

Reconstructing Africa Education in Line with African Values and Needs: A Panacea For Development in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract

Education has occupied a central position in almost all known civilizations over different epochs. For instance, in ancient Greece, an educated man was seen to be the man who had mental and physical balance. The Romans equated the educated man with the art of oratory and military prowess. The English in the middle ages saw only the Lords and Priests as educated men. In traditional Africa, the noble person (of character), the warrior, the hunter, the farmer, a man with specific positive skills, was adjudged as educated. However, this notion of the educated man in Africa has drastically been distorted today owing to unhealthy alien cultural influences. Education tends to have been reduced to memorizing rhymes, writing, reading literary treatises, and the likes. Africa has rather imbibed the Western conception of education and erroneously used it as a paradigm for Africa, without minding the peculiar African situation. And it is structural dislocation that has made it impossible for education to positively impact on the development of Africa. This paper therefore calls for a reconstruction of African education in consideration of her value and needs. The study adopts the qualitative research design by gathering data from books, journals and the internet. The paper surmises that if education would become functional in Africa and foster development, then the traditional African understanding of education and description of the “educated man” must be reignited rather than the present Western conceptual scheme. Education must be made relevant to the developmental needs of the African society.

Keywords: African Education, African Values and Needs, Reconstruction, Development, Contemporary Africa

Introduction

Every meaningful effort at nation building and development begins with education. Such an education ought to be adapted to the mentality, traditions, occupations, aptitudes and general worldviews of those being educated. However, as Enoh observes, “critics of the Nigerian system of education have tended to see it as a colonial inheritance, perpetuated by agents of imperialism” (17). This entails that as a nation, Nigeria has copied systems of ideas and models from other countries, without realizing that just as our problems differ from theirs, so must our solutions differ. In line with the above, some actors have appeared at one time or the other on the Nigerian educational scene whose ideas have helped in the adoption of a worthwhile educational programme and could still be harnessed today for improvement in our educational system. In this study, therefore, the researcher advocates for a reconstruction of the African educational system in line with her values and needs, which in essence would trickle down to sustainable development of the African continent.

Conceptualising Education

The concept 'education' has many definitions. Because of the many definitions, owing to multiplicity of schools of thought in education, some scholars have rather resorted to defining education based on its etymology. But even its etymology has been contested today. For instance, Akpan and Ogabo aver that the word education is derived from the Latin word *educere* which means “to lead out of” or “to bring out” (3). This would mean to lead out or bring out of ignorance. Schofield on the other hand traces the etymology of education to *educare* which connotes to “form” or “train”. While one cannot uphold either of these etymological suppositions, it is apparent that both are windows through which a concise definition of education can be fashioned. It is from here, perhaps, that Farrant views education as “the process of learning to live as a useful and acceptable member of the community to which one belongs” (12). The implication of this definition is that there are certain things that must be learnt if one would become useful and acceptable to the community, but how long this should last, the definition does not state. From this functional definition, we can decipher that education is an instrument for personal change, but at the same time a developmental process which enables the individual to contribute to the wellbeing of the generality of the society

through his social responsibility. For the purpose of this paper, however, we shall adopt Fafunwa's definition of education. Fafunwa redefined education in a way that has become classic for the contemporary African. For him, education is the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives...it is a process of transmitting culture in terms of continuity and growth, for disseminating knowledge either to ensure control or to guarantee rational direction of the society or both (17).

Fafunwa's broad view of education includes both formal and informal education. In fact, for him, what we call formal education represents an insignificant fraction of all that we learn in life since a greater proportion of what we learn takes place outside the classroom.

Appreciation of Traditional African Education

Every society whether simple or complex, has its own system of training and educating its youth. In Fafunwa's opinion, what was introduced by the Europeans is 'mere schooling' which despite its importance constitutes but a fraction of the total process of what is still being learnt. Thus, just as the West have their conceptions of education, so also do Africans and other groups. This means that education can only be evaluated in terms of how it meets the needs of any given society.

