The 'African' school curriculum: Content and relevance of indigenous knowledge to Africa's regeneration

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ABSTRACT

This article advocates for an 'African' curriculum, a type of learning experiences 'brewed in an African pot' (i.e. takes into consideration the unique African context) but borrows from Western education values and practices that are relevant to Africa's regeneration. The article is based on the lived experiences of the authors and the relevant available literature. We argue in the article for Africa to achieve a true 'rebirth' the school curriculum, its content, values and indeed the school system itself must transform to have a hallmark of Africa's true identity. To achieve this, we advocate for the incorporation of Africa's indigenous knowledge systems and values into the school curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism brought in its trail Western education, ideas, values, socio-economic and political institutions to the African continent and its people. Starting from the 14th century, Africa was partitioned into colonies by western countries including Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium and England. In its trail, colonialism brought to Africa and its people western education, ideas, values, socio-economic and political institutions. The formal education system introduced by the colonisers either overshadowed or side lined the indigenous education practices of the African people. It did not take cognisance of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems or considered incorporating them into school learning experiences. This was done by consciously teaching and encouraging the learning and assimilation of western ideas and values at the expense of indigenous knowledge, skills and values. Formal school, graduates became Europeans in their ways of life and were alienated from African culture and values. This situation ostensibly was the result of the colonial curriculum legacy. Although most African countries attained self-rule or political freedom (uhuru, in Swahili) during the second part of the 20th century, very little has been done to
transform the system of education inherited from the ‘colonial masters. The school curriculum inherited from the colonisers can be partly blamed for the millions of educated, but unemployable citizens of the continent with serious socio-economic repercussions of which any true African might be concerned. This situation is an indication that the ‘whole sale’ implementation of Western education system and its curriculum is not suitable to the context, needs and aspirations of the ‘new’ Africa.

Although it has been a few years into the new millennium the quest for African identity and indigenous approaches to solving socio-economic and political problems is gaining currency on the continent. It is our view in this article that to achieve stability, peace, progress and socio-economic and political development Africans, as a matter of urgency, may have to revisit their indigenous knowledge systems and practices and integrate relevant parts into the adopted western formal education system. As Kawagley and Barnhardt (2004) appropriately observe, the depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for more sustainable way to live on this planet.

African society of today is dynamic and as changes take place in the socio-economic and political spheres within the various countries of the continent the school curriculum need to be responsive to such changes to enable formal education provide for the socio-economic and political needs of the continent and its people. Holding on to the legacy of colonial curriculum may not do Africa and its people any good. The painful truth is that the values, skills, habits and attitudes transmitted by the formal school system in Africa differ in important respects from those of indigenous societies and in effect reproduce the sub-culture of the dominant interest group in society, the Western-educated ruling stratum or social class (Datta 1987, 34). Here in lies the justification to transform the school curriculum to incorporate African identity – learning experiences that relate to the life of learners and their respective communities. Thus a transformed ‘African’ curriculum should embrace learning experiences ‘brewed in an African pot’ but borrows from the western education values and practices that are relevant to Africa’s regeneration today.

We are of the view that it is only when school experiences are contextualised that the goals of formal education can best serve the interests of the continent, its people, their needs and aspirations. The point of departure for the realisation of true African identity and aspirations is therefore the transformation of the school curriculum. It is through transformation that the type of skills, knowledge and educated people the continent requires can be produced.
NATURE, ORGANISATION AND VALUE OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Education, as Pinar (2006) alludes, involves more than the transmission of knowledge and skills. It includes also the teaching (formally and informally) of relevant cultural values, especially to the youth who are the future adults and leaders of society. The essence of transmission of knowledge and skills to the younger generation is to ensure the continuity and progress of society (Pinar 2006). The indigenous people of Africa have their own unique ways of transmitting knowledge, skills and values to the young. Before the advent of colonialism and its concomitant introduction of formal education to the African soil an indigenous less structured education existed in various African communities. The characteristics of the African indigenous education are unique. Education was flexible, informal, not based on written examination and certification (i.e. less stressful), more practical and career orientated. In learning skills a young member of the community could be attached to an adult with expertise in a particular trade or field. The young boy or girl might live with the expert and study the specific trade till s/he becomes an accomplished tradesman/woman. This, on the job training form of education, was very comprehensive because the protégé learnt many other things like farming, home making, child care, cooking, working with others, moral values etc in addition to the actual trade enrolled for.

