Integrating Traditional African Education into Current Educational Practices: Suggestions for Primary School Pedagogy

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how traditional African educational approaches can be used with European methods in the teaching of young children at primary schools in Zimbabwe. From an African-centred perspective, European/Western education is viewed as ‘compartmentalistic’, limiting and potentially inhibitive of the communal, social, and cultural responsibilities expected of a fully initiated African adult. The paper takes the position that a re-look at African traditional knowledge dissemination system such as communal education, group learning, fireside folktales and legends, used in tandem with the European paradigm, will produce a better-cultured adult who fits comfortably in the frame of current developments on the African continent. The paper proposes a curriculum that recognises the value of African traditions as educational methods of teaching that can make learning more relevant and exciting for primary school going pupils.

Keywords: traditional African education, pedagogy, relevance, colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a critical role in the development of society. According to Ndoye (1990) education must be universal, that is, acquired by all people without exception and is inseparable from the recognition of human dignity. Much of the education seen on the African continent has continued to be burdened by colonial connections. The function of the school in Africa has been following, supporting, and anchoring a conquest imposed by colonial arms on the African people and its main goal was to recruit, select, and train locals to function in the whole colonial scheme (Ndoye, 1990). From the beginning, throughout the colonial as well as the post colonial periods, education on the continent has been lopsided, tending to down-grade endogenous methodologies of disseminating knowledge to the young in favour of western knowledge systems using the westernised methodologies.

The imposition of Western paradigms of education onto an essentially traditional system resulted in a rather perplexing mixture of Western and African education. To the coloniser, it was a necessary development since there was very little faith that Africans had any educational systems in place. A number of scholars over the years have doubted the authenticity and the efficacy of traditional African education (Abdi, 2006; Hegel, 1965; Leys, 1996; Saul, 1993; Voltaire, 1826; that before the arrival of Europeans, Africa had no culture to talk about, let alone an education system. Education in Africa was ‘inferior’ and had to give way to western education, which the colonialist considered more superior. Over the decades, colonialism nudged endogenous/communal ways of educating the young out of the way and Africans were left with the western paradigms whose modus operandi they were not quite used to. Educational practice on the African continent is mired (to different degrees) in Western practice, sometimes causing conflict. Although after attaining independence many African governments tried to move away from strictly Eurocentric education to
something more home-grown, education on the continent still remains highly westernised, each variety mirroring the colonial system of education under whose dominion a particular country was historically colonised. Africa has been westernised through imperialism, colonialism, and globalisation and the advent of modern communication systems. To advocate for a purely African pedagogy might be an exercise in anachronism. Though alien to the African terrain and psyche, western education has achieved a lot on the continent. Africa boasts of erudite scholars who have contributed immensely to scholarship, the economies, and cultures of the continent. The development evident on the continent can, to a large extent, be attributed to the high standards of western education that African elites got from such universities as the erstwhile Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, Makerere University in Uganda and University of Ibadan in Nigeria, which were cited amongst the best universities in the developing world (Baguma and Aheisibwe, 2011).

Research Problem

Nziramasanga comission on education in Zimbabwe (1999) found out that stakeholders had misgivings about the competences of teachers in the school system. The commission concluded that there is a gap between current demands of classroom practice and the skills teachers possess. Learning is no longer exciting and rote learning has become the order of the day in most schools. Teaching and learning has become monotonous. How can traditional African education make learning more exciting?

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine characteristics of African traditional education that make it more meaningful and relevant in Zimbabwe and possibilities of integrating African and western strategies to better suit the African condition in this century.

Research Questions

The research addressed the following research questions:

- What are the methodologies used in African Traditional Education?
- What is the relevance of the traditional African education methodologies in teaching and learning in the primary school in Zimbabwe?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

What is education?

Barker (1994) defined education as all those processes of learning which enable a person to acquire skills, behaviours, knowledge, values and norms which are considered necessary to live a happy and successful life in the society to which he belongs. Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2002) defined education as the process of transmitting the culture of a society from one generation to the other, the process by which the adult members of a society bring up the younger ones. According to Rodney, (1972) Education is crucial in any type of society for the preservation of the lives of its members and the maintenance of the social structure. Education grows out of the environment; the learning process being directly related to the pattern of work in the society. Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2003) believe that education is the process of cultural transmission and renewal, the process whereby the adult members of a society carefully guide the development of infants and young children, initiating them into the culture of the society.