For Africa, Enoh warns that the traditional education must not be judged by any extraneous consideration or some foreign yardstick but by its performance in the African context. "In old Africa", he says, "the warrior, the hunter, the noble man, the man of character or anyone who combines the latter feature with a specific skill was adjudged to be well educated and a well-integrated citizen of his community" (Enoh 243). Here, education has clear characteristics and goals which make it unique and attractive to those for whom it is meant to serve. It is in line with this that Fafunwa appraises the traditional African education as characterized by functionalism, social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, spiritual and moral values. Learners learnt by doing. The aims of this system of education for him include:

- ❖ To develop the child's latent physical skills
- ❖ To develop character

- ❖ To inculcate respect for elders and those in positions of authority

- ❖ To develop intellectual skills
- ❖ To acquire specific vocational training and to develop healthy attitude towards honest labour
- ❖ To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs, and
- ❖ To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large (20).

For Aminu, the communal nature of African life, where members of the immediate and extended family and the community at large take active interest in the upbringing of the young, instills in them a sense of community participation. Also, local history is taught through songs and exciting stories of the people's past. In the same way, the use of proverbs and riddles with obscure meanings in conversations and arguments, which individuals are required to unravel, stimulate and develop reasoning powers (88). According to Fafunwa, the common concerns of the curriculum of traditional African education would include: physical training, character development, respect for elders, intellectual training, vocational training, community participation and promotion of cultural heritage (27).

Akinpelu lucidly presents a compact understanding of the African notion of the 'educated man'. According to him, in traditional African society, there is no system of education separate and different from the indigenous system of socialization and living. In Akinpelu's own description,

The educated man can be described as one who combines expertise in some specific economic skills with soundness of character and wisdom in judgement. He is one who is equipped to handle successfully the problems of living in his immediate and extended family; who is well versed in the folklores and genealogies of his ancestors; who has some skill to handle some minor health problems and where to obtain advice and help in major ones; who stands well with the ancestral spirits of his family and knows how to observe their worship; who has the ability to discharge his social and political duties; who is wise and shrewd in judgement; who expresses himself not in too many words but rather in proverbs and analogies...; who is self-controlled under provocation, dignified in sorrow and restrained in success; and finally and most importantly, who is of excellent character. (178-179).

The implication of the above is that no matter how rich a man may be in other qualities and dispositions, if he lacks good character, he cannot be said to be educated. Corroborating the above position, Uduigwomen points out some qualities of the educated man in African conception. For him, the educated man in African society is “a man who has good social interpersonal relationship with other members of his community, who is economically fruitful (at least enough to cater for his immediate needs), who makes positive contributions to community decisions and policies, who discharges his social and political duties” (199).

Therefore, a truly educated person in the African worldview shows an evidence of well-integrated personality; he or she is morally conscious of his or her actions and shows evidence of responsibility in the social welfare of others. He or she is a person of all season, who is cultured and broadminded; he or she is socially sensitive of his or her crucial role in developmental process, and embraces socialism rather than individualism stressed by the Western idea of the educated person. Such a person thus relates with society and is an evidential embodiment of societal values with his or her physical body, mind and spirit fully developed to the fullest capacity to ensure the survival of his or her society. He is one who maintains a vertical and horizontal relationship between the human and divine (Akpan and Ogabo 41).

Some Cherished African Values

African value system revolves around humanitarian ethics, the kind of ethics that places a great deal of emphasis on human welfare. The concern for human welfare may be said to constitute the hub of the African axiological wheel. This orientation of African ethics takes its impulse, undoubtedly, from the humanistic outlook that characterizes traditional African life and thought. Some of these African values include:

Humanity and Brotherhood: According to Eluke, “these two concepts, humanity and brotherhood, feature prominently in African social and moral thought and practice. They are among the moral or human values that constitute the basic - perhaps the ultimate - criteria that not only motivate but also justify human actions that affect other human beings” (88). In African terms, humanity is not just an anthropological term; it is also a moral term when it comes to

considering the relations between members of the human species. The term 'brotherhood' has come to refer to an association of men and/or women with common aims and interests. But the notion of brotherhood is essentially a moral notion, for it is about the relations between individual human beings that make for their own interest and well-being. There is an affiliation between humanity and brotherhood in African ethical conceptions: if we are human, we are (must be) brothers, in a capacious, comprehensive sense of the word 'brother' (91).

