

**TRADITIONAL/ INDIGENOUS AFRICAN EDUCATION:
ANY LESSONS FOR THE WESTERN
EDUCATION SYSTEM?**

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***Abstract:** Education in the broader sense involves the transmission of knowledge skills and values to younger or other members of a society to ensure continuity of and improvement in economic and social advancement. Before the advent of colonialism and its concomitant introduction of Western education to Africa there existed on this continent an indigenous or traditional informal system of education where relevant knowledge, skills and values for survival were taught to the younger members of society to enable them fit into their respective communities. The importation of Western education minimised and to a larger extent, overshadowed the informal African system of education and training. The Western system was introduced to Africa without adapting it to the needs, context and realities of the environment in which it was planted .*

The consequence of this has been the turning out in droves of graduates who are not only aliens to their own society but are also unemployable and cannot therefore contribute to the socio-economic development of Africa.

African countries start to question the efficacy and relevance of Western education to the African context. The need to transform the existing formal system of education to suit the needs (knowledge, skills and values) of the African continent and its people becomes more pressing. This paper attempts to examine and put into perspective the distinctive characteristics of the two different systems of education. The paper argues that there are certain unique elements in the Traditional education in general and its curriculum in particular.

Introduction

It is important to begin by defining what Traditional African Education means. Traditional African Education means indigenous knowledge, skills and values which are transmitted and passed on informally to people from generation to generation. Education, whether indigenous or from outside

Africa, involves the transmission of relevant knowledge, skills and values usually to the younger members of society to enable them fit into their respective communities. Although not documented, the indigenous people of Africa had their unique education system before the advent of colonialism and its concomitant formal or western education. Hountondji (2000:39) correctly points out that in most African countries the present educational systems were set up at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The primary goal was clear: formal education was intended first and foremost to train young people for civil service. Colonial administration needed civil servants. Western education in particular, and colonialism in general, overtly and covertly sought to down-grade, despise and sideline the indigenous African education. Western or formal education has made many Africans 'westernised' in outlook and help directly and indirectly to supplant their own indigenous knowledge, skills and cultural values. Sharing this sentiments Wohuter (2000:14) writes: "the indigenous populations were educated outside the context of their own cultures and environment. Schools were used to serve colonial interests: the quantity and quality of education that colonial administrations were prepared to supply were just enough to train staff for auxiliary and subsidiary positions such as clerks, interpreters and preachers." Despite the incursions and assault made on indigenous African education many of its core values and practices stood the test of time. With the drive towards Africa Renaissance and the philosophy of *Sankofaism* (a Ghanaian word which literally means go back for it) many Africans (politicians, education policy makers, nationalists and scholars) are beginning to recognise the importance of the indigenous education (that is, knowledge, skills and values) and advocating for its incorporation into the Western education system as part of African identity.

As Diop (2000:85) remarks: indeed we cannot reflect on our present destiny without analysing the grafting between the ancient values and the modern values in a context of accelerated globalisation, fashioned by a boundless liberalism with its share of all types of trading (currencies, money, merchandise including migrants, men, women, children, drugs, weapons etc) In this period of transformation of the formal education system – ie, adapting it to the African context. The challenges is for African countries to look at the indigenous or traditional education system and borrow from it to make the formal education reflect the African context. Wohuter (2000:14) appropriately points out that making education relevant to the needs and situation in Africa meant, firstly, that curricula and textbooks had 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. Supporting this view Diop(2000:88) says the need to take historical evolution and hence lessons from the past, into account in order to be able to establish a viable educational

project has not been over-looked by organic research, whose concern has been to go along with the action of the political leaders.

Nature and Characteristics of the Traditional and Western Education

The traditional or indigenous African education has some unique characteristics. This system of education is informal and not based on examinations for certification and therefore less stressful. There is no specific entry requirements or entry and exit periods. The traditional African education system is thus very flexible. Learners can enter and exit any time of the year. In most cases, education and training focus on specific careers. If for instance a child wants to become a manufacturer of farming implements such as hoes and machetes he will be attached to a master craftsman as an apprentice till the child acquires the relevant knowledge and skills of the profession. The Traditional education is competency-based and so duration of learning depends on how fast one can learn. In this kind of education much of the knowledge, skills and values are learnt on the job through observation and imitation of what the expert craftsman does on daily basis. Datta (1987:75) points out that through activities of this sort, children internalise the technical and moral elements of different roles in the adult world. Critics of the indigenous education however argue that in most cases the skills learnt are for a particular trade and may restrict the learner to a specific job. Nevertheless much of its features are important and relevant to the African context. For example any course an individual chooses in the indigenous education focuses on knowledge, skills and values the particular learner will need to survive or live in his/her society. The African experts convened by the Unesco regional office to prepare for the Jomtien International Conference of Education (1990) put the problem of African education into perspective. The experts analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional African education. They noted that this system of education had strong points which could be summarised in a word – the importance of ‘related knowledge’. Its main features are:

- relation of general knowledge to practice
 - relation of education to production
 - relation of education to society
 - relation to culture through mother tongue as well as through the immersion of the elements of knowledge into cultural practices (games, masks and religious rites, dances, music, sport etc) and
 - finally the relation of this education to recognised ethnic values.
- (Diop 2000: 94).

