

FORMAL AGAINST INDIGENOUS AND INFORMAL EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: THE BATTLE WITHOUT WINNERS

Emmanuel Matambo
University of KwaZulu-Natal
ematambo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This article argues that formal education has not been very successful in sub-Saharan Africa because it has been impervious to the specific context of developing countries. Informal education is also limited in that it provides an insufficient foundation for sub-Saharan Africans to navigate through an increasingly globalized world. African indigenous knowledge has become increasingly neglected though African values continue to influence the sub-Saharan mind-set. The article recommends that the three approaches to education can be more successful if they are blended into a synthesis that contains elements within each approach that are useful. Thus, conceptual integration, wherein elements of education are taken from various sources and fused into a more effective whole, will be used as the theoretical framework. The article also argues that education is not neutral and hence the context of the people to which it is exposed has to be considered. The article concludes that the continued privileging of formal education is based on old stereotypes of European racial and intellectual superiority.

Keywords: Formal education, indigenous knowledge, informal education, social context, Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is forgotten, all too often, that Africa was the first continent to know literacy and to institute a school system. Thousands of years before the Greek letters alpha and beta, roots of the word alphabet, were invented, and before the use of the Latin word schola, from which the word school derives, the scribes of ancient Egypt wrote, read, administered and philosophized using papyrus (Ki-Zerbo, 1990: 15).

INTRODUCTION

“All individuals are engaged in learning experiences at all times, from planned, compulsory and intentional, to unplanned, voluntary and incidental” (La Belle, 1982: 159). This assertion should not be taken for granted because certain forms of learning have been dismissed as inferior, or as not constituting learning at all while others have been lauded as more rational and superior. Nonetheless, it can be argued that education is a universal human activity. Thus, Africa has always had some form of education. After the onset of Africa’s contact with Europe and the subsequent colonial relationship that emerged from this contact, African modes of learning were derided by Europeans who based their idea of rationality on purported racial essences and their attendant intellectual properties.

Europeans thought that “enlightening” an allegedly ignorant continent was morally justified. Britain has been described as a more benevolent colonizer because of its introduction of education for development in its colonial outposts (Bolt and Bezemer, 2009). Bolt and Bezemer (2009) have argued that erstwhile British colonies have achieved more growth than non-British colonies because Britain offered a more effective variety of education. Compared to the type of education that Africans conducted, the Western brand of education was perceived as formal education.

“Formal education corresponds to a systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology” (Dib, 1987: 300). It is associated with the type of education that was introduced by Western colonialists and missionaries and that has been continued by post-colonial African governments. A strict definition of formal education could incorporate any type of education that takes place within formal institutions established for the purpose of academic instruction. For this article, however, the understanding of formal education as being Western oriented will be used.

The article advances a few central arguments: first, it argues that privileging formal education and isolating informal education and indigenous knowledge in Africa will not guarantee a successful conversion of Africans to Western mores. Secondly, this privileging is obliquely laced with the assumption that Western mores and knowledge are superior to African mores and knowledge. Thirdly, the article argues that the tussle between the three modes of education (formal, informal and indigenous) guarantees no winners because while formal education is pervasive, it is not valued intrinsically by the majority of Africans. As members of the developing world, sub-Saharan Africans are more amenable to an education that they regard as practical and responsive to their everyday problems. However, in a modernized world, this mode of education holds no real prospect for success. In addition, while indigenous knowledge has largely been shunted to the fringes, it still continues to inform African value systems (Ani, 2012).

The article recognises the fact that, though formal education carries within it assumptions that might offend sub-Saharan worldviews, it is difficult to imagine a contemporary and future Africa without it. In a world that is characterized by technology and international competition and collaboration, formal education becomes important for Africans in terms of widening their exposure to global opportunities and trends. Thus, the article argues for a blend of the different types of education in a way that the resultant mixture will be more applicable to sub-Saharan Africa’s context. This is the conceptual integration that the article uses as its theoretical framework. The article adopts the notion that education is not neutral; it is a value-laden activity which has to be sensitive to the context of the people to whom it is exposed. The first section will provide a brief description of formal education; the second will present a short outline of informal education; the third section will summarise indigenous knowledge. The fourth section will be analytical in character and will state why formal education has not been successful because of the overlooked fact that education is value-laden and non-neutral.

The fifth section will present the racial and political implications of continuing with formal education in sub-Saharan Africa to the determinant of other forms of education. The final section will conclude the article.

