

Schooling or Education? : Africa

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Priests working in parishes up and down the length and breadth of Africa are faced with a severe, and ever increasing problem. They refer to it as the "school leavers' problem", meaning the thousands of disaffected and frustrated primary and secondary school graduates, who having completed their course of education, and armed with their hard-earned certificates find themselves unemployed and unemployable. They may have spent years in the city, have tried every avenue and have drifted either into delinquency and crime, or have gravitated back to the "bush".

They went to school in the hope that school would free them from the grinding poverty of the rural areas, by obtaining employment hopefully in town, and even more hopefully, white-collared: an easier and more interesting life than their parents' was their goal. Their parents looked on this as an investment, insurance against their old age or infirmity, and likely as not made tremendous sacrifices to send them, equip them, and keep them there.

It rarely turns out that way and years of expense, sacrifice and effort dissipate themselves as the graduates slip back into, at best, semi-literacy. Their styles and standards of living, their outlook and ambitions are often indistinguishable from those of their "less-fortunate" brothers and sisters who did not go to school.

For decades, and often in the teeth of Colonial opposition, the Churches founded schools, and brought "education" to the furthestmost corners of Africa. To do this the Church, as much as the parents themselves, made huge sacrifices of personnel and material, time and money. As Bishops and the reverend schoolmasters look with fondness on a host of civil servants, business and professional men as well as politicians; the successful and devoted sons and daughters of the school system, and while they compliment one another's service and dedication, the priest at parish level has to cope with the suffering, misery and frustration of the nine out of ten for whom school was largely a waste of time.

What happened? How has our transplanted educational system fared or how is it faring?

Every society wants to educate its young people to become good and useful members of that society. The industrialised, urbanised and organised West created a specialised institution of education to do precisely this. We call it the formal, school system, and we transplanted it to a rural, agrarian and peasant society. We

thought "Education" was in itself a good thing. We wanted ecclesiastical functionaries and Church members, as well as to provide the Government with clerks, and interpreters either to assure ourselves of "influence", or because we saw that the indigenous peoples wanted it (no doubt to become more like us, and in the end throw us out). Since Independence in the sixties African Governments have given pride of place to schools, often devoting up to forty per cent of the budget to "education".

In 1961, UNESCO held a conference in Addis Abbaba, Ethiopia,¹ and set the targets of universal, free and compulsory primary school education by 1980, and an expansion of secondary school places to 30 per cent of those who completed primary school. All the thirty-eight African nations that attended the conference committed themselves to this programme.

In 1976, fifteen years later, this time under the joint auspices of UNESCO and the OAU yet another conference was held in Lagos, Nigeria.² There it was admitted that it would be impossible to achieve the 1961 conference targets. By 1976 only 59.1 per cent of the relevant age group were in primary schools; this would increase at best to 59.5 per cent in 1980 and by 1985 there would be an actual reduction if present and past trends continued.

These are aggregate figures based on the returns given by various Ministries of Education in Africa, which are notoriously optimistic. Independent studies paint a far darker picture.³

The population of Black African countries is rural, ranging from 75 per cent rural in some countries of West Africa to as high as 95 per cent or more in East Africa. In spite of this, there are more school places per head of population in the urban areas than

¹ *Final Report Unesco, Paris 1960*

² Cf. report in *West African Magazine*, London, 23.2.76 on the African Education Ministers' Conference, Lagos Nigeria, held from 29th Jan. 1976 to 6th Feb. 1976 and organised jointly by Unesco, U.N. Commission for Africa and the O.A.U.

³ For Africa cf. the works of Coombs, Pearson, Sheffield, Jolly, as well as my own contribution. Further afield, Myrdal provides similar material on S.E. Asia.

See for example:

Philip Coombs *World Education Crisis* O.U.P. New York 1968

New Paths to Learning Harrap, Parish 1973.

Adam Curle *Education for Liberation* London 1966 Tavistock Press.

Richard Jolly *Education in Africa* E.A.P.H. Nairobi 1969.

Lester Pearson *Partners in Development* Pall Mall Press, London 1969.

James Sheffield and Victor Diejomoah *Non-formal Education in African Development*, The American-African Institute, New York, 1972.

A. M. Visocchi *The Experience of the Catholic Church in Non-Formal Education for Rural Development in Western Uganda* Master's Thesis, Manchester University, 1976 (unpublished).

Gunner Myrdal *Asian Drama* Pantheon, New York 1968. Particularly Vol. 3 who points to a similar situation in S.E. Asia.

in the rural areas. Most administration, educational or otherwise is controlled from the towns, and the administrators, the educated elite, want the best in the way of buildings, equipment and teaching for their own children and those of their peers. An elite form of education is emerging at the Government's expense, paid for by the taxes raised in the rural areas.