The indigenous education emphasised more on training. Although what was learnt could not permit career changes because of lack of easy transferability the training provided people with relevant knowledge and skills for survival and thus enabled the youth to fit into their respective communities. Education in indigenous African society was job related and provided self-employment or some kind of occupation for community members. It made unemployment and its concomitant social problems such as house breaking, robbery, murder, mugging etc less known or visible part of life. No matter how simple one may perceive it, indigenous education provided livelihood for individual members of the community. In actual fact no individual community member was idle hence there was less crime as compared to the post-colonial situation in the continent.

CURRICULUM: A BRIEF EXPOSITION

Education is the vehicle for the realisation of social, economic and political innovation and advancement in every society. Through education, economic, social and political norms, values and aspirations of a particular society are transmitted from generation to generation. An important pillar which enables education to transmit what society considers important and useful to its youth is the curriculum.
It is very difficult to define curriculum adequately because of the complexity of the subject. Nevertheless, various scholars have tried to describe the term in their own ways. Quan-Baffour (2000, 3) for example, describes curriculum as teaching and learning experiences for which an educational institution is responsible. To him, curriculum covers what is considered important to be taught to the younger generations of a society. Concurring with this view point Farrant (1988, 24) points out that a curriculum represents the distilled thinking of society on what it wants to achieve through education. It tends to mirror society itself, reflecting its aims, values, priorities and aspirations. Curriculum clearly spells out the knowledge, skills and values a particular society considers important and useful for its development. A curriculum, thus, may be described as an instrument which utilises the experiences and activities of learners for their development and their societies at large.

Salia-Bao (1989, 3) for instance, argues that for a curriculum to serve its real purpose it must assist the pupil to see the value of the past in relation to the present and the future; it must equip the child with the necessary skills for modern living; and it must help to keep the child a fully integrated member of his community. The problem with the current African school curriculum is that it is too Euro-centric. It does not reflect the realities of the African economic, social and political environment and aspirations. Most of the things taught in the schools in Africa have little value to the development of the continent and its people. For example teaching an African child the history and religions of the West at the expense of their own is a recipe for stagnation and alienation.

The school curriculum inherited from the colonizers does not adequately represent the values, needs, aspirations and the distilled thinking of what Africans want to achieve through education. Learning experiences of the formal school hardly relates to the needs and environment of the African learner and the consequence is the massive turn out of scholars who are strangers to their culture, unemployable and can hardly contribute to the socio-economic and political advancement of their respective communities, countries and the continent at large. The development of Africa and its people depends on the relevance and functionality of curriculum, hence the curriculum should link theory with African life by promoting its application to the African situation, environment, culture, and teaching and learning processes.

TYPE OF CURRICULUM SUITABLE FOR TODAY’S AFRICA

It has been argued in this article that the school curriculum is the distilled thinking of society, that is, a blueprint of learning experiences to be taught to the young members of society. Thus the kind of curriculum implemented in schools is informed by the needs, values and aspirations of the society concerned and since the values and socio-economic needs and aspirations of the continent are undergoing dramatic change, the
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curriculum must also change in line with what takes place outside the school (Terhart 2003; Hudson 2002; Ramose 1998). The formal school curriculum bequeathed to African countries by the West is not totally relevant to the current needs of the continent and this makes it crucial for its reformation or transformation to speed up the development of the continent and its people. The point of departure should be a forum to debate and design a curriculum that could be more responsive and appropriate for Africa today. The need to transform formal education to suit the African context is gaining currency since the beginning of the 21st century. Wolhuter (2000, 14) for instance points out that making education relevant to the needs and situation in Africa means, firstly, that curricula and textbooks have to be reformed so as to take account of the African environment and cultural heritage, and secondly, that education should be re-directed so as to make it more responsive to the needs of the people. It is imperative for all stakeholders of education – educators, parents, communities, government and policy makers – to examine indigenous African knowledge, skills and practices and incorporate the aspects that can improve and enhance and make the current formal school system more relevant to the African context and needs.