What seems to be a common thread linking the generality of definitions of education by varied scholars over time is the idea of preservation and perpetuation of the cultures of different societies through inculcation of the norms, values, practices of the particular societies among the young, in the context of educational practice. In other words, the cultural future of a people is based on the kind of education that such people provide for their children. When that education is Western, then there are serious implications for the African child and African societies in general because their survival, development and social transformation are threatened (Rodney 1972).

Being society and culturally based, the above definitions of education go in tandem with African traditional practices. The western paradigm (apparently focussing on the individual) tends to be selective, competitive and largely formal in nature. Western education also emphasises on hierarchy, structure; a chronologically graded education system, running from primary school through to university, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialised programmes and institutions for fulltime technical and professional training (Baguma and
Aheisibwe, 2011). Western values are generally blamed for the creation of African elites who failed to identify with the values and aspirations of the communities in which they had been raised (Rodney, 1972).

What is African Traditional Education?

African Traditional Education refers to the ways of teaching and learning in Africa based on the knowledge accumulated by indigenous Africans over long periods in response to different physical, environmental and social problems. Chitumba, (2006) posits that there was education in traditional societies whose aims were passing on to the youths, the accumulated knowledge, wisdom and skills of the cultural groups. African Traditional Education is described as mostly having no schools nor the formal organisations associated with conventional western learning. It does not divide curricular content into disciplines such as arts, sciences, agriculture, economics but, wedges the children’s daily routines and livelihoods of their family and community together, integrating skills and knowledge about all aspects of life into a single curriculum.(Gwanfogbe, 2011). The teachers in African Traditional Education are mostly unpaid, yet they prepare the children to function with efficiency in their communities. The system allows no drop-outs because promotion from one level to the next is not based on selection but is automatic. The education is characterised as “remarkably comprehensive since it has as its aim the full integration of the child into the life of the tribe” (Farrant, 1980).

According to Rodney (1972), Indigenous African education can be considered outstanding: its close links with social life, both in a material and spiritual sense; its collective nature; its many-sidedness; and its progressive development in conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional and mental development of the child”. Traditional African education, therefore, was wholesome. All elders in the society were expected to play the father and mother roles in teaching and advising, rewarding and punishing children in the village or community. The teaching and bringing up of children was therefore a collective responsibility, hence, the African saying that “it takes a village to raise a child. Marah (2006) observed that traditional education in Africa was intimately integrated with the social, cultural, artistic, religious and recreational life of the ethnic group. Children were instructed in social etiquette, agricultural methods and other skills that ensured the running of the social entity of which they were integral members. In the early age of the child, the education was largely the responsibility of the biological mother, but the community structures and systems took over as the child grew older, for example, in the initiation of adolescents into adulthood.

Initiation schools played a part in complementing traditional education, particularly when boys and girls transitioned into adulthood. These schools were crucial to the child’s full understanding of their changing roles in society. According to Van Rooyen et al. (2006), the lack of initiation rights in modern day communities causes a lot of confusion among the youths. Individuals have to look at young people’s difficulties in finding themselves and see something that is missing in our society. Initiation schools developed children’s will power through promoting asceticism, self denial, mortification, physical endurance and self control. Spiritually, children were taught to become something that is missing in our society. Initiation schools developed children's will power through promoting asceticism, self denial, mortification, physical endurance and self control. Spirtually, children were taught to become an entity in unity, not only with other men but also with the whole of nature, comprising the earth, water, fire, light, etc... to pass from being an individual to the social situation aimed at full cosmic participation (Van Rooyen et al, 2006).

Approaches or methodologies in African Education

Traditional education uses teaching methods and familiar materials drawn from the children's environment. Such methods are related to the culture and traditions of the children’s ethnic group such as folk tales. Smith (1940) cited in Marah (2006), unpacks the use of folk tales as educative devices in traditional African societies. Stories are used not only to amuse and express feelings but also teach ideal forms of behaviour and morality. Children learned by listening to their elders, imitating or emulating them. These stories are handed down from generation to the next; their concern was to induct the youth into moral, philosophical and cultural values of the community.

Unlike the Western methodologies, African Traditional Education is collective and utilitarian. It incorporates the input of all members of the community, thus preparing the learner for full participation in society. Traditional African Education was not confined to school room walls, there were no special buildings. The homestead and the community were the contexts of African education. Different games such as wrestling, running, training for healthy living, cooking, hunting, forms of carpentry, training to become blacksmiths, critical thinking, drumming, dancing, marriage counselling etc. were used as part of the traditional curriculum at different stages in the development of the child. Norms and values of the community such as honesty, loyalty, bravery, mental and physical wellness, leadership, responsibility and accountability were part and parcel of the curriculum that developed the African child (Datta, 1995).