Everyone wants to live in the towns, and teachers are no exception. Demand for places outstrips supply and evidently only the best teachers are going to be selected. The standards of teaching are going to be better in the towns, as are teacher to pupil ratios.

As one moves out of the towns however, things tend to change a bit. The rural areas are less well served, and of course the poorer rural areas are even worse off than the richer rural areas. Boys have a better chance than girls, at the lower end of primary education there are at least two boys to every girl, and in tertiary education the ratio widens to five or six to one.

The pattern of attendance in primary schools is striking. Huge classes in the lower forms, and small classes in the higher forms. Often enough more than 50 per cent of the pupils drop out of primary school before even completing it; most of these are girls. Thus in the lower forms the schools are understaffed and crowded, while in the higher forms they can be grossly overstaffed with many empty places.

The high percentage of those who 'repeat' a year blocks up the system. Many repeat two or three times and instead of taking seven years to complete a course may take as long as nine or ten years. Children are often obliged to leave school for a year or two, (usually to earn money enough for their fees) and return when conditions are right. It is therefore not unusual to find boys and girls of sixteen and seventeen sitting together in the same class with eleven and twelve year olds. A pupil who sits his primary leaving exam three or four times before getting a place in secondary school, and then leaves after a couple of years at secondary school, has usually prevented a more capable pupil from getting a place.

The exam at the end of primary school is set in the Capital and imposed on all children in the country. Not only has the child in the capital got off to a better start with better schools, conditions and teachers, but he or she has far more chance of practising his literacy and numeracy skills as well as his English (or French). Year by year I used to compare the results of schools in the capital with the rural primary schools in my own parish. The former would get twenty Grade A passes out of twenty, whereas the latter would get one or two out of thirty. This makes a mockery out of the exam system (if you ever believed that exams were good for anything in the first place).

In the majority of African countries, only 15 per cent of the 50 per cent who complete the primary school, i.e. for every 100 children starting primary school only 7.5, will go on to some kind of secondary education. Yet instead of seeing Primary school as basic education, and so adapting it for this purpose, it is still seen as a preparation for secondary school. Thus the majority of children who go to school end up with a truncated, unfinished schooling, something they very much resent.

Those who pass the exam will go on to the big, prestige secondary schools built by the colonial administration or by gifts, grants or loans from the West or East when they were in a benevolent mood. They will quite probably be staffed by expatriate teachers, usually ignorant of the country they teach in and often indifferent to its problems, but happy to collect the high salaries that the African Governments together with their own will be paying them. The students, spoonfed and protected in their "educational factories" from the harsh realities of life become disgruntled by the slightest thing, and go on strikes over petty grievances, which sometimes result in mayhem or even death.

The majority of those going to secondary school go into a private institution run more as a business venture than an educational service, receiving little in return for the huge fees that they are invariably charged.

As educational spending is usually much higher, in real terms, on secondary education than it is on primary education (and higher still on tertiary level education than on either secondary or primary) the vast amount of money that the government spends on education is spent on a very small proportion of its population.

Many of the gross stupidities of the old colonial system have been or are being rectified. History and geography, for example are now Africa orientated rather than based on those of the colonial power, and Europe in general. African authors writing in English form the backbone of the English literature syllabus, much to the chagrin of the English literature teachers, and not without reason, as the English is often a much lower standard.

In spite of these efforts at an internal reform of the educational system, the whole style remains bookish, academic and irrelevant to the real needs of the country. Attempts have been made both by the colonial and independent regimes to introduce agriculture and trades into primary school. These have been largely unsuccessful, mainly because the school year rarely coincides with the agricultural calendar, or because a stint in the school garden is more likely to be seen as a punishment than a lesson. After all, children came to school to escape the drudgery of such work. On the other hand, how many carpenters, masons, or tailors can a rural area absorb, and what is the use of teaching these skills to ten and eleven year olds?

One might well say that this is a purely economic argument, and that if these countries could afford universal education the situation would be different. Let us look then, at the effects on the individual and communal psyche of our transplanted educational system.

