africa: The Colonial Experience

In Africa, education has been a product (if not a victim of the various historical, social, political and economic forces which have determined the fortunes of the region over the years. It has also been a contributor to the evolution of the region in a number of ways. A clear understanding of the contemporary education dilemma of Africa will therefore require a close look at the evolution of contemporary African society itself.

Like in all other societies cultural factors have been the primary determinants of education in Africa. Since, the primary function of education is enculturation, all traditional African societies sustained themselves through the form of education that seeks to inculcate social norms and norms in the young. The same type of education seeks to prepare each person for his or her future role in society. It inculcates the skills needed for survival in the immediate environment and mobilizes all available human energies and talent for holistic societal development.

The African colonial experience introduced a culture clash which had affected education in the region in a number of ways. First it changed radically the objectives of education, from enculturation into indigenous culture, emphasis shifted to learning another culture and in the language of other culture, secondly and closely related to the first impact of the culture clash, the content and orientation of education also changed. Thus Obanya (2004:4) remarked that, it created a hiatus between education and Africa’s cultural roots.

Reform efforts after the attainment of several reforms have been embarked upon by African countries after independence. In 1961, the first conference of ministers of education was organized by UNESCO in Addis-Ababa. The main purpose of this conference was to analyze the type of education inherited from the colonial masters at independence. Some countries at that time such as Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa went to the extent of evolving consistent new philosophies of education and experimented on alternative models during their period of struggle.
Available evidence shows that the first two decades of independence witnessed some concerted efforts to evolve genuine national systems of education. At the level of policy making, national consultations were held and national policy documents (e.g. Nyerere’s famous education for self-reliance) were produced. Free compulsory primary education was even tried in some countries, like Nigeria.

Politics and education operate in close interaction in a number of ways. Since politics deals with power play for the governance of human societies educational systems tend to reflect the politics of the nations they are designed to serve rather created an unstable political scenario which affected education in Africa.

The Economy and the Exigencies of Structural Adjustment also had its impact on the education system in Africa. It is a known fact that economic factors interact with educational development. That is, the fate of education does depend to a large extent, on the level of economic prosperity. African economies have been experiencing stunted growth since early 1980’s and these years have been described by the ECA as “Africa’s lost decade”. This state of affairs is well captured in the words of Adebayo Adedeji, one time executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa in the following words,

Whatever indicators we use, bettering micro-economic or social variables, the situation of our continent has been one of the significant and sometimes precipitous retrogression. As a continent, we are worst off today than we were 10 years ago in virtually all aspects of socio-economic development output and income growth, capital formation export and import growth. Our balance of payment deficit have accelerated while inflation and debt servicing obligations have escalated. De-industrialization has proceeded on an unprecedented scale. Capital decumulation, rather than capital accumulation has become the order of the day in many African countries. (Adebayo, 1980)

It is in the midst of such problems that the structural adjustment policies, adopted by African countries since the mid 1980’s were intended to lead to improved economic performance and to help African states get their micro-economic fortunes.

In spite of Africa’s declining economic fortunes, in spite of its multitude of political and social problems, in spite of the wide “knowledge gap” between Africa and the rest of the world, the region has become part and parcel of today’s global village. This globalization has also had its effects on the development of education in the continent.
Contemporary Dilemma of Education in Africa

A good picture of the educational dilemma can be seen from a careful look at the poor state of education in Africa. They are thus:

The dilemma of relating the curriculum to regional manpower needs and the region’s economy. It is a glaring fact that education in Africa generally has not been adapted to the needs and aspirations of the people. Phelps – strokes and advising commission far back 1925 confirmed this fact when it stated that “subjects taught in African schools should henceforth be related to African life and culture. Education in most African countries, like Nigeria, Cameroun, Senegal, Gambia, Mali, etc is still too literary, not practical, not adapted to the needs of a developing agricultural nation”. This type of education only tends to produce proud lazy people who dislike manual labour and prefer white-collar jobs. Commenting on the above dilemma, John W. Harrison (1986) observed thus:

It is understandable why the European and American experts who still play an influential role in Education in most African nations should cherish the educational systems by which they themselves were nourished. What is not as clearly recognized by those who have been anticipating an essential change in education following independence is that the first generation of Africans who have taken the place of the colonial authorities in most nations face an even greater intellectual and emotional difficulties in breaking with the past. They are frequently as conservative concerning the educational status-quo as the most traditional of the colonialists.

This issue of curricula relevancy was extensively discussed in 1961 UNESCO sponsored Addis-Ababa conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa, yet the situation is still gloomy.

Literacy and Numeracy

Many of the learners in the African region lack proper foundations in literacy and numeracy. This has served as a stop-watch for African learners in their struggles to progress in the education system and even into post-school education and training. Studies have shown that in some African countries, there is too much low level of literacy and numeracy. In fact, without a secured foundation of literacy and numeracy, the learners will never obtain the high level skills needed by any nation to address issues of poverty and inequality for development and growth. In Africa therefore, only 30% of the population are literate enough and this dilemma can never lead us to the realization of our dream of progress.
Quality of Teachers

The low quality of the teaching personnel constitutes a serious dilemma in the quest for sound education in Africa. It is a truism that the educator must first be educated if the visions of the region are to be realized. The unqualified teacher is therefore a problem, because he lacks the power to carry those he is teaching beyond much of what they already know. Knowing little more than the learners, he cannot discern relationships or give varied interpretations of a concept out of which greater understanding can be derived. Accordingly Enoh (1996) said that because of this, “teaching becomes dry and mechanical, a situation which limits students grasp of content and consequently application, so vital for purposes of transforming society”.