FORMAL EDUCATION

“Formal education is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured” (Marsick and Watkins, 2001: 25). In sub-Saharan Africa formal education is Eurocentric education. The content, acquisition, validity and usefulness of Western education are determined by Western standards. Western education, like any form of education, carries with it the expectation of changing the mindset of those it reaches. In contemporary times, Western education emphasizes individual liberties “from family and other traditional authority” (Armer and Youtz, 1971: 605), as well as confidence in people’s capability to govern their own life. It also comes with a profound belief in the power of science. An extreme belief in the efficacy of science, called scientism, has latterly dismissed other forms of knowledge, some even of Western origin, such as religion and philosophy (Franz, 1953).

Post-colonial African states spent significant portions of their budgets on formal education (Robertson, 1984). However, Nyerere (1976: 5) rued the fact that for most Africans, their unconscious motivation for education was to turn themselves into “black Europeans or black Americans”. The underlying assumption of Nyerere’s thinking was that formal education, as inherited from the colonial edifice, was not fit or possible for Africa. Furthermore, Nyerere’s conception of education held that its main objective should be “the liberation of man” (Nyerere, 1976: 6). If education is haphazardly copied from foreign concepts and then applied on an impressionable populace whose desire is to emulate the identity of the proprietors of that brand of education, then chances of authentic liberation become remote. Should formal education today continue to be implemented as the only valid mode of learning, shorn of the supplement of informal and indigenous knowledge, then it will keep sub-Saharan Africans in the shackles of Eurocentrism.

Another dimension that should be looked at is the role that missionary activity played in promoting formal education in sub-Saharan Africa (George, 1976). The fact that colonial powers were mostly Christian meant that their forays into sub-Saharan Africa were accompanied by Christian missionary activities. Those who conduct education are informed by their frame of reference, in this case their religious, political and ethical values. Formal education became a tool for the purveyance of Christian values on sub-Saharan Africans. African religious beliefs were vilified and discouraged. Christianity, argued James (1897), was an important force in the redemption of an unenlightened and pagan Africa. However, the colonial powers held sway over the work of the missionaries. Even in cases where missionary education preceded colonial administration, the institution of colonial rule often imposed government curricula on missionary education (Taylor, 1984). Though some missionaries pressured colonial governments to

move toward political justice in their colonies, they (the missionaries) were intolerant to African modes of worship and cultural practices that were at odds with Christian doctrine. Formal Christian education reeked of religious supremacy and prejudice in the same vein that colonial rule smacked of political, social, racial and economic domination.

INFORMAL EDUCATION

Informal learning or education is the form of acquiring knowledge through experience and from one's natural environment. It is a learner-centered approach that puts the responsibility to regulate learning primarily on the learner and is appropriate for adult education because of its use of personal life experience (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Eraut, 2004). Informal education can take place in an institution but is neither necessarily classroom-based nor strictly structured. Consequently, it takes place in a "much wider variety of settings than formal education or training" (Eraut, 2004: 247). Schugurensky (2000) identifies three types of informal education: self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialization.

Scribner and Cole (1973) argue that learning is more effective if it occurs in a natural environment. This could occur through osmotic processes like learning a language through extracurricular interaction. The assertion that learning continuously takes place in indigenous contexts is indisputable (La Belle, 1982). In informal learning, the specific context or setting (such as the workplace, family or community organisation) is more important and influential than the focus of the education taking place. A study conducted in Great Britain found that informal teaching and learning promoted activism in the citizenry (McGivney, 1999).

AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

La Belle (1982) states that people are always involved in some form of learning and that learning is influenced by the contexts in which those who learn are embedded. This validates the fact that sub-Saharan Africans had their version of knowledge that served their specific context before the introduction of Western education. Ani (2012: 301) argues that "reasoning, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and living standards are determined by the socio-cultural milieu, environmental background, and the specific period of time and space in which people live". The core of this argument is that no particular group of people enjoys monopoly of knowledge. The purpose of this section is to outline the ontology of sub-Saharan indigenous knowledge.

Historically, Africans have generally been regarded as a communitarian people (Hamminga, 2005; Laird, 2005: 462; Wiredu, 2008). The word 'generally' is being used deliberately because the article leaves open the possibility that there could have been sub-Saharan African societies that do not fit a communitarian description but that if they existed then "they must be rare" (Wiredu, 2008: 333). Indigenous education was an all-inclusive activity "in which storytelling, proverbs and myths also play[ed] an important role" (Omolewa, 2007: 593).

