

Empowering Teachers to Cope with Socio-Economic Diversities of the 21st Century in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The 21st century is a period identified with much diversity such as socio-economic status in the area of education. Formal education sector is now universal in some countries in Sub-Sahara Africa given the advances in technology, democratisation, human rights and globalisation. This accessibility has brought a number of dilemmas especially to the school teacher and pedagogy. This article adopts a critical-conceptual approach to analyse the socio-economic setbacks and discusses the ways of transforming the teacher and teaching in the 21st century. The article concludes that the teacher is still a powerful force in the transformational wheel of education and socio-economic development, and should therefore be given opportunities to transform and shape the direction education is taking in this era of socio-economic upheavals in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Introduction

Education systems in some Sub-Sahara countries are increasingly serving more diverse group of students. This obviously translates to a society with superior economic, social, and political developments given that there is a wider base of highly educated public. With diverse groups, and especially the marginalized in sub-Saharan Africa - the poor, those with disabilities, the slum dwellers, refugees and those deprived of their freedom - accessing education on a wider scale means that the traditional notions of a teacher and teaching have to assume a paradigm shift to accommodate the educational needs of all groups. Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) argue that with a wider populace connected to educational opportunities, fears still abound as to the challenges that the marginalized are likely to face due to the exclusivity of most educational systems. One of these challenges could be the inadequate preparation of the traditional teacher to

accept and transform with the socio-economic and other diversities associated with the marginalized.

Millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa are accessing education due to efforts of Education for All (1990) and the Millennium Development Goals (2000). Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) (2009) confirms that in Kenya for example, the primary school net enrolment rates have assumed a steady incremental trend from 76.4% in 2002 to 91.6% in 2007; secondary net enrolment rates from 17.8% in 2002 to 24.2% in 2007; and primary to secondary transition rates from 41.7% in 2002 to 60% in 2007. These are indicators that many children are currently accessing education than previous cohorts. To adjust to the increased numbers, school systems have resorted in to hiring contract and volunteer teachers. The question to ask is whether such teachers are adequately prepared to handle the challenges increased diversity brings to the system.

Current challenges faced by teachers

Beginning of the 21st century has opened up a new spate of challenges to teachers and teaching styles, thereby throwing most of the traditional pedagogical paradigms in disarray. Due to globalization, teachers have to grapple with issues ranging from child rights, single parenthood, incurable pestilences and technology advancement among others. Pertinent amongst the predicaments facing society in developing countries is the twin concept of divorce and single parenthood – factors that have divergent and numerous roots and bedevilling all facets of households and their respective socio-economic status. Narratives about the causes of single parenthood and divorce in the contemporary society heavily lean on the socio-political factors of war (Achoka & Okoth, 2007) and socio-economic factors ranging from household earning

differentials, costs of living to deaths (Larchick, 2004; Hartley & Dobebe, 2009; Hernes, 2009). The resultant effects and manifestations of single parenthood and divorce are far reaching as far as handling of learners and the parents from these types of family backgrounds is concerned. The intricacy is well captured by Holmes, Holmes, Herrington, & Kritsonis (2009):

Never in history has the raising of children been more troublesome that (*sic*) in today's stressful and pragmatic society. The increase in parents working multiple jobs outside the home to make ends meet, unfulfilled marriages ending in divorce, unemployment leading to poverty and homelessness, all play a role in taking children into an endless cycle of quick fixes that include violence, stealing, alcohol, and drugs. (p.6)

Some school children get readily exposed by their parents to society's pervasive constituents (Njoroge & Mosha 2010) and learn the available "bad manners" from both their peers and some of the permissive parents (Kibiego, 2010). These are some of the levels of cultural mismatches that some children carry to school – a school that is soundly equipped with rules, motto, vision, mission and goals that are absolutely conflicting to the aspirations of the 'uncultured' student. The bulk of correctional measures rest with the teacher and methods available of instilling and sustaining learning in the child whose behaviour the jury has vindicated as wanting. The question to ask is how such teachers will conduct themselves while at the same time ensuring that the affected learners are redeemed of the ills acquired in society and gets to gather sufficient knowledge to acquire survival skills.