The efforts to transform the school curriculum to make it suitable for the 21st century Africa must start with a dialogue involving all stakeholders in education, for example, community members, educators, parents, education planners, policy makers, industries and the government. We are of the view that a forum of all stakeholders in the various countries under the auspices of the African Union may be able to come out with a more suitable school curriculum that focuses on unique learning experiences akin to the developmental needs of African countries and for that matter the continent and its people.

'Africanising' is essentially about self-criticism of what is in practice at the moment. Transformation of the school curriculum should not be a mere window dressing. To change the school curriculum to be more 'African' means there must be a paradigm's shift from teaching and learning of too much Western values to African values, thoughts and aspirations. An African curriculum means that what is taught, how it is taught and learnt relates to the values, needs and aspirations of the African people. The knowledge and skills transmitted to the younger members of the society must encompass things they will need to be able to fit into the African society. The teaching and learning of European history in African schools, for example, must be de-emphasised in favour more relevant and practical courses that may lead to employment. At the senior school level the content of learning experiences must comprise more practical skills in addition to academic programmes. There may be many students in the schools who are not endowed with the capacity and motivation to study to the tertiary level. Such people may be more at home with job related practical skills, instead of too much 'book work', pencil and paper tests and their concomitant failures and frustrations. Africa of today needs skilled people in the various aspects
of the continent’s economy not only to stem the tide of high unemployment rate but also contribute to the overall development of respective countries. The school curriculum must therefore be designed and implemented within socio-cultural, historical and economic realities of the continent and its people. This would require a new philosophy of education embedded in an African experience. Ramose (2000) believes that the African experience in its totality is simultaneously the foundation and the source for the construction of all forms of knowledge.

Indigenous African societies have strong admiration for morality. In the western school teaching setting, African ethics seems to be increasingly less-covered by the school curriculum. The teaching of the African child must be holistic (Hudson 2002; Ntshoe 1991) and to provide a holistic education for the African child the content of learning experiences at school must emphasise both moral values and socio-economic needs. In transforming, Ntshoe (1991) notes that the school curriculum must be a mix of specific contents and tools, tailored for reaching realistic and relevant goals, that is, facing and solving socio-economic and political challenges of today. The school should be able to teach, mould and turn out people who respect their African values such as morality, honesty, patriotism, selflessness, co-operation, service to humankind and love for people, no matter their creed, origin or background. This very important aspect of African-ness, to a very large extent, has not been addressed by the current formal school curriculum hence most school graduates lack patriotism and are mostly self-seeking individuals, tribe centred, racists or xenophobic. It is hoped that a transformed school curriculum with relevant learning experiences could make students sensitive to the significance of ethical issues, develop some moral imagination, and a deeper sense of self and the nature of society.

In reforming the African school curriculum the following are worthy of note:

- Learning experiences should relate to both socio-economic and political needs as well as the preservation of the physical environment.
- It must engage learners in acquisition of knowledge and skills that can make them fit into the socio-economic endeavours of their communities and countries.
- The school curriculum must be seen and used as a bridge-builder across disciplines, an integration mechanism for the social curriculum as a whole, by promoting holistic education and as a legitimate place of alternative thinking.
- The African school curriculum must seek to further a critically-reflected understanding that focuses on different though interdependent moral attitude components: self-conception, sensitivity, judgement, sharing, motivation and courage.
- The school curriculum promote diversity of moral views and standpoints, documented by such data collection as mentioned or not, can be an important resource for simulation of real world moral and cultural diversity.
Technology and Science for example, need to be deconstructed in terms of the realities and needs of Africa as aforementioned. The learning experiences of the school must empower learners to promote rural based science and technology, for example, the design and manufacture of simple farm implements, processing of food for storage or medicinal herbs into tablets and cream for the cure of ailments. Formal education must make its products productive and useful to both themselves and their communities. In South Africa for example the drive now is towards outcomes-based education where the learner should be able to demonstrate particular skills as evidence of learning or competency. Perhaps this is the right time for African governments to stop the rhetoric and gear themselves for action. Work Integrated Learning (W.I.L) and co-operative education similar to the apprenticeship strategies in the indigenous African education must be incorporated into the curriculum and implemented in the schools.