Traditional African education continues to constitute an essential component of African societies. Apart from stories and myths, this form of education is also transmitted through mediums such as rituals, dance and music. Information and traditional practices and beliefs for posterity are communicated orally (Iwuji, 1989). Indigenous education is practical in that it helps to sustain societies in terms of agricultural viability, health care, ethical conduct and other facets of communal living. The concept of Africa as a “dark continent” which had no rational knowledge and education before European incursions is intellectually dishonest and morally repulsive because it denies Africa the fact that it had history. Europeans instituted formal education which also introduced “the learning of European languages, literature, history, philosophy, as well as the science subjects including mathematics, biology, physics and chemistry” (Omolewa, 2007: 594). Africans were deemed “benighted natives” (Magubane, 2010: 277; Matambo and Ani, 2015). This is an illustration of what Michel Foucault (1977) means when he states that power is knowledge, an astute inversion of Francis Bacon’s statement that knowledge is power.

The decision of what constitutes knowledge often resides in the powerful who have the wherewithal to implement and defend their ideas. Whether the knowledge promoted is valid and useful becomes of marginal importance. However, it is noteworthy that even during the lifetime of certain grand narratives upheld by the powerful, there is, in most cases, revolt from the cowed section of society. This revolt can be overt, where people radically propose a transformation of an educational system, or covert as in the case of the many Africans who continued their allegiance to African ways of life in the midst of an imposed formal education. The example of the Ghanaians who have largely been reluctant to embrace formal education (Nordensvard, 2013) will be discussed later to stress the point that education carries within it certain values and if these are at variance with the local context then the results thereof will be disappointing.

EDUCATION AS A NON-NEUTRAL ACTIVITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CONTEXT FOR THE SUCCESS OF EDUCATION

Paulo Freire, an advocate of critical pedagogy, asserted that there can never be an education that is utterly neutral. The political importance of education has been seized upon for centuries; in the United States, education was withheld from slaves on grounds that enlightenment could engender ambition in the enslaved and was likely to lead to revolt (Woodson, 1915). The Belgian colonialists in Africa adopted similar policies (Hochschild, 1999). On the one hand, education can be used by those in positions of power to “educate” or indoctrinate learners about how society has operated and should continue operating with the view that those being educated will conform to the status quo (Gramsci, 1971; Lott, 1999; Kremer and Sarychev, 2008). This is what Freire calls education for domestication. On the other hand, education can also be used by individuals who critically assess their social context and try to find ways in which they can use education to transform an unjust society. This is termed education for liberation (Freire, 1972). Any education that is impervious to critical transformation

becomes a tool for domination (Friedman *et al.*, 2011). Formal education in sub-Saharan Africa has been beset with indifference because it has taken the form of education for domestication and is regarded as a foreign and colonial practice thrust on an unwilling people.

Despite the pervasive scope of formal education in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, it has often been met with half-hearted commitment in societies that strive to preserve their cultural purity. Hence, formal education in such societies has not succeeded in transforming people's outlook. Where it has taken effect, the change has been a cosmetic one. Deep-seated beliefs such as loyalty to one's kin (Nordensvard, 2013) have remained unchanged. Where credible change has occurred, it could be due to exposure to metropolitan lifestyles, print, television and online media, and experience of working in modern industries; these factors could indeed be correlated with formal education (Inkeles, 1966). On the other hand, people's behavior can also be radically transformed by influences that emanate from an individual's ethnic extraction, religious persuasion, intelligence, age, sex and social status. The above factors can exert their influence on an individual solely because of exposure to certain influences which need not be proffered by formal education. This questions the notion that Western formal education has a modernizing effect on traditional values and beliefs. Though a significant number of sub-Saharan Africans have embraced Christian beliefs, they have not totally foresworn beliefs that constituted African religions. Enculturation in the Catholic Church arose following the realization that certain aspects of African religious practices could be combined with Christian liturgy to form a more accommodating formula of worship (Kurgat, 2009).

Formal education, with its emphasis on individualism, cannot be effective, taken in isolation, when applied to a people whose instinct is primarily communal. In sub-Saharan Africa, as "in many other developing societies, responsibilities to extended family, clan, tribe, ethnic group, religion, locality or region often outweigh whatever vision of personal liberty their citizens possess" (Wing, 1992: 295). Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1973: 553) argue that any theory of education "requires a theory of society as a whole" and a theory that looks at how social processes impinge on education. "A theory of formal education also requires a theory of how learning and thinking skills develop in an individual member of society, and how educational processes contribute to the shaping of these skills" (Scribner and Cole, 1973: 553). This theory could be a conceptual integration that takes helpful elements from the different types of education and forms them into a synthesis that addresses specific social processes in sub-Saharan societies.