Secondly, pestilences such as HIV/AIDS and their interconnected complications are particularly rife in the 21st century. Disease has the ability of significantly distorting the learning outcomes of school-going children (World Bank, 2002; Glewwe & Kremer, 2005; World Bank (2009). In effect, the on-off attendance of learners occasioned by the pandemics is a factor that the school teacher is supposed to put into serious consideration. What are the expectations of a teacher who

handles sickly and absent-prone students? What skills and attitudes should the teacher consider as paramount for such a learner, apart from the small amount of knowledge that the student will derive from the school set-up?

The cumulative and intergenerational aftermaths resulting from disease are not only weak learning outcomes but also poor general economic performance of the affected economy. Put rather succinctly, the World Bank (2009) says that “infectious diseases are hobbling [sub-Saharan, Africa] SSA’s economic performance” leading to “large youth cohorts with limited job prospects” (p. 32). In such impoverished economies, the consequences are more disease, more poverty and even more illiteracy (Alubo, 2004; Murunga, 2004).

Thirdly, various scholars have acknowledged child labour and child trafficking as modern day socio-economic challenges that impact negatively on the achievement of learners in schools (UNESCO, 2005; Nyaga, Kimani, Mwabu & Kimenyi (2004); UN-Habitat (2003). And just in line with the foregoing issue of disease, it is prudent to note that the linkages between child labour and disease affects education demand by lowering school enrolment. For example, AIDS orphans dropout rate increase as the children opt to engage in economic generating undertakings (child labour) and even head households. The rise in child labour and child-headed households following the death or incapacitation of the parent prevents many school age children from attending school.

Even though cases of child labour seem to abound everywhere (in coffee farms, mining regions, sisal estates etc), it is also apparent that a huge amount of these instances take place in urban areas and in the slums where labour is forced and bonded (UN-Habitat, 2003). Symptoms of labour-engaged children such as sleeping in class, daydreaming, truancy and so forth are pointers

to the tough challenges confronting teachers in the modern classroom. Child rights issues as removal of corporal punishment have complicated the way teachers should handle such truancy. Elaborate pedagogical strategies are therefore needed to wean back the learner. The onus therefore falls on the teacher to exploit his/her innate and trained capacities to sufficiently, if not completely, improve on the learners' potentials as a learner and not a breadwinner.

Fourthly, due to the struggle to have education wholly inclusive, trends are that numerous learners with special needs are now finding their way into institutions of learning than ever before. UNESCO (2005) identifies children with special needs as “children with situational disadvantages due to malnutrition; child labour; and other factors associated with poverty; physical, mental, or emotional impairments; and learning difficulties” (p.130). But as the clamour for inclusiveness of education gathers momentum, the harsh reality on the ground is that few universities offer even “a single course directed at teachers or leaders of at-risk or delinquent youth” (Price, 2009, p.4). Teachers who work with youth school settings typically receive no specialized training intended to equip them to serve these often difficult-to-teach students in the context of a typical instructional settings. Yet UNESCO (2005) estimates that as many as 50 per cent of school-age children in the least developed countries may need specialized educational responses. It is therefore needful that the 21st century teacher reengineers themselves to handle these types of children.

Paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches

With the multiplicity of socio-economic problems affecting the school setup in the 21st century, a paradigm shift is required to re-invent the teacher and re-tool pedagogy. This study posits that pedagogy should now be repackaged in three fundamental spheres of influence to include a) life

skills, b) experiential learning and exchange programmes and c) research skills and knowledge management.

Life skills: It is vital that education become relevant for the learners it is meant to serve. The curricula adopted and the manner of its delivery should be relevant to the present and anticipated future needs of the learners. Indeed, it should thoroughly draw a parallel with information that the community needs due to circumstances changed by the socio-economic crises of the 21st century. According to Kirk (2009), it is high time that pedagogy (and curricula at large) adopted such spheres of influence as life skills and peace education all the way from basic to university education. Drawing from the harsh realities of what war can do to children, the Ugandan education system, for example, has included life skills in its curriculum (Kirk 2009). This is with the full knowledge that children trooping back to school bring with them various levels of ‘negative’ cultural capital such as permissive sexual liaisons experienced at war fronts and refugee centres. It is therefore rather essential that pedagogy addresses the immediate dilemma of young scholars versus safe sex and HIV/AIDS prevention, and more especially for the “refugee students whose precarious socio-economic status may compound the age and gender-based vulnerabilities” (Kirk, 2009, p.79). Life skills, together with human rights education and peace education, may be integrated within a basic education syllabus or may exist as detached programmes, and should not necessarily be examinable.

