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Reordering African Education-Potential benefits & Challenges: Africanising the Education curriculum

Kudakwashe Danmore Keithy Tapfumaneyi

Department of Library and Information Services, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

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Abstract

Soon after the attainment of independence most African countries made vigorous attempts to expand education to all citizens. Education especially tertiary education was seen and is still seen as the engine for development. In order to achieve this broad development agenda many educational institutions including Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Centres were established.

Indeed most African states boast of a huge intellectual capital and a “well educated human resources” and a continent that is endowed with natural resources. But questions are always abound why education has failed to live up to its expectation of developing Africa. The reason has been in the education and training of professionals. The paper explores the potential benefits that might come with Africanising education curriculums in Africa. The paper argues that the pursuit of Eurocentric biased curriculums has limited the impact that education has had in developing Africa. The paper cites the possible challenges in Africanising curriculums and the possible solutions that may be employed to make education more relevant to the development of Africa.

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Introduction

African scholars and professionals are generally agreed that education curriculums in Africa are premised on Western systems of philosophy. This dependency has led to ever increasing calls from some academics to “de-Westernise” or “Africanise” education curriculums in Africa so as to make education relevant to the African context. It is envisaged that africanising education curriculums would result in Africa getting the most out of its education thereby realising socio-economic and political development. It has been hypothesized that euro centric biased curriculums have been the major reasons why education has failed to make an impact in developing the continent. The question is what are the potential benefits that might come with Africanising education curriculums in Africa? This paper argues that the pursuit of Eurocentric biased curriculums has limited the impact that education has had in developing Africa. However, they are possible challenges in Africanising curriculums and these must be explored and possible solutions should

emerge that may be employed to make education more relevant to the development of Africa.

Definition of key terms

Curriculum

According to Barker (1998) curriculum refers to all learning which takes place in any educational institution or establishment, which is either a direct or indirect result of the planned activities which are practiced there. Thus a curriculum can be said to refer to the planned or unplanned learning experienced by learners in the school system as not all learned experiences are planned.

Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is knowledge that is unique to a given culture, community or society. It is contrasted and differentiated from the knowledge gained at formal institutions. Indigenous knowledge systems encompass all aspects of life, such as the management of natural environment. It forms the basis of survival for the people who own the knowledge. Indigenous knowledge may be part of an

on-going experiment or maybe even be an established local tradition (Slum, 2006). Indigenous knowledge is a result of many generations and is cultivated over pro longed years encompassing experiences, careful observations and trial and error experiments evolving over centuries (Martin, 1995). Thus over centuries, indigenous people of various localities would have developed their own specific knowledge on various aspects. (Cotton, 1996).

Education

Education may be defined as all those processes of learning which enable a person to acquire the skills, behaviours, knowledge, values and norms which are considered necessary to live a happy and successful life in the society to which the individual belongs. (Barker, 1994)

The background of the problems of the African Education System

African education curriculums are too dependent on Western knowledge systems. This dependency traces back to the colonial period when the colonising powers imposed their epistemology and philosophy on the colonised. Mukasa and Becker (1992:41) noted that the teaching materials, trainers, curricula from the respective colonizing powers were aimed at ensuring the dominance of European culture in their colonial enclaves. Indigenous histories, epistemologies and ontologies were not considered worth including in any educational curriculum (Ramose, 2004:138).

The irony, however, is that Western knowledge systems continue to dominate African curriculums well after the colonising powers relinquished power to the black political elite in now independent states (Banda, 2008:50; Ramose, 2004:138). Mukasa and Becker (1992:36) underline this dependency when they say that out of a survey of 20 randomly selected papers read at a 1987 communications conference in Nigeria, 87% of citations were from Western sources, suggesting that there is a heavy dependence on Western thought patterns in African education. Mano's (2009) extensive survey on the teaching of journalism and media studies in Africa also revealed that there is an over-dependency on syllabuses conceived in the West; that most students and staff are still trained abroad; and that major books and theories used in African institutions were mainly written by Westerners for Western students.

Western dominance of the dissemination of knowledge and information can also be seen in the over-reliance on Western textbooks. UNESCO made this observation when it said:

The source of inspiration of teachers, curricula and textbooks is Western. Teachers are mostly Western educated, curricula are drawn from Western models and most textbooks are authored and published in the West and North America (UNESCO, 2002:1).

