

## The Challenges of Quality Education in Africa: Some Hints and Tips

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### Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on the challenges of quality education in Africa thinking systemically. The paper reveals some challenges that face education systems and educators in various colleges and universities in Africa. Specifically, the paper expounds the role of educators in providing relevant grades, which conform to the ability of the students in attaining the same, and it further proposes areas of consideration (challenges) for ensuring quality education. The paper utilizes a philosophical approach and envisages some areas of research that would facilitate preciseness of information regarding education. The first part is the introduction, which narrates the meaning of education in ever-changing environment. It also covers education philosophy and the interplay related to education. The second part provides challenges facing education in Africa -thinking systemically. The third part provides some steps that are felt important in providing premises to education system and hence achieving what education is meant for. Finally is the conclusion, which asserts that education is a key to development if only it is designed to curb the challenges facing mankind in ever-changing environment hence development.

**Keywords:** Education, Development, Thinking Systemically.

### INTRODUCTION

Education refers to a set of knowledge that is accrued through learning using various methods of teaching for the purpose of providing answers to the challenges that face our environments. Here the word environment assimilates a professional meaning, which includes humankind, plants, buildings, animal etcetera. Education has evolved over time and thus some scholars consider and emphasize on the difference between education and skills. However, looking at education with an eye of a specialist that is thinking systemically one would realize that when education is accrued has to render skills to a person learning. Certainly there is need to find out the role of education in the ever increasing dynamic world. There is, indeed, diversified thinking regarding what is education even to people of the same society. Some studies have shown diversity in perceiving what is education and the relevance of it (IITRC, 2006). The International Institute of Training, Research and Consultancy has come up with some responses on the perception of what is education.

Some responses are:

*“The central task of education is to implant a will and facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. The truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents, and children are students together”* (Happy Mahava, a Tanzanian master degree student at Groningen University).

*“No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure. The only purpose of education is to teach a student how to live his life-by developing his mind and equipping him to deal with reality. The training he needs is theoretical, i.e., conceptual. He has to be taught to think, to understand, to integrate, to prove. He has to be taught the essentials of the knowledge discovered in the past-and he has to be equipped to acquire further knowledge by his own effort”* (Kumbuka Ndatta, a bachelor’s degree student at Tumaini University in Dar es Salaam).

*“The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men. Jesca Mtavangu, School manager in Iringa Tanzania. “The one real object of education is to leave a man in the condition of continually asking questions.*

*The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student” (Bishop Mwaishumo of Mbeya Tanzania).*

These quotations demonstrate the diversity of beliefs about the purpose of education. How would you complete the statement, “The purpose of education is...”? If you ask five of your fellow teachers to complete that sentence, it is likely that you will have five different statements. Some will place the focus on knowledge, some on the teacher, and others on the student. Yet people’s beliefs in the purpose of education lie at the heart of their teaching behaviours.

Despite what the letter writer might have wished, there is no definition of education that is agreed upon by all, or even most, educators. The meanings they attach to the word are complex beliefs arising from their own values and experiences. To the extent that those beliefs differ, the experience of students in today’s classrooms can never be the same. Worse, many educators have never been asked to state their beliefs—or even to reflect on what they believe. At the very least, teachers owe it to their students to bring their definitions into consciousness and examine them for validity to be attained in more formalized institutions than informal. The question is where do we draw a line of formal and informal? At times methods used in our formal institutions are partly used informally. The differences of methods of providing education matters little as far as our topic is concerned. All in all the key question is what is the role of education in development.

### **Thinking systemically**

What is to think systemically? When looking at education the emphasis is to look at it holistically bringing in, and considering many factors that purport or purported for creation of what now is known as education. Hence, to think systemically refers to looking backwards, to the left, to the right and into the future cognizing the social-economical impact of the theme on discussion. It is to look at things from different perspectives while realizing the resilience of present and future generations. It is to give respect of dynamics of the world without losing focus of the key issues that a theme on discussion was meant for.