UNESCO (2009) equally argues that instead of equipping a narrowly selected elite for further academic education (and thereby fail the majority who wallow in the socio-economic quagmire), pedagogy should prepare an entire age group for integration into adult society by infusing in them “life skills, key competencies and citizenship education” (p.18). Moreover, entire age

groups should be endowed with life skills in the form of core generic skills that will ground them into the world of work. Learners with a broader perception of problem-solving skills, civic and citizenship education, team work are well grounded to engage in accepting the dilemmas presented by the socio-economic stressors. Put more succinctly, transforming pedagogy requires training teachers to develop skills for the school leaver to come out with the appropriate profile to enter the world of work or go for higher studies. Sutherland-Addy (2008) has equally found that life skills acquisition amongst girls especially in lower secondary school has the externality benefit of contributing to a lowering of their fertility rates since such girls remain in school much longer. Moreover they are better equipped to contribute to “better family care and better nutritional habits” (p.23)

Mwaka, Kegode & Kyalo (2009) state that with the phenomenal increase in socio-economic diversities, pedagogical environments, including the key players (teachers) should be tidied up. They argue that the emotional and psycho-social wellbeing of teachers should be correlated with life skills that boost self-esteem, good health and personal safety. Moreover, other scholars add that the concern at stake now is that school leaders, especially teachers, need a set of skills that amount to cultural capital, social capital and productive life. This, according to Gauthier (2006), is an indispensable tool box that is an answer to every teacher’s life dilemma since to every human being, “living is ultimately what is at stake” (p. 78)

It should also be understood that what constitutes quality of education is shifting, just as socio-economic perspectives also are shifting. Pigozzi (2006) argues that whereas conventional definitions looked at quality as incorporating literacy, numeracy and life skills, the shift currently has placed educational quality as “ processes [that] require well-trained teachers who are able to use learner-centred teaching...to address issues of disparity and discrimination with regard to, for

example, culture, language and gender” (p. 45). This perception is similarly held by Tsiwo-Chigubu (2005) who argues that teachers require hands-on skills to make students know the truth about themselves, to learn and never to feel like victims of the socio-economic dilemmas.

Experiential learning and exchange programmes: Coping with the 21st century predicaments in the school setup may also require external benchmarking that comes in form of experiential learning and exchange programmes. Benchmarks are ideal in estimating what has been covered and what needs to be done in comparison with similar international efforts. Kirk (2009) posits that the practice of immersing oneself in a completely new culture and language is more valuable both for the subject and the hosts. Teachers can satisfactorily acquire new levels of diplomacy and integrity consequently becoming ‘reverse’ ambassadors back home since as Kirk (2009) argues, part of the value of the exchange is the new ways the teacher brings to the students and the different cultures that he/she consequently endows the learners with. Experiential learning and exchange programmes are sources of components of diversity and authenticity among teachers so that teachers are able employ a multiplicity of strategies in handling the different learners and their socio-economic disparities.

According to UN (2010), successful exchange programme such as Erasmus in the EU, Fulbright in the US and Chevening in the UK have a positive role in turning around both teachers and students by equipping them with leadership roles and arousing in them patriotism on top of relevant values such as work and personal effort. In other words, such programmes provide a fertile forum for positive cross-cultural interaction with the potential of improving both individuals and economies. They are essential bridges of understanding amongst students from diverse countries.

Tranaeus (2006) argues that one salient role of academic exchanges is its ability to vitalise educational institutions and at the same time open them up to brand new ideas. In essence, networks are fostered through student and researcher mobility across countries necessitating attraction of talent and building public diplomacy. Teachers with brand new ideas acquired via academic exchanges will have the capacity to diplomatically approach the many socio-economic problems. Using the knowledge and experience gathered from exchanges, they will be able to formulate methodology of handling schools that have experienced cases such as drug and sexual abuse, poverty and other social issues.