The first effect is that of alienation. The pupil becomes increasingly a stranger to his own background, the rural, agrarian, peasant society of his parents and forebears. Throughout the sixties this was the aim of education, to provide manpower for industrialisation, commerce and administration. This might not have been a bad thing if there had been jobs for the graduates to go to, if the industrial, commercial and administrative sectors had been growing and able to absorb them, but this is far from being the case. Whereas cities in Europe grew out of industrialisation, there are at best in Africa a few cottage industries, first stage processing of exports or last stage assembly of imported luxury goods for the wealthier classes. It could be said that Amin and people like him had to expel the Asian populations to create places for the unemployed graduates of the educational system which we ourselves helped to found. Any available jobs are usually filled by the children, relatives and friends of those in a position to give them. The chronic unemployment problem is no longer reserved to the primary school graduate, but to the secondary school and even the university graduate, but also the engineers and scientists who cannot find jobs commensurate with the level of their education. If the school gave birth to rising expectations, then the reality has caught up with us in a rising tide of frustration. African cities are marked by unemployment, slums, delinquency and crime.

There can be no doubt that our own school system, whether in the classroom or on the sports field, encourages ambition and competition. A certain amount of these two qualities are virtues, no less a man than Freud said that deferred gratification was one of the hallmarks of civilisation. But when this competition is geared to selecting an elite who will go higher up the educational and social ladder, then the tendency is to make competition and success (defined as getting to the top of whichever particular heap you have chosen) almost ends in themselves. The internal efficiency of our education system is such, that it passes on these very values to its clients. This is one of the major dangers that Nyerere sees in our imported school system.⁴

Elitist and selectivist as it is, pandering to its own products, the formal educational system ignores those who never went to school, those who went but did not complete school and have slumped back into semi-literacy, the adults and other special groups.

⁴ Cf. *Education for Self-reliance*, Dar es Salaam, 1968.

In the end we have a rather grim picture of an elitist system based in favour of the male population, the wealthy and those in the urban areas. It is wasteful, with large enrolments at the lower end of the primary school, thinning out rapidly in the higher classes and in secondary. It is geared to select those who will advance to the next rung up the educational ladder, It alienates its clients from their background, creating hopes and aspirations which it cannot fulfil. Once you have entered the system any return to one's background is seen as a failure. It is bookish, academic, irrelevant to the real needs of the rural areas. It completely by-passes the needs of the rural communities. Adults and those who did not go to school are ignored. In most cases it is turning out unemployable graduates at primary, secondary and tertiary level. And it does all this at great expense.

If this were not bad enough, the picture is further complicated by soaring birth rates and little inclination to family planning. Moreover, declining economies and spiralling inflation are making less and less money available to extend the formal education system, which in the light of what I have said, might not be a bad thing.

The clergy in Africa, expatriate or local, especially those working in the rural parishes are pragmatic men. They see the difficulties stated above and many are endeavouring to respond to them. Many, both priests and nuns are dedicating themselves to helping the "school leavers" find their bearings in rural society. They are trying to take the "rejects" from the formal educational system, and give them an education which will restore their pride in themselves, show them that life in the rural areas need not be quite so unattractive as they thought, and teach them knowledge and skills to help them improve their lives in the rural areas.

Hitherto the accent had been on formal education, primary and secondary schools, so that most parishes follow a pattern; a church, a presbytery, a primary school for boys and another for girls, and in many places a secondary school. Now in many cases you will also find that the latest addition is a small training unit for boys or girls, or both together. In most cases it is founded and run privately for as it is not part of the school system, it is overlooked by Ministries of Education except in the more socialist countries like Tanzania.

The skills taught are almost as varied as the methods used to teach them. The children might be taught how to raise improved breeds of chickens, rabbits, pigs, goats or cows or any of the domestic fowl or animals in their particular area. Better production of existing crops often goes hand in hand with attempts to introduce new crops. Carpentry, masonry, tailoring might be taught not only to help people acquire specific skills to earn a living, but also to help the peasant improve the quality of his life. The peasant is the

jack of all trades. He builds and repairs his own house, and most of the utensils that he needs; he needs bits and pieces of a whole host of skills and trades.

Girls, as one would expect, in the rural areas at least, are more interested in such things as homecraft and homecare. Cooking, sewing, making and mending clothes, looking after children, hygiene, arts and crafts, first aid, growing vegetables and other crops, as well as looking after small animals, everything that they consider necessary to be good daughters today and mothers tomorrow. Of course, in some places this is already changing, as more and more girls wish to be clerks, community development officers etc. and play a bigger role in public life at village level.

In general however, a certain pattern emerges, boys and young men tend to be taught animal and crop husbandry, and rural trades. Girls tend to learn more the skills necessary to running and managing a home and family.

Methods used vary. Because of the Church's familiarity with the school system, mini-technical or agricultural schools have taken shape in many places in Africa, with boarders, a farm, workshops, dormitories, a syllabus and a curriculum. The danger with this type of organisation is that like formal school it tends to lose its identity with the rural surroundings and degenerate into another purely academic institution. The pupil may well earn a certificate, and as likely as not head for the nearest town, defeating the whole purpose of the enterprise.