Formal, informal and indigenous knowledge in Africa need not be applied as mutually exclusive enterprises. Informal education offers an alternative to individuals who have missed out on formal education. In a continent battling with basic human needs, a practical education that offers the possibility of surmounting these challenges is seen as a necessity. Realistically speaking, it is almost impossible to imagine a contemporary or future Africa shorn of formal education or Western influence. However, for formal education to be readily embraced by

Africans, it has to be systematically blended with informal and indigenous knowledge to form an educational brew that is responsive to the circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, the different types of education are dependent components of a whole; they have an inextricable relationship. Malcolm, Hodgkinson and Colley (2006: 313) assert that “[t]he nature of ... [the] inter-relationship [between formal and informal learning], the ways it is written about and its impact on learners and others, are closely related to the organisational, social, cultural, economic, historical and political contexts in which learning takes place”. Thompson (2001: 1) states this more succinctly: “The whole which is an integrated system of education and learning is greater than the sum of its constituent parts”.

There has been an acknowledgement that formal education, promoted in isolation, cannot be the answer to Africa’s challenges. The Jomtien Conference (1990) focusing on Education for All (EFA) inspired initiatives that aimed at providing alternatives or supplements to formal education. In Kenya, the Jomtien Conference committed its attention towards alternative forms of education in the face of the challenges of children and youth being out of school and hence prone to lethargy and crime. This initiated the move towards the formation of a non-formal education desk at the Ministry of Education. This desk was later upgraded into a unit in the hope that a Department of Non-Formal Education was in the offing (Thompson, 2001).

Emphasizing the importance of an education that is context-specific is in tandem with Scribner and Cole’s (1973: 553) argument that theories of education need theories of the society in which education takes place. Different social, economic, cultural and religious circumstances would require a brand of education that addresses these specifics. La Belle (1982) states that during the 1970s, youths in the developing world resorted to non-formal education because they were inadequately helped by formal schools or needed to “supplement” the formal education they had already acquired. The reasons for this were at least two-fold: firstly, the requisite elements needed for efficient formal institutions were beyond the resources of struggling economies and unstable political leaderships. Developing countries could scarcely cope with the burgeoning populations that would have to be enrolled in schools requiring expensive development and transformation. The second reason was that non-formal education was responsive to problems such as food and job insecurity in the formal sectors. These problems continue to typify the struggles of the developing world.

Brock-Utne (1996: 335) argues that “the most common problems of the South can only be understood by analysing local experiences”. If education is to be more potent in Africa, it has to be shaped in a way that integrates these local experiences. Indigenous knowledge is important for education because it emerges from local experiences. The arguments advanced in this article echo Brock-Utne’s (1996: 335) argument “for a transformation of the universities of the South to include local knowledge”. Omolewa (2007: 594) goes further to assert that the incorporation of some elements of indigenous education “into modern-day educational practice” can enhance the quality of the latter. Indigenous

education involves traditional socio-cultural mores, practices and knowledge which resonate deeply with the population.

In a 2009 study conducted in the United States on children who came from low income families, it was discovered that learners who used social network services out of school (thus, informal education) exhibited certain twenty-first century trends which could be typical of formal education, but were unsure whether extramural learning could be supplemented by classroom instruction. The researchers (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009) reached the conclusion that, in order to diminish learning inequity, such informal learning could be incorporated into mainstream education. These two instances, one from the developing world (the Kenyan case discussed above) and the other based in the United States, converge on the point that formal education should be more receptive of what goes on outside the classroom and could ideally harness that to enrich the quality of education that learners are exposed to.

The fundamental necessity of education for self-development cannot be refuted; indeed, it has been acknowledged by both civic leadership and social scientists. However, civic leaders consign the importance of education to its instrumental role, i.e. providing needed skills in order to tackle issues of technical/technological weakness, poor economic status and ineffective administration of society. Social scientists belabour how education can actually be used “to change the balance of different attitudes and values in the population” (Clark, 1962: 70). Sub-Saharan Africans cannot be expected to fully embrace education if it challenges some of their most intimate values. Studies have shown that northern Ghana continues to have a negligible rate of enrolment in formal educational institutions. Nordensvard (2013) argues that this is because formal education has historically been intolerant to the traditional and religious worldview of certain parts of northern Ghana and has also shown a historical preference for Ghanaians who are Christian. Thus, those who profess Islam have been more flagrant in their rejection of formal education (Heaton, James and Oheneba-Sakyi, 2009: 74). This dynamic reinforces the assertion that education can never be looked at in neutral terms. It carries certain values and if these values are impervious to different contexts, the expected consequences are failure, rejection, or indifference.