On thinking systemically we can realize that education can be attained formally or informally. Formally regards to cognized institutions placed by the law of the land and so forth. Informally refers to attaining education without the institution that is placed by the law of the land. However, the transformation and dynamics of the world in terms of both technology and needs, have made it possible to transform education channels- means of attaining education, and thus to date some strategies that were used informally have been adopted by formal institutions and thus the strategies are now formal. Some few decades ago, the use of online studies was, in some countries particularly Africa, felt as none reliable means of attaining education. For instance the provision of online studies in Tanzania can be said is one decade old, when the department of information technology of the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) was launched, and it took five years for the same to offer online studies. The program was supported heavily by the Australian University-Newcastle. Equally distance learning was felt like inferior education (Norman, 2006).

Some studies have indicated that people were adamant to accepting distance learning for what they considered an inferior education. For example the study that was conducted in 2000 to find out the perception of the students on distance learning in Tanzania and Zambia, realized that only 8% of students were comfortable for attaining such education through distance learning (Commonwealth Youth Forum, 2000). When the same study was repeated eight years later, most students who were under normal study-campus, opined that they felt important to study through distance learning, and the percentage rose to 86% (Norman, 2008). When those students who attained education through distance learning were subjected into a study on the relevance of distance learning as one means of attaining education they were of the opinion that it was the most important means of attaining education. Respondents cited independence and purity of the grades attained compared to campus learning (International Institute of Training Research and Consultancy, 2008).

International Institute of Training Research and Consultancy (2008) reveals that generally students, both who attained campus learning during their first degrees and those who attained master degrees on campus but the first degree on distance learning opined that distance learning was the most favorable means of attaining education compared to campus study. This provides justification on the transformation that has been attained on means of attaining or proving education. Online studies are one of the means of attaining distance learning, and have proven to be equally interactive just like campus studies when a physical trainer appears before the students. Hence education should be looked at systemically/holistically, that is considering many factors while maintaining focus on the objectives. One of the paramount objectives of any education is to transform a student through acquisition of skills. When the focus is on transformation of the students, little will be made on the means of attaining the same. Rather, success of the methods will be made hero rather than the perceived means. In this line, the prudence of education will be measured on its ability to transform the environment as applied by the people.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The review of literature has been designed to capture the various literatures in the area. It is divided into two parts, which include education philosophy, education and development and its relationship thereof. We provide a philosophical stance for the purpose of giving value to key words under discussion.

### **EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY**

Every theme existing in the world has its philosophy- that is a central identity of it. If we want to give answers to many – we could. Education philosophy entails to give an answer on why education? If we were to ask, why law? The answer could be provision of justice. If we were to ask the philosophy of the first coming of Jesus – the answer could be forgiveness of sins of manhood and hence salvation or to seize powers of darkness and hence freed those who believe in him (Jesus). The philosophy of second coming of Jesus could be rapture- ascending in heaven to those that would be found righteous. The philosophy of education could be improved livelihood of the people, which is development. It could further mean transformation of the people through provision of skills and knowledge that will enable those that have accrued such education able to defeat the challenges posed by the barriers to development. The philosophy of management is improved quality production of goods and services hence attaining organization objectives; the philosophy of administration is solving and or managing problems of the society. The philosophy of any theme answers the question why does it exist. Why education, administration, management and so forth.

The relevance of education philosophy is imperative since it helps to act as a premise on why education and what is not education. When the relevance for education is pinned to development and or transformation attained by the students/people, less will be put on gauging the mode of transmitting the same, and if it will be done, is for the purpose of cognizing the methods and strategies that could be assimilated or copied to other institutions or places for the better. The paramount issue on education philosophy is why do we study? Indeed some authors have indicated why do we study and have revealed that we study for the purpose of attaining education or knowledge, and some use the terms interchangeably.

However, all of them seem to agree that education is important as leads to the acquisition of knowledge and or skills (Ong'ang'a, 2003; Callaway, 1979; Hirsch, 1987; Rodney, 1961). The pertinence of education definition on the philosophical point of view is to give an insight on expounding the challenges of education in relation to development. Norman (2009) provides that any policy must be created with a focus on its ability to bring forth development. In this vein, Norman suggests that the importance of education and anything that we place for the mankind

should be weighed against its ability to facilitate development. Policies are for development hence education. We gauge education on its ability to bring forth development. Hence, even systems, models, and ways of attaining education should be valued or devalued in respect of, what does much in facilitating development.

## EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Literally development refers to improved livelihood of the people (Mbire-Barungi, 2004; Mongula, 2003; Word Bank, 1981). It is the act of developing or disclosing that which is unknown; a gradual unfolding process by which anything is developed, as a plan or method, or an image upon a photographic plate; gradual advancement or growth through a series of progressive changes. To attain this, one may need improved machinery, improved tools of teaching, improved technical know how etcetera. Education philosophy, thus suggests that we study for the purpose of being able to positively deal with the challenges that surround us. Proper management of the challenges that surround us paves a way for development. That is improved livelihood of the people. Hence gauging the impact of education is important since failure to do that we may not be able to know the contribution that is being made through education.

It is therefore assumed that the more the ratio of educated people versus those not educated the better the level of development. This will be our first proposition. The question is does Africa continent attain an improved life when the number of educated people increases? When the opposite is true, the second proposition is developed. Is the education provided by our institutions able to render knowledge to the students, which is equally able to deal with the deterrents of development? As narrated on the part of education philosophy, education is there to make us attain development through transformation of our understanding attained through knowledge and skills, irrespective of the means. In this regard, the means or strategy will be weighed on the extent of transformation of the people, which will again be gauged on the extent of those attained such education and their ability to sustain their lives in ever-changing environment of the globe.

The essence of this paper is to reveal the role of education in development, and in doing so some challenges and realities will be revealed. Hence it does little in, for instance, defining education versus knowledge and or skills. However, it does ascertain that education has to render facilitation of improving the lives of the people. It has to ease the lives of the people in the areas that education covers. The purpose of education is covered variedly by different authors; however it is also agreed that people differ on what they perceive to be the pertinence of education.

Thus, from these definitions, we might assume that the purpose of education is to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of students. Unfortunately, this definition offers little unless we further define words such as *develop*, *knowledge*, and *character*.

What is meant by *knowledge*? Is it a body of information that exists “out there”—apart from the human thought processes that developed it? If we look at the standards and benchmarks that have been developed by many states—or at E. D. Hirsch’s list of information needed for *Cultural Literacy (1)*, we might assume this to be the definition of knowledge. However, there is considerable research leading others to believe that knowledge arises in the mind of an individual when that person interacts with an idea or experience. In this respect, whether knowledge arises in the mind of people or otherwise, should be considered as one of the means of getting knowledge. Nevertheless our discussion focuses on the role of education –formal education in development. Thus opinion of the people may suggest that people differ on perceiving what education is just as they differ in perceiving other themes of study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper has utilized documentation as the main data collection strategy. It has surveyed literatures from various studies and has equally employed experiential strategy to set the position

it advocates. The author is an educator, and thus has utilized observation, and experiential to literate the audience through harnessing understanding as observed from the field and paradigms of development. The analyses of findings have been articulated through descriptive methods, where narrations backed by argumentation have been realized. The design of the study was a review in nature, thus secondary data was mitigated with primary data to draw the conclusion it has accrued.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE CHALLENGES**

There are many challenges facing education system(s). However, it is imperative that we discuss challenges that face education systems with a view of how such challenges deter the attainment of education objective- that is improved livelihood of the people. Hence challenges will be grouped into three. 1) Those that hinder the provision of quality education 2) Those that hinder a more less equal literate level to graduates of the same level 3) Those that answers the questions is our education system able to improve the livelihood of the people. To gauge the quality of education is a little bit difficulty. However, if the same is done through linking education and what it does in dealing with the development challenges then that could be easy.

Therefore on responding to these challenges few questions will need answers.

The questions include:

1. What is the quality of our graduates on dealing with the challenges that surround their environment? Some researches are on the process trying to find out the relevance of the educational degrees in dealing with the challenges that face our societies. The pertinence of this is due to the fact that we ought to have perception regarding quality education but we are yet to establish a fundamental gauge regarding the perceptions of the graduates on the relevance of the degrees they have attained.
2. Are the graduates of one university of the same course articulate considerable similar competencies? In view of this, we are not referring to equality in abilities, not at all. Even professors in the same area may defer in terms of competencies. We are referring to considerable similar competencies in the sense that things that are expected to be done by Bachelors degree holder, indeed should be done. That should also be true to higher degrees holders and even elementary education. One should anticipate what a master degree can perform and what he cannot perform. In some circumstances executives give heroes to moderate educated people than those seem most educated. This happen when one demonstrates inferior competencies compared to the low educated person. The challenge here is to have education system that provides competencies that are predictable.
3. Are lecturers of the same university provide considerable similar marks on a considered similar answers provided by different students? Again this question seeks to find out the equality equation among students on the one hand, and lecturers on the other. Some other related question will emerge: what do we look at when marking students' exams, assignment, take home tests, timed test, dissertation/ thesis and so forth? Is the marks given by one lecturer to a student A equal to the marks given by the same to a student B under more less similar answers? Is the marks given by lecturer A to student B equal to marks given by lecturer B to the same student under similar answers?
4. Do we have mechanisms of harnessing the performance of our students such that a student that has attained first class at university A, would actually attain the same if were to pursue the same degree in another university in the same country but under different markers, and supervisors? Can we boldly say this is an intelligent student; if performance of students would at times, depend on whims of the markers in the name of lecturers? If we lack such mechanisms or skills, what is the essence of grading? We may be holding first class certificates which are based on location or are institutional- they are relevant under one institution and in one particular location, but is deterred under another.

5. Do lecturers have an agreed mode of marking throughout universities such that when a student has attained an A, in one university would actually attain the same or a more less the same when the marking is done by another lecturer from another university.
6. When setting our syllabus do we first realize/find out the problems that face our environment or we simply copy and paste from those considered superior institutions? Of course it is not wrong if we copy when have realized that what is being copied or adopted is the answer to the societal problems.
7. When setting time for various programs such as master degree or doctoral degree, do we recognize the level of technology and its role in reducing time spent to find data and thus accomplish the researches and/or studies? Do we recognize the difference in terms of abilities that are bound in students? Is, for example, the one year master degree program in UK unachievable in our universities?
8. Is group assignments modality of setting exercise for students viable? Have we done researches to realize how many students do participate in the contribution and thus preparing the so-called group assignments? If, for example, few are participating what is the justification of pegging equal marks for the entire group? We were once students, now professors; we can stem and establish the prudent way of doing the group assignments. This too needs researches in different setting in our institutions to come up with proper way of marking and setting assignments. In the same view, we notice that institutions differ; some have gone ahead of others.
9. In supervising students at bachelor, master, and doctoral levels, we experience differences in terms of accomplishing the studies. We need to ask ourselves and find out who is the cause for inconformity between expected time for accomplishing the studies and the real time accomplished. Is it the weaknesses of students? Is it the weaknesses of supervisors? Studies need to be done to establish a position and hence come up with viable measures for enhancing education. We notice that, in some instances we may throw complaints to students even when the faults are of supervisors.

The challenges posed are philosophical reflections, which scholars need to pursue some researches to elude the way forward. The reflections posed form part of the reflections that African educational systems, and in some setting, the entire world, need to mitigate for getting better in the provision of education that provide answers to societal problems. Norman (2005) appeals to educators when indicated that there are some challenges that African education systems face, which do not need financial capacities to resolve rather willingness to act. He adds that time, remunerations, and commitment of the educators to the trainee is imperative if quality education assurance is of concern.

## CONCLUSION

It can thus be concluded that education is the key for development when the programs created are able to deal with the challenges that face human beings. Education must provide answers to societal problems and when utilized, be able to improve the livelihood of the people. It defeats any intelligent mind to say one is educated when the same is not able to manage the environment, and more specifically the environment in which is working and particularly the area of his competence. It further defeats the same intelligent mind to say one is a graduate while the same cannot avail competencies that reflect the level of education attained. It again defeats our ambitious when a graduate from one university would not attain the same grades or more less the same in another university in the same country. Therefore, an appeal to personnel working in education systems is to ensure preparation of programs that suggest dealing with the problems of the communities. In order to make this possible it is important to have harmonized credentials for marking and grading within educational institutions. Lastly, it is imperative to

realize that the role of education will not hold water if the tendencies is to circulate the present knowledge without germinating or creating new knowledge. We should create new knowledge to conform to the dynamism of the world. In addition, it is worthy that every program be weighed against time taken to accomplish it. In achieving this, we must cognize the difference pegged to the students and lecturers in accomplishing the tendered program.

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