Currently, a wide range of students and their mentors (the teachers) constantly feel isolated by the worthlessness of credentials attained in traditional classrooms because of the inability of the credentials to secure jobs for the students in sub-Saharan Africa. Ruzzi & Kraemer (2006) hypothesize that greater solutions lie in experientialism; that there is a need for interplay between academic curricula and community-based learning such that students are kept engaged and focussed on the applications of knowledge. In this way, “there is often a specific career focus, guidance and opportunities for career exploration” (p.31). With career exploration, there will be opportunities of re-orienting learners under the guidance of the teacher so that whatever skills learners acquire help them both at job and generally in life. Knowledge should not only be seen as leading to employment. It should also be an empowerment tool to fit the learner into society.

Research skills and knowledge management: Hernes (2006) correlates development with the modes in which knowledge is produced and used. He argues that “the capacity a country has to acquire, use and transmit knowledge” (p.44) will be the yardstick of development. Put rather plainly, development is synonymous to research and research is life. Whereas it may be presupposed that research is the preserve of the academia in the universities, it is rather ripe that

school teachers stretch and put to extensive use their research skills to unearth solutions to the innumerable psycho-social and socio-economic tribulations bedeviling the school set up. It should be the interest of every school teacher to investigate the dilemma behind students attaining poor grades despite good learning environments; absenteeism despite all the available resources like school buses; incompleteness of homework despite the availability of well-lit homes and school; lack of interest to read books despite numerous libraries; engaging in drugs, illicit sex, taking alcohol, truancy, and so on and so forth. Tsiwo-Chigubu (2005) ,while interrogating teaching methodologies in parts of the US schools, argues that the best trick is to engage the mind-body relationships, investigating and creating models (through research) that would help learners come up with strategies to cope with aggression and get empowered with high self esteem.

Teacher quality and teacher capacity building can well be achieved through rigorous involvement in the realms of inquiry. It is argued that teacher quality has a powerful effect on student outcomes (World Bank, 2008). The chain effect of teacher quality is corroborated by Dasgupta, Narayan & Skoufias (2009) when they argue that higher teacher quality leads to significantly higher satisfaction in the learners.

But the quality of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa has been found to be affected by issues such as uncoordinated transfers, weak incentives, little supervision and absenteeism (Too & Katam, 2009; Glewwe & Kremer, 2005). Eventually, learners from diverse backgrounds do not entirely benefit from the wealth of prominent teachers thereby compounding the efforts to redeem learners who portray the earlier identified psycho-social and socio-economic diversities. Efforts at capacity building and the development of professional capacities of teachers is a worthy cause.

This is meant to improve the social care of marginal groups and realise the needs of social groups that stand at risk of further exclusion. In fact, teachers require first-hand knowledge about the disenfranchised groups of learners since these groups are at a great risk of losing out on key learning benefits. It is important to gather knowledge about children from slums, pastoralist communities, orphanages, and from communities ravaged by disease and famine. Scientific study of these groups will give the teacher an upper hand in tackling their relative socio-economic dilemmas. Murimba (2006) puts it more precisely when he argues that teaching staff require to be equipped with hands on training in skills related to “design and implementation of large-scale research studies, the design and use of data collection instruments, computer-based management and analysis of data, policy analysis and development and report preparation” (p. 127). And when results of such studies are shared through teacher exchange and online, a wider group of teachers will have the opportunity of being equipped both at the school level and at the national level.

Conclusion

This study has presented a theoretical discussion on the challenges that the modern school teacher is faced with. Problems range from handling children from broken homes, sexually abused children, children with chronic illness, truants, those with a variety of malnutrition disorders and many more. With the strengthening of the children’s rights act, the 21st century in sub-Saharan Africa is a hotbed of social issues that can easily derail the efforts of teachers. The study has therefore proposed a variety of technical approaches, among them, life skills training, experientialism, and research and inquiry at the secondary and primary school level. In other words, the whole aspect of pedagogy has to shift with these shifting and emerging educational challenges.

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