THE UNSAID IMPLICATIONS OF PRIVILEGED FORMAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA: RACE AND POLITICS

“This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid” (Kant, 1997: 57). This was Kant’s impression on seeing a black man. The essence of the statement was that black people do not have the intellectual capacity commensurate with that of white people. This attitude was held by other influential philosophers like David Hume, George W.F. Hegel and Diedrich Westermann (Mawere, 2011). Kant was persuaded by racial essentialism, the notion that the pigmentation of an individual determines his or her intellectual capacity. It is due to this attitude that indigenous African knowledge has been

discredited. However, despite its vaunted usefulness and superiority, formal, that is Western-oriented education has yet to be accepted by all Africans. One of the major reasons for this seems to be the fact that education is not neutral (Freire, 1970); it is political (Archer, 2007) and value-laden.

To adhere to one form of education entails buying into the value system from which that particular brand of education emanates. Hence, in order to be an adherent of Western education, Africans have to relinquish certain aspects of African values. Formal education has slender prospects of success in sub-Saharan Africa because this region has specific socio-economic and cultural circumstances that make informal education more useful. However, in an increasingly modernized world, informal education has limited usefulness on its own. There seems to be tension between the forms of education that governments promote and view to be most effective on the one hand, and the type of education that ordinary people perceive to be more useful on the other hand. In this scenario, both formal and informal education are under threat in sub-Saharan Africa because they are seen as competitors: while the former is being supported by governments and other stakeholders, informal education appeals more to sub-Saharan Africans who appreciate its everyday usefulness.

This reality eliminates the element of surprise in Nordensvard's (2013) research which discovered that despite the extension of free formal education in Ghana from six to eleven years, and "the positive light in which education is usually presented" (Hashim, 2007: 911), this brand of education continues to lose out to informal education which the majority of Ghanaian citizens consider more useful for their daily life. The campaign to universalize primary education in Ghana started before independence (1945) with the ten-year plan by the colonial government. The 1951 Accelerated Development Plan (ADP) of Ghana aimed at achieving universal primary education by putting an end to tuition fees. However, this commitment did not succeed in augmenting enrolment rates. Nordensvard's (2013) research suggests that this trend has continued to this day. An analytic report on access to basic education in Ghana (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2007) established that enrolment in that country has not been as comprehensive as the government wished because the people's reluctance to enrol in schools extends beyond financial constraints. Though the report talks about the availability of teachers and classrooms as other intervening factors, people's worldview and what they believe should be the objective of education play a pivotal role.

The neo-liberal emphasis on personal civil and political rights is yet to gain precedence over sub-Saharan Africans' loyalty to family, kinship, tribe and other social forces for unity and identity. Wing A.K. (1992: 296) raises "the issue of whether it is possible to combine the strong protections of personal liberty associated with individualism and liberal democracy with a communitarian concern for groups and duties beyond the individual". Furthermore, the tendency to look at education for its economic benefits and as a tool to eliminate poverty often neglects the other roles it can play like the promotion of responsible citizenship. In sum, education in sub-Saharan Africa should be crafted into a combination of elements from different types of education with the objective that the

resultant blend will be relevant to the sub-Saharan context. This blend of different educational concepts is what this article terms conceptual integration. This integration is not an easy formula to bring about; it requires a painstaking selection of elements of formal, informal and indigenous education that can be helpful for an African learner in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

The central theme of this article is that despite their individual usefulness, formal, informal and indigenous education in sub-Saharan Africa share a future of certain doom because formal education, which receives the support of African leaders at the expense of informal and indigenous forms of education, was adopted from colonial leaders and has been applied to sub-Saharan Africa without taking the context of this region into consideration. Sub-Saharan Africa falls within the developing world and hence has specific experiences and needs that have to be considered. The article has conceded that the three forms of knowledge are relevant for contemporary Africa and hence none of them should be precipitately jettisoned. Elements from the different types of education can be combined into one whole that addresses the specific circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, a conceptual integration of formal, informal and indigenous education is more potent if elements that are borrowed from the three forms of education enhance each other and attend to the sub-Saharan social, economic and political situation. Finally, the argument that education is not neutral has been emphasized to highlight the point that if formal education continues to enjoy precedence over other forms of education in sub-Saharan Africa, the unsaid implication is that age-old stereotypes of Western value systems being superior to non-Western ones are in fact valid.

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