In all aspects of learning morality or ethics are not separated from education. Values like honesty, fairness, respect for others or laws of the society permeate teaching of knowledge and skills. The communal spirit of *ubuntu* (support, co-operation and love for a fellow human being) is stressed in

Traditional African education. Diop(2000:85) adds that this education gives importance to endurance, focuses attention on the security of the group (existence of special para-military groups), develops solidarity and *esprit de corps*, reserves a part for sexual initiation and cultivates not only modesty and humility but also emulation. The stress on the belief that crime calls for the 'wrath' of the ancestors encourages children to be mindful of their actions and behaviour.

In contrast, Western education is based on the formal school system in Africa. This was laid by nineteenth century missionaries. Missionary schools were modelled after European schools and reflected little in the way of African context. As the colonial era progressed, colonial governments became increasingly involved in education too Wohuter (2000:14). Unlike the traditional African education the Western education system has established schools with educators and administrators. It is organised and structured into levels or grades. Lessons are based on syllabi drawn by experts who are not necessarily educators at the school. It is usually less practical but examination based. The final assessment is not done by the educator who knows the strengths and weaknesses of the learners. Learners have to pass tests and examinations before they either move to the next level or are awarded certificates. There are specific entry requirements, entry and exit periods. Its assessment methods are very rigid and norm-referenced hence there are usually many drop or 'pushed outs'. One of the greatest weakness is that the Western Education system does not relate its programmes to the African context. Most of its learning programmes do not prepare the learners for the j

What Lessons for Western Education?

As Kawagley and Barnhardk(2004) 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".

The above statement is very valid in the light of the enormous value the indigenous African education possesses. For Africans to develop their formal education to suit their circumstances they need to take lessons from their traditional or indigenous education system.

As the need to transform Western education to suit the African context becomes apparent it behoves educators and policy makers to examine the African traditional education practices and borrow from its aspects that can improve and enhance the current formal education system. The drive now is towards outcomes-based education where the learner should be able to demonstrate particular skills as evidence of his/her competency. We cannot talk of African education when every aspect of it (curriculae, teaching

methods and assessment techniques) are Eurocentric. At the school level Work Integrated Learning (W.I.L) and Co-operative education similar to the apprenticeship strategies in the Traditional African education can be established. The school curriculum must be reformed and expanded to include more vocational or career oriented subjects. This may give learners subject options so that those who are not much academically inclined could major in the trades. The school system must also be organised in a more flexible way to allow educators to look for experts in farming, sewing, painting, weaving, carpentry, building, fitting, sculpturing (carving), etc who work in the 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 mechanic to learn more practical skills or the nitty gritty of the trades. Wolhuter (2000:16) concurs with this view when he refers to the introduction of polytechnic type of education whereby pupils spend part of the school day on farms or workshops. The practical skills and knowledge gained by learners through such on the job training or Work Integrated Learning programmes could be assessed and marks recorded to be added to final school examination for certification. The adoption of this education – ie, teaching and learning-strategy may enable school children to acquire specific skills for a living before they even complete school. It may also lead to job creation and self-employment - something that can reduce the influx of school graduates to the cities in search of non-existing jobs. The introduction of Work Integrated Learning programmes into the school system may not only give learners knowledge, skills and values but also the experience job market or employers often require matriculants to have as pre-requisite for employment.

Team spirit based on African communal co-operation(*ie, Ubuntu*) among community members must to be incorporated into the school curriculum. African life is based on commuality where the norms of society oblige community members to live as one by supporting and co-operating with others for common good. When co-operative activities are taught right at the school when children complete school they may team up with others to start joint ventures. The present form of Western education covertly and overtly makes its 'products' selfish and suspicious of each other. The present school does not teach its learners the values of team work. This unAfrican attribute of the Western education makes it difficult for school leavers to enter into business associations. Where a few attempted to form partnerships they usually split up because of dishonesty and the tendency to cheat and 'bully' their partners. African students need to learn team work or the spirit of *ubuntu* (support and co-operation) right at school in order to build their less developed economies and communities. African culture encourages communalism hence the saying: it takes a whole community to bring up one child. School education must therefore reveal to children the processes that

gave birth to their culture, ideals, beliefs and national institutions and enable them to develop a worthy of pride in themselves, their culture, their past, present and future. Diop(2000: 85) rightly points out that among Africans there is a marked cult of soldarity, fraternity and mutualism. Those who have undergone initiation together become united for life. Indeed Western education should not continue to ignore these African values.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the need for the current formal education system to fuse the best practices in the African Traditional education in order to improve and adapt the former to the African context. The blend of Western and Indigenous elements could serve the needs, aspirations but also relates to the cultural identity and affinities of Africans. In this way the youth – the African future leaders – could be proud of their African way of life instead of despising it.

The paper has argued that in the era of educational transformation it is crucial for policy makers, politicians, educators and communities as a whole to design curriculae and learning areas that reflect the true nature and needs of the African continent and its people. Teaching and learning programmes (ie education) must link what children learn at school to their world – what actually happens in their lives or communities. Concerted effort should be made to study the African indigenous system of education and training and borrow from the aspects that can assist learners achieve better education outcomes that are true African. In this way unemployment could be reduced and we can then boast of a true African education.

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