Peace: The African man was enjoined to always be a peace lover. Even though conflicts may arise in the community periodically, the type of relationship in which individuals are involved affects the manner in which conflict is resolved. Breaches in enduring relationships, or social relationships that had a “time dimension...are not amenable to handling through law”. If individuals wished to preserve a valued relationship they would avoid legal procedures and seek procedures that make reconciliation possible. This is because strong punishment and “revenge denies the presence of social ties and peace in the community” (Mbiti 73).

Kindness: A humanistic morality, whose central focus is the concern for the welfare and interest of each member of community, would expectably be a *social* morality which is enjoined by social life itself. Such is the nature of African morality. Social life or sociality is natural to the human being because every human being is born into an existing human society. The natural sociality or relationality of human beings would - and should - prescribe a social ethic, rather than the ethic of individualism. Individualistic ethics that focuses on the welfare and interests of the individual is hardly regarded in African moral thought.

The Good Character: The concepts of good, bad (or, evil), right and wrong feature prominently in African moral thought, as they do in the moral systems of other peoples and cultures. There are of course other moral concepts in the African moral language and thought. Among these, the notion of Good Character is central to African ethics. A person is morally evaluated according to his/her character - whether good or bad” (Gbadegesin 79). African ethics is, thus, a character-based ethics that maintains that the quality of the individual's

character is most fundamental in our moral life. The justification and relevance of a character-based ethics for contemporary society is not far to seek. All that a society can do, regarding moral conduct, is to impart moral knowledge to its members, making them aware of the moral values and principles of that society. In general, society satisfactorily fulfills this duty of imparting moral knowledge to its members through moral education of various forms, including, as in African societies, telling morally-freighted proverbs and folktales to its younger members.

A Proposed Educational System for African Development

In the light of the discourse so far, it is apt to attempt a proposal of the different levels of education that ought to be considered for an African model.

At the Nursery Education Level

The growing conviction that for education is to be of real value it must be life-long as the traditional African type of education. This is why the utter neglect of nursery education especially to the majority of rural dwellers is condemnable. To neglect this stage in a child's development is to build his further education on a precarious foundation. This paper therefore proposes the development of the nursery system of education in both the urban and rural areas of Nigeria, but especially in the later. This argument is hinged on the fact that the African child more than his/her European counterpart needs nursery education because of the several disadvantages that his/her early home environment presents. The nursery education should have a curriculum which will follow a child's natural inclination and provide opportunities for self-expression and creative imagination. There should be localization of both the materials of instruction and activities. This, apart from reducing educational cost, would facilitate the continuity of home and school experiences. There should be science exploration, civics and health education for this level of education. Thus, science exploration will seek to assist the child to understand and appreciate his immediate world; civics and health education will assist in working health rules into children's daily activities as well as gaining insight about their environment.

At the Primary Education Level

Primary education ought to be considered as the basis of all development because, “no country can expect to develop to its maximum so long as its masses remain ignorant, poor and disease ridden” (Fafunwa 31). This high expectation for primary education stems from the belief that for a long period to come in Africa, primary education will remain to a very significant proportion of the population, their only form of formal education. This means that it has to equip recipients with basic skills which they will use to survive in their later parts of life. Basic science ought to occupy a strategic position at this level of education. The adoption of a radical and unconventional approach to the question of finding solutions for Africa's problems has to be a key priority. Next in priority to the study of science would be vocational education. If possible, there should be devotion of an entire year of the six or seven year primary education course to training in practical skills.

This paper advocates that as much as possible the nursery and primary levels of education should be conducted in the mother tongue. The main reason behind this is that the imposition of an alien language of instruction is one of the major factors that militate against the dissemination of knowledge and skills and therefore of rapid social and economic well-being of the majority of people in the developing countries. Using the mother tongue eliminates the unnecessary distinction between school knowledge and knowledge of everyday use.

At the Post-Primary Education Level

It is an unfortunate situation that long after political independence, the Nigerian secondary curriculum has remained such that would alienate the child from his environment. With such a curriculum, “the students that Africa will produce will be those who are African in blood but English, French or Portuguese in opinion, morals and intellect” (Adesina 64). In this system, there is overemphasis on examinations and certificates. It is the contention of this paper therefore that the curriculum at this level should be such that would develop a well-integrated person who is socially stable, morally dependable, mentally and physically alert, intellectually honest, economically efficient, scientifically literate, vocationally equipped, nationally and internationally oriented and culturally adjusted.