When this is incorporated into the school curriculum educators could look for local experts in unique indigenous skills such as farming, preservation of farm produce, sewing, arts and crafts, painting, weaving, carpentry, building, fitting, sculpturing etc from local communities and arrange for on the job practical training sessions for their learners. Learners in technology class, for an example, can be attached to a master craftsman in building, carpentry or fitting to learn more practical skills and the nitty-gritty of the trades. Again community members who have expertise in indigenous crafts, history, culture (folklore, proverbs, dances, dirges) could be requested to visit schools to teach these practical subjects to the pupils. Thus the contents of the ‘African curriculum’ must reflect African realities, sensibilities, aspirations, needs and values. The introduction of such indigenous practical skills may not only increase the human resource base of the continent but also make people acquire the skills of doing their own work. When local schools utilise the untapped expertise in their communities students could acquire specific skills for a living before they even complete school. The measure may not only give learners knowledge, skills and values but also experience most industries or employers often require from school graduates before being hired. We strongly believe that school education must have a synergy between theory and practice. Lamenting the lack of this synergy Vilakazi (2000, 202) points out that besides the obviously Euro-centric character of current African education, particularly in South Africa, perhaps the greatest problem facing educationists is the current lack of synchronisation between the existing system of education on the one hand and development policy and development needs of Africa on the other.

Unemployment is a huge problem in African countries due to lack of skills. The irony is that while the rate of unemployment soars the need for more skilled personnel also increases. This paradox can be explained in the fact that the school curriculum inherited from the colonizers is not suitable for Africa’s current human power needs since it does not produce the kind of people the various institutions in the economy would like to hire.
It is very important for African governments to diversify and prioritise learning areas and learning experiences provided by their schools. We are of the view that when more indigenous learning areas are incorporated into the school curriculum more jobs could be created through self-employment initiatives among school graduates. Thus schools will be able to turn out job creators instead of job seekers who have no relevant skills but parade town and city pavements hoping against hope for employment.

The content of the African school curriculum must therefore focus on inter-disciplinary studies where disciplines such as, science, technology, medicines and agriculture are integrated into African languages and cultural practices. To transform the African school curriculum is not tantamount to discarding western programmes of study instead they may be de-emphasised to make the curriculum more Afro-centric. For example instead of teaching African children European history the school curriculum may make provision for African Studies where indigenous, philosophies and values such as ubuntu (humanness, respect) and African culture can be taught. This may not only instil in learners patriotism but also make children learn and know more about their own continent, countries, people and indigenous knowledge systems.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the shortcomings of the formal school system as bequeathed by the colonizer. The authors have argued that the best way to make the formal school more responsive to the 21st African context, socio-economic needs and aspirations is to transform the curriculum. This can be done by fusing the best of the two – western and African values of learning experiences. This is a strategy to make what is learnt at school more relevant to the African continent and its people. As a point of departure we suggest an African Union special Summit on school curriculum where experts and representatives from various governments and the civil society can deliberate the issue, share ideas and plan to incorporate relevant local and national imperatives into the learning experiences of schools. To enhance regional integration the learning of important and widely spoken languages such as English and French could be taught in schools throughout a particular region. In West and Central Africa for example the learning of English and French could be encouraged alongside indigenous skills and values.

To do this requires from African leaders the will power and the courage to abandon the colonial curriculum legacy and become more practical and transformative in their educational policies. African leaders must abandon rhetoric and take practical steps to make school education more relevant to the continent’s development needs. The integration of valuable elements in Africa and the West could see education playing a more meaningful role in the regeneration of the continent in this millennium.
REFERENCES