Similarly, the girls might be organised in a school-like structure, doing all their own cooking, cleaning, growing food, raising funds through the sale of their arts and crafts. Again there is always a danger, that armed with a certificate, they might drift off to become well-paid servants in the homes of the wealthy Africans in the towns. Thus an educational process that was set up to free the mind, could become a school for servants.

But this new-found education takes even more unconventional forms. It could be a carpenter at a mission with a group of apprentices and helpers around him, doing maintenance for the mission and the schools. On the other hand it could be a well-organised, efficiently run, cottage industry in a forest, using the locally cut timber to manufacture items of furniture, but this time cut and prepared with the help of machinery.

Sometimes it may not look like an educational project at all. In Uganda, for example, one parish priest has twenty-five groups of tomato growers, who are learning everything from literacy and numeracy to modern crop husbandry methods, and yet there are no formal classes, no exercise books, no blackboards. Another is settling young men on small farms where they work and live together in a kibbutz-style life, using modern farming techniques, learning to look and plan ahead, keep the books and drive and

maintain tractors. Yet again, another is helping his people drain marshland and swamp, bringing in new land for cultivation, eradicating the mosquito and tsetse fly and with them malaria and sleeping sickness (perhaps upsetting the ecology, we will have to wait and see), and providing irrigation for year round cropping. Results have been so good that the communities involved have had to learn how to store, market and keep records of their harvests.

In all this activity, the accent is on responding to an immediate and relevant need, with skills and a methodology suited to circumstances and those taking part. It is thus highly adaptable to local situations and changes in those local situations. Instead of alienating the clients from their own background and offering them impossible hopes, it helps integrate them into their own background and improve on it, making it more attractive, and giving them more hope for the future. To a large extent it depends upon the co-operation of the community from child to adult.

In comparison to the formal education system, costs are relatively low, in many cases they generate their own funds and are self-supporting. This is particularly evident in the farming projects which tend to reduplicate themselves, thus the profits from one farm go to help start another in a different area.

There is no need for a centralised administration and bureaucracy, its very decentralisation helps keep it responsive to local needs.

What is most important is that it can be a community activity, with the participation of all, whether adults or children. This avoids the situation in the formal education system where schooling is reserved for children, and "adult education" is a worn out, dried up effort at functional adult literacy detached from the realities of life.

Thus outside the formal education system, there is growing a whole network of new ideas and educational processes, supplementing and complementing it, relevant to real needs, adaptable, low-cost, integrating, using local material, and personnel. It educates not just children but also adults, usually in a community structure where they all learn and work together and not in isolation from each other. Many pin their hopes for future rural development on non-formal education.

In spite of the success of the non-formal education, and the conspicuous lack of success of the formal education system in Africa today, in educating the masses in a relevant, meaningful way, non-formal education will continue to be of marginal interest to governing bodies, civil or ecclesiastical. The reasons are not difficult to see. The formal education system is the means whereby the members of the ruling elite have achieved their status and aim to prolong it, using the system to extend the privileges of their

own peer group, at the same time as educating others to believe that this is the only way, and that there are no alternatives. Freire suggests that all education is political, just as he suggests that the only model that the oppressed have is that of the oppressors, and it should not be surprising that the oppressed either wish to join the oppressors, or imitate them after they have taken their places.⁵ Furthermore the formal system is still seen as the major means of social mobility for those who wish to “advance” or “better” themselves, or for parents who wish a “better” future for their children. Thus it will continue to receive the lion’s share of money and attention.

Non-formal education serves best those who have never been to school, the drop-outs, the rural or urban masses, who docilely follow their leaders, or are lost in the basic struggle for survival. The rural masses are powerless, particularly where elections are unheard of, or where they are turned into farce through bribery and corruption, as is the case in many African countries today. But even if there was a real choice between parties, or candidates as in the case of a one party system, the lack of meaningful and universal education would simply mean that those who promised the most would get the most votes.

Here and there however, there are voices being raised in favour of the replacement of the formal educational system by an alternative based on a network of non-formal educational processes such as we have outlined above. Apparently Tanzania’s President Nyerere is one such advocate at least of granting a greater share of resources to non-formal education. This raises quite another question; one wonders whether once the dead hand of bureaucracy gets hold of it, and tries to create a system out of it, its relevance and adaptability to new and changing situations might be the first major casualty, thus rendering it as ineffectual as the formal system itself.

Come what may until we realise the place, role and style of non-formal education, any attempt at a basic, universal education, relevant to the needs of the masses in rural Africa, will quite simply remain a pipe-dream.

⁵ Paolo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: Penguin Books, 1972.