Traditional methods used what westerners would call ‘Mastery Learning’ (Marah (2006). Thus, failure was virtually non-existent; every effort was made, encouragements given, incentives provided to make sure even the
most coward went through, say, the circumcision process. Group instruction, group assignments, apprenticeships and age groupings to experience a particular significant event, were the most common methods employed to instruct the young.

The content of African Traditional Education was determined by society to cater for the physical, social and spiritual aspects of the life of children and followed certain principles that are suggested by Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2006). These are as follows:

- **Principle of Preparation**: This involved the removal of economic and social poverty, hunger, disease, squalor, ignorance, malpractice, production of human power (human resources).
- **Principle of Functionalism**: It determined that people learnt through imitation, initiation ceremonies, work, play, oral literature.
- **Principle of Communalism**: All members of the society owned things in common and applied the communal spirit to work. Children belonged to the community and every member of the community had a stake in their upbringing, e.g. If a child misbehaved while the parents were not around other adult members of the community would discipline and correct him or her on the spot.
- **Perennialism**: Education was a vehicle for maintaining or preserving the cultural heritage and status quo, it was conservative.
- **Holisticism or multiple learning**: In economically, socially and practically advanced societies like the Zulu, Ashanti and Nupe there was a high degree of specialisation in learning. In latter societies, education equipped boys and girls to undertake multiple occupations that required related skills, e.g. when a child was taught to be a fisherman, he not only learnt to catch fish but also to preserve, market it, mend nets, manufacture canoes and set up temporary shelter. There was no gap between work and study; there was no unemployment in African traditional societies (Datta, 1995).

In the societies mentioned above, formal means of teaching were common and professional teachers existed (Adeyemi and Adeyinka, 2002). Such teachers taught a predetermined body of knowledge in an organised sequence over a period of time lasting many years. They received payments in kind from the parents of the pupils. Professional teachers used to train young people in diplomacy, medicine, hunting, copper and iron manufacturing and other specialised roles. Both theoretical and practical approaches were employed in teaching with pupils encouraged to recite poems, riddles and songs. Classes or schools were held in secluded places or at the king or chief’s palace. Graduation took place after they had sufficiently mastered their courses. These sessions were often marked by feasting, ceremonial dancing and rejoicing (Tiberondwa, 1998).

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology was qualitative in nature. According to Reid (1996), one of its major characteristics is that the researcher attempts to gain first hand holistic understanding of phenomena. Qualitative research design for this study was the case study.

**Research Design**

This research employed the multiple case study approach. According to Yin (2003) a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. The advantage of a case study was that the researcher would be able to make an in-depth intense and focused study of phenomena.

**Population**

The population was made up students, lecturers and graduates from teachers’ colleges and mentors from schools.

**Sampling Procedure**

The purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The selected sample was made up of individuals who were teachers currently teaching in primary schools. They were selected because they can give rich information on current teaching practices in the primary schools.
Data Collection Procedure

To collect data, interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used. Data was collected from the teacher in Bindura urban primary schools.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was qualitative and used the grounded theory.

FINDINGS

The research found out the following:

- Present day teaching and learning can be integrated with the Traditional African education and learning can be more exciting.
- Children learn better using things their cultural experiences and these can motivate and capture the whole child by linking children to their immediate environment thereby making the process of educating them more meaningful and relevant.
- The respondents mentioned that though traditional methodologies are being threatened, if not replaced by modern games and gadgets, where they are in use; there is some benefit that society is reaping from them in child development and education.
- The traditional game of nhodo played using stones in a circle drawn or hole dug on the ground aided in numeracy while psychomotor skills were developed through games like hwai hwai huyai (sheep, sheep, come home) and other activities that were appropriate to the ages and sex of the children.
- The methodologies most frequently cited were drama, song, dance, role-play, group work, mime, proverbs, and idioms.

DISCUSSION

According to the teachers approaches such as the Ngano genre of story telling among the Shona (and most Africans) as particularly promoting an idea of the bigger social picture. One tells the story while the others listen and answer back, (paivapo… dzefunde…). The songs that usually accompany these stories are taught to all and sung in unison and the themes developed and the moral lessons gleaned from them are appreciated collectively in the group. Ngano also boosts children’s confidence by taking attention away from the teacher as source of information while empowering the children as they recounted stories that they heard told to them. Not only does Ngano inculcate a theme or moral message but the telling of them teaches group functionality and dynamics, vesting in all the abilities to be leader, while being part of the group. This promotes the collectivistic nature of African systems as advocated in philosophy of Ubuntu.