Funding, peer review and many other validation processes all lead to this over-dependency on Western models (Banda, 2008:50). Theory and practice in library, journalism, business and science education are still defined and determined by Western institutions and scholars. The roles of professionals are also still informed by western theories and schools of thought. These theories have been universalised in the examination of professionals in non-Western countries. Gunaratne (cited in Fourie, 2007:208)

The result of all this, is the use of Western standards to determine what good professional practice should be in African professional practice. Codes of ethics and professional values used by various professionals in Africa are heavily inspired by Western or Western derived international codes. In order for individuals to enter the international and increasingly the national higher echelons of academics, individuals, just as institutions such as universities, will need to play the game according to the hegemonic rules of the North (De Beer, Banda & Mukela, and 2007:5).

The domination of Western liberal thought on African scholarship and education is seen by postcolonial scholars as limiting the scope and history of freedom of expression to Eurocentric thought patterns (Fourie, 2007:208). This is envisaged to be one of the reasons why Africa's trained professionals have failed to make an impact in developing the continent. Academics argue that because curriculums are based on western knowledge, circumstances and environments, the theories may not be applied wholly trait jacketed and unmodified with success. It is this wholesome assimilation of Anglo biased curriculums that has resulted in education having a limited impact in Africa. Thus western theories in curriculums are being applied in completely different socio-cultural and economic contexts hence the failures by African professionals to transform the fortunes of the continent. The western ideologies pursued by western educated African professionals are often rejected by the indigenes who are supposed to implement the policies hence the limited impact.

Post colonial scholars also see western biased curriculums as part of the colonial agenda to impose a Western world view on important issues such as class, race, gender and sexuality. The dependency on western philosophy and theory has resulted in the production of educated professional who cannot deal with the complex postcolonial challenges of the continent of Africa. The Anglo American based curriculums alienate African professionals from their history, thus making it difficult for them to effectively engage and critique the postcolonial state and solve the challenges that exist. As often they become overwhelmed as the prescribed theories fail to meet the demands of an alien African context which they were not trained in.

It appears from the foregoing argument that there is a consensus that African education curriculums have to be reordered and revamped and be freed from the iron-grip of Western philosophy if education is to be of any relevance to Africa. Many African academics and professionals are increasingly calling for the “africanisation” of educational curriculums in the African continent.

Nyerere (1922-1999), former President of Tanzania highlights problems and challenges facing post-colonial education in Africa. Nyerere (1975:12) in “Education in the least-developed countries” argues that:

So the first problem we have not solved is that of building sufficient self-confidence to refuse what we regard as the world's best (whatever that may mean), and to choose instead the most appropriate for our conditions. In education, industry, agriculture and commerce, we all too often prefer blind invitation to relevant initiative or rational adaptation.

Nyerere was alluding to the whole some adoption of euro centric philosophies in all aspects especially those of education. This blind adoption of foreign principles in professional practice has led to injustices and failures by most professions such as librarianship and journalism to meet the needs of the African society. There is a need to train professionals towards a mode of professional practice that is well suited to Africa's conditions. This is only achievable if educational curriculums are tailored made to meet African conditions and are spearheaded by

indigenous knowledge systems in the various sectors of science, education and agriculture.

Chijioke (1989) states that, African people themselves have been to blame for many of the misconceptions since they expected to receive the same model of education as their European counterparts. In their view, anything less would have been inferior. Mchombu (1991:28) cites a statement by Kenneth Kaunda, the former President of Zambia, where he warned Zambians that they were heading for intellectual bankruptcy because of the poor state of the nation's bookshops and the President called the absence of “good books” a “national tragedy”.

Nyerere's speech (1967:2) “Education for Self-Reliance” argues that “The fact pre-colonial Africa did not have ‘schools’--except for short periods of initiation in some tribes--did not mean that the children were not educated. They learned by living and doing. In the homes and on the farms they were taught the skills of the society, and the behaviour expected of its members...” Nyerere alluded to the afro centric view of “de-schooling” which acknowledges other ways of “knowing” and of knowledge that is IK.