Teachers’ quality is affected also by teachers conditions in most African countries in terms of management benefits and professional support are poor and teacher motivation and performance is low. This situation has been detrimental to the quality of basic education in some countries e.g. Cameroun, Nigeria, Botswana, Togo, Niger, etc.

Inadequate Classroom Accommodation

In Africa, you find a situation where majority of students at secondary and tertiary level are without enough classroom accommodation and seating arrangement grossly inadequate. As a result of the large enrolments in schools in this region, the classroom and lecture halls are overcrowded. You find a situation where one hundred students at the secondary level and tertiary institution, one thousand, five hundred and above receiving lecture. In most cases the chairs and desks are not enough, you see students standing up, sitting on broken desks. When students are overcrowded like this, there is a stalling of the teaching-learning process and a disruption of the children mental activity, a situation that generally militates against effective teaching and intellectual development of the learner.

Education Statistics

The quality and quality of research-based data in Africa is extremely low compared to that of the developed countries and most of the educational policies do not have such imperial-based support. Well managed and responsive statistical information services are essential to viable policy formulation and efficient investment in education.

Female Enrolment

Several millions, according to Brenda (2012) remarked that, approximately 30 million African girls are out of school either because they have never enrolled in school or because they have dropped out of the education system. Access to school for girls in some African countries is not guaranteed because of discriminatory practices against girls. This is due to some social and cultural practices that stand on the ways of girls
education. Some parents have not seen the benefits of girls education. Women education promotes a shared responsibility for the training of children, for social improvement, low regard attached to women education constitutes a dilemma in Africa.

Internal strifes in Africa has affected education in some African countries, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Somalia, Angola, Niger etc. These internal strives have prevented many countries in the region from settling down to think of development activities including educational development activities. Non democratic regimes have prevented the thinking of ideas. Schools and the informal network of education, did everything to stifle the growth of the innovative ideas which could have led to creativity. The overall climate of political instability results in frequent changes in the education sector because of policy summersault. Political instability also lead to the depletion of the resources available for or allocated to education. Investment by non-governmental sectors in education to compliment government efforts could not have flourished in an atmosphere of instability. Here again, you find a dilemma of Africa’s impatience at implementation since no new policy is given enough time to get assimilated before it is jettisoned for a brand new one which invariably, would be ill-planned for their effective implementation.

**Funding Constraints**

The gross under-funding of the educational sector in some African countries is another dilemma facing the region. A good picture of the educational dilemma can be seen in the neglect of the maintenance of the physical facilities, instructional and learning conditions have deteriorated in many schools, classrooms, libraries, and laboratories are nothing to write about. African governments are known to spend a large chunk of their budgets on education yet education remains under-funded. The bulk of educational expenditure is on teachers’ salaries, yet teachers in Africa are under-paid and ill-motivated. African societies need large numbers of scientifically and technically qualified persons to engineer development, yet large number of Africans with this skills remain unemployed or have migrated.

While this situation persists, Obanya (2004) observed that “expatriates still occupy a large number of key technical-scientific and managerial positions in Africa.” Worst still, while billions of dollars (from external aid) have been poured into development of education, the sector appeared less developed today than it was in 1960s. It even appears that the countries that have received the greatest quantity of external assistance have remained the most educationally underdeveloped.
How Can Africa Get Out of its Educational Dilemma?

The answer seems to lie in a two pronged approach that combines educational regeneration with the regeneration of the entire society. This means that the rebuilding of education should be an integral part of a radical re-thinking of the working of African countries themselves.

This boils down to saying that African countries should practice ideal democracy in terms of polity. African countries must go beyond the practice of simply seeing democracy as mere multi-party politics. Rather, it should be the matter of genuine nation-building in Africa. This will be generated only when Africans are encouraged to do their own thinking, to analyze their own problems themselves to examine alternative approaches together and when divergence views are recognized as a legitimate phenomenon.

Structural adjustment in the education sector should be a reflection of adjustment in the wider society. Coupled with that is a creation of the climate of good governance for meaningful economic development. Above all, efforts to regenerate education in Africa will be incomplete if Africa fails to emphasize those things that really matter.

Conclusion

In analyzing the current dilemma facing education in Africa, an effort has been made to go into issues confronting African education with the overall concern for socio-economic development and the promotion of democracy and human happiness in Africa. African societies therefore need to promote genuine development efforts, which will put the people first by regenerating education that will be relevant to the needs of the African societies. Education in this context has to be taken along with society, building on each society’s cultural roots and harnessing Africa’s own internal energies, resources and political will. This will forge genuine partnership with the international community with which Africa should operate as equal co-operator.

References