Taboos also facilitated in the development of people who fitted into society, for example Ukagara munzira unoita mamota (If you sit in the road, you develop boils), ukadya wakarara unomera makuvhu maviri (If you eat while lying down you will grow two belly buttons), ukitaitiratsa unaunoisirwa uno mhinipiri, (if you defecate in public places, someone will put chillies on your poo and that will burn your backside), ukadongorera vakadzi vasina hembe unoita shohwera, (peeping Toms will develop boils on their eyes. One respondent emphasised the point that these taboos help to develop the moral dimension of African traditional education. Where they are used, learning becomes familiar and more meaningful to the children. This was education for life directed at fostering humane people endowed with moral norms and virtues such as kindness, generosity and compassion.

Other outdoor activities including naming of trees, agricultural activities in the school garden train children to work as teams. Through such activities, the school develops a homely environment where all people play a part in nurturing the young.

There were few teachers however, who did not believe there is much value in traditional African education. These were mostly the younger generation of teachers who may not have had much contact with the erstwhile African cultural traits and whose attraction towards African cultures is very weak. They indicated that some of these methodologies were out-dated and not in sync with the modern day African youth, who depends more on television, play stations, video games and smart phones for everyday entertainment. It cannot be denied that the new information wave has taken Africa by storm, but the majority of the children from the locations studied are from low
income families and these modern gadgets are far in-between; such pupils can still benefit from the traditional educational practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends the following to be incorporated in the primary school pedagogy to make it more wholesome and meaningful to African people:

- Mastery learning as a method of teaching, including the training of the young people for various skills and trades. Assessment should be positive and failure made virtually non-existent through practice and incentives.
- The child should be educated to know, internalize and practise roles appropriate to age and sex.
- The re-introduction of initiation rites to inculcate a sense of respect for elders and brotherhood among the youth and to develop skills in practical matters and appreciation of cultural values.
- Teachers need to take up the roles of fathers and mothers in the school in teaching and advising, rewarding or punishing young people together with the community.
- Education should be closely and collectively linked to social life both in a material and spiritual sense.
- Wholesome moulding of each child into a functional member of family and the community should be encouraged.
- All members of the community need to participate in the education of children.
- Traditional education be not confined to the schoolroom walls but be opened to the homestead and the community.

In terms of methodology,

- Games should play an important part in transmission of knowledge. Training (to function effectively in society) should be adopted by primary schools to produce functional artisans.
- Norms and values of the community should become an integral part of primary education to inculcate such values as honesty, loyalty, bravery, leadership, responsibility and accountability.
- The use of legends, riddles, drum and dance in teaching and learning needs to be embraced as part of the methodology of teaching young children.

Writing on the subject of education in Africa, Bangura (2005) advocates for a return to Ubuntugogy by arguing that Western-type colonialist style education (schooling) has not served the people of the sub-continent well, and that a return to Ubuntugogy as an indigenous approach to education should be considered. According to him, western systems are incompatible with the African frame of mind because the former are based on a world view that fragments African life- seeing education as something separate from politics, religion, economics and the social institutions of family, group or community. To the scholar, “the salvation for Africans hinges upon employing indigenous African educational paradigms which can be subsumed under the rubric of Ubuntugogy, which I define as the art and science of teaching and learning undergirded by humanity towards others (p.14).

CONCLUSION

Though applicable to a relatively small fraction of educational institutions in the country, the findings of this study seem to point out to the truism that there are potential benefits to be derived from an education system that is biased towards traditional practices. Without taking a radical stance that negates all the good that western education has achieved so far on the continent, a qualified return to African practices, taken in tandem with the current western preference, might create the correct equilibrium that will make education more meaningful and fulfilling for the African. The paper thus calls for a kind of amalgam of indigenous African and Western methods so that children can derive benefits from both. According to Van der Walt (2010) Education on the sub-continent has to move from solitary (Western-style individualism) to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality as something apart from the community to individuality in terms of community, from competition to cooperation, from market-based capitalism to communal/social capitalism, from exploitation of others to seeking benefits for them, and from seeing the other as fixed to seeing the other in his or her historical context.
REFERENCES