The Afrocentric Paradigm

In the late 1970s Molefi Kete Asante began speaking of the need for an Afrocentric orientation to data. By 1980 he had published a book, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, which launched the first full discussion of the concept. The Afrocentric paradigm is a revolutionary shift in thinking proposed as a constructural adjustment to black disorientation, decenteredness, and lack of agency. The Afrocentrist asks the question, “What would African people do if there were no white people?” In other words, what natural responses would occur in the relationships, attitudes toward the environment, kinship patterns, preferences for colors, type of religion, and historical referent points for African people if there had not been any intervention of colonialism or enslavement?

Afrocentricity answers this question by asserting the central role of the African subject within the context of African history, education and civilisation, thereby removing western ideologies from the center of the African reality. It is on this premise of the centrality of African knowledge that educational curriculums should be based. Afrocentricity just like the quest to africanise education curriculums becomes a revolutionary idea because it studies history, philosophy, ideas, theories, educational and political and economic processes from a standpoint of African

people as subjects and not as objects, basing all knowledge on the authentic interrogation of location. Thus localizing approaches to aspects like education enhances the role that education may play in development.

Afrocentricity seeks to emphasise the contribution of black Africans in various spheres and it notes how approaching all disciplines from a Eurocentric perspectives results in the trivialisation of African knowledge systems and their contributions to civilization. There is something more than knowing in the Afrocentric sense; there is also doing. Afrocentricity holds that all definitions are autobiographical. One of the key assumptions of the Afrocentrist is that all relationships are based on centers and margins and the distances from either the center or the margin. When African people view themselves as centered and central in their own history then they see themselves as agents, actors, and participants rather than as marginals on the periphery of socio-political and economic experience. (<http://www.asante.net/scholarly/afrocentricityarticle.html>)

Why Africanise education curriculums in Africa?

Nyerere, J. K. (1968:69) castigated the colonial education system in Africa which influenced the levels of underdevelopment prevailing today when he suggested that the education provided by the colonial governments was not designed to prepare young people for the service of their country. Instead it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the value of the colonial society state. In these countries the state interest in education therefore stemmed from the need for local clerks and junior officials. It was modeled on the British system, but with even more emphasis on subservient attitudes and on white-collar skills. Such weaknesses in current curriculums impede the effective training of Africa's educated professionals.

As the 21st century dawned, some African intellectuals were already contemplating an education system based on African philosophy and African values. These intellectuals were motioning for an education system that would uphold the indigenous knowledge systems this was after realising the inadequacies that emerged as a result of the Anglo American biased curriculums.(Makgoba, 1996; Seepe, 2004; Higgs and Van Wyk, 2007). This group also contends that through education, African societies will be enhanced if education reflects the local indigenous knowledge systems. The enhancement of the education will in turn produce professionals who are grounded in meeting the needs

of Africa in various professional disciplines and this may be achieved through the overhauling of curriculums so that curriculums incorporate IK and have an afro centric outlook which would meet the needs of the African environment.

The call for an African Renaissance in educational discourse, therefore, seeks to demonstrate, how indigenous African knowledge systems can be tapped as a foundational resource for the socio-educational transformation of the African Continent, and also how indigenous knowledge systems can be politically and economically liberating (Higgs & Van Wyk, 2007). Africanised education has its foundations in African philosophy which largely has to do with African experiences, concerns, aspirations and how Africans construct knowledge (Higgs and Van Wyk, 2007). Furthermore, Van Wyk and Higgs (2004) pointed out that African philosophy should respond to the problems and human conditions in modern Africa thus the challenges that are experienced by African professionals can only be solved by Africanising education through revamping the curriculums. An analysis of education within an African context has to shed light on how Africans learn and construct knowledge and also has to focus on the underlying beliefs and values that constitute education within an African context (Higgs and van Wyk, 2007).

Since time immemorial educational curriculums have had a euro centric focus. In addition the use of western books and foreign training of some African professionals like teachers, librarians and journalists has not helped matters. African professionals and academicians have thus pursued elitist professional practice in line with their training which neglects IK. There is need to re order the curriculums to incorporate IK in educational curriculums if African education is to bear fruit.

The Potential Benefits of Africanising Education Curriculums.

This urge for Africans to want to embrace an African Renaissance is a conscious attempt to reclaim an (African) identity. This reclaim can be legitimate only if knowledge generated as well as educational purposes formulated respond to the immediate environment of the Africans that is Afro centric curriculums for African professionals and not euro centric curriculums for African professionals. Ekong and Cloete (1997) aver that institutions around the world should be responsive to the changes that are taking place in the society. There is also a belief by some that IKS induced education has a liberating effect. Higgs and Van Wyk (2007) write: The call for

an African renaissance in educational discourse, therefore seeks to demonstrate how indigenous African knowledge systems can be tapped as a foundational resource for the socio-educational transformation of the African continent, and also how indigenous African knowledge system can be politically and economically liberating.