At the University Education Level

The African university system ought to be that which would serve the need to provide opportunity for an ever increasing demand; manpower development; adaptation to local needs and projection of the African identity. Thus, the peculiar functions of an African university system should include: to ensure modification of Africa to Africa's advantage, conduct research in African culture and heritage, and then perpetuate the cultural heritage so defined; dispel negative misconceptions about Africa, develop human resources, educate the whole man for nation building and evolve a distinctly African pattern of education. For the universities to effectively perform their expected functions, their curriculum must also be restructured to reflect the needs and aspirations of the people, take cognizance of African culture, reconstruct the personality of the African, prepare students for citizenship and meet the problems of economic development and social reform.

The Relevance of Teacher Education

Teachers occupy a strategic position in all aspects of education and development since they train the manpower needed for nation building. If the nation has to attain true development, then adequate attention must be paid to teacher quality, because poor teachers tend to reproduce their own kind just as good teachers tend to reproduce their own kind. The role of teachers transcends every facet of development thus, there is absolute need for adequate training.

In order to achieve quality in teacher education, there should be only one type of teacher-training below the university, that is, the Advanced Teacher Training College or College of Education. The revolutionary idea that university teachers be introduced to professional training in education is a welcome one. To treat the teaching profession with levity and careless abandon, is to damn our own future. This is because a poorly trained and unsure teacher will produce a poor doctor, engineer, architect, fellow teacher and the like.

Critical Evaluation

It must be reiterated that the uncritical, unwholesome and unsuited assimilation of the Western model of education by Africa and Africans could only be described as driving in a round peg into a square hole or vice versa. No doubt, this conceptual colonization could be responsible for the recurrent

travails and undoing of the African continent in terms of integral development. It is this craze for 'paper education' without concomitant consideration for the cultural condition and developmental needs as well as ethical dimension of the African continent that accounts for the geometric progression in social vices such as examination malpractices, nepotism, unemployment, mediocrity and high crime rates in our societies today.

One must admit the dearth of 'truly educated men' in Africa as a result of the superimposition of the Western model of education on the continent. Africans have uncritically and erroneously embraced the model of an educated man to be one who is bookish, has much paper qualification and an array of academic appellations. If an increase in the number of formal educational institutions tantamount to the churning out of more educated men in Africa, why would the continent remain developmentally stagnant for so long a time rather than develop commensurately with the educated men produced? It is apt to reiterate here that any education that is worthwhile ought to equip one for life and living and create in the individual the ability to roaster and survive his environment. As Okolo beautifully states, "that education is dead which does not equip one with the necessary knowledge and skills to dominate one's environment" (49). Thus, true education which would produce the desired development is the African traditional model which is characteristically aimed at self-reliance – the ability of the man to think, decide, fend and act for himself; one which is free from the dominion, whims and caprices of the Western model. This entails a decolonization of the avaricious and distorted conception and followership Africa has for the Western model of education today, which has stagnated Africa's development. Instead, there must be a reconstruction of Africa's educational model on the African worldview and practical condition.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is apparent that no society can rise above the quality of its education. This entails that for any society to develop integrally, the role of education cannot be neglected. The truism remains that education is the swiftest vehicle to societal development. But this truth has remained a mirage to Africa due to the distorted model of education patterned after the Western model. There is therefore urgent need to carry out a re-orientation of the African mind towards education. Only such an African orientation will

bring the needed attitudinal/behaviour change, catalyst, as well as sustain and consolidate Africa's developmental drive in this century. This discourse upholds the thesis that there is urgent need for a decolonization of the copied and lopsided concept of education structured along Western schemes, and an imbibing of the holistic sense of the concept of education in the African scheme. Only those who are educated in the African holistic sense can make significant and meaningful contributions to the development of the African society. Education must be once again made holistic, education of the head, the hand, the spirit and the mind. The onus therefore lies on all stakeholders in the African educational sector to re-structure their educational philosophies and curricular to depict the African educational system in tandem with perceived needs and aspirations. This educational proposal represents a synthesis between formal and informal learning; continuity between the home and school; use of local resources in education; learner centeredness of education; indigenization of the curriculum; and, restoration of African personality. Education should be life itself rather than a preparation for living; learning should be directly related to the interests of the child; the teacher's role is not to direct but to advice; and the school should encourage cooperation rather than competition.

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