Waghid (2004) captures a number of implications for teaching and learning through the utilisation of African philosophy of education. Furthermore, Waghid posits that an African philosophy of education reveals the potential to promote justice, courage and truthfulness in people. "African philosophy of education aims to contribute to the transformation of educational discourse in Africa, in particular empowering communities to participate in their own educational development" (Waghid, 2004). There is a better chance of working with others rather than stress individualism in education. This is the vital component which African professionals need to relate with the communities they serve as currently educated professionals are operating like intimidating ivory towers which the communities find alien and irrelevant hence the poor status of African professional practice. IK which is part of the African philosophy ensures that education and training begins with people's life worlds (Hoppers, 2004). This goes a long way in ensuring that professional training would be geared in meeting the needs of the people thereby enabling trained professionals to be better able to meet the desires and aspirations of the African people. Hence, the need to Africanise education curriculums in Africa.

Challenges to Africanising education

There are genuine fears that Africanising education curriculums could invite blind romanticisation of IK. That is the constant portrayal of all African practices as good and perfect and as such prescribing negative views of other knowledge systems such as western science as bad. Such fears are as result of the antagonism that exists between African IK and western science which views African IK as backward, archaic and irrelevant. Yet it is true that not all elements of IK are good as some environment crimes have been committed as a result of bad agricultural and environmental practices for instance. It is equally not true to view IK as being fossilised in the past but it is practiced daily in the laboratories of human existence as its modified after experimentation. This poses challenges to the inclusion of IK in education as it has not been scientifically proven and can therefore cannot be subjected to the methodologies of enquiry that exist in western science. This has brought about skepticism

in the acceptance of IK and consequently in its incorporation in education curriculums.

Some critics though, believe that africanising education curriculums, will not only lower standards, but that it will also be incongruent to globalisation as indigenous knowledge systems will not be compatible with modernisation. This belief stems from the colonised mentality that was alluded to by Nyerere as cited earlier in the need to develop enough self confidence in developing our own systems in education, agriculture and industry which is best suited to meet our African needs. This mirrors calls by Ngugi wa Thiongo to decolonise the mind in order to develop African practices in education and all sectors. The fear of lowering standards through africanising education stems from the desire to create 'internationally acceptable' professionals despite the failure of such elitist professional practice to meet the needs of the African people and expectations hence the poor performance of most African states.

The current characteristics of IK such as lack of documentation and the fact that some elements of IK are shrouded in secrecy really complicates attempts to include it in educational curriculums. This poses questions on how best to capture knowledge in the education curriculums on which very little is known hence the challenge. Convincing those who possess such knowledge to share is a mammoth task but yet if African education is to become fulfilling it has to be grounded in IK.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Though some Western and African notions cannot always be thought of as mutually exclusive. Wirendu (2004) stresses the importance of combining Western and African knowledge systems, especially when this can do the Africans good. The possible coexistence and synergy of African knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems is supported by Le Grange (2004). The same approach may be applied to education where IK can be fused with Anglo American based curriculums to come up with education curriculums which are better suited to meet the needs of the African continent. It is not the aim of this paper to discredit western models in education but rather to show that simply adopting the western based education curriculums in Africa has led to inadequacies which can only be fulfilled by including IK in education curriculums in Africa.

Fusing IK with the western knowledge in African educational curriculums would help overcome the fear of lowering standards that is often associated with africanising education. This ensures that desirable elements of the two knowledge systems are

integrated in ways that achieve the desired level of technical competence that best meets the needs in which the trained professionals will operate in. There is need however for serious debate amongst scholars in Africa to discuss on how best to include IK in curriculums in ways that are beneficial to professional training and practice in Africa.

Re ordering educational curriculums is necessary if African education is to emerge from its Anglo American biased foundations that have hampered the impact of education in Africa. This requires africanising curriculums in ways that integrate IK and western knowledge in ways that prepare trainee professionals to be best suited to the brand of professional practice that is best suited to the African environment.

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