

# Choosing the Right School: Redefining Performance in the Contemporary Kenyan Educational System

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**Abstract:** *The principal aim of education is to promote good citizenry. However, the general perspective of educational system in Kenya today seeks to have an academically excellent student. This explains why every Kenyan parent or guardian seeks to have his or her child get a place in a top “performing” school. It is arguable that this trend sets us away from the national educational goals. There is therefore need to re-examine and redefine performance in educational practice and theory.*

*This article adopts a critical-conceptual approach to analyse the relevant benchmarks that would define the “right” school that consequently ensures performance. Overall, three issues are presented. First, the national goals are redefined as the foundation of education in Kenya. Secondly, “performance” is discussed in the light of these goals. Finally, the article presents practical interventions that will guarantee that each and every school becomes a centre for holistic development of the learner. The article concludes that the Kenyan educational system needs to ensure that schools show commitment to achieving the national goals of education, otherwise schools will put the goals in a closet in the guise of “performing well” academically.*

*Key words: Education, Performance*

## Introduction

Scholars have defined education in different ways. Shiundu and Omulando (1992) define education as acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for an individual to take up his/her role in the society. The implication of this definition is that an educational institution, such as a school, should focus not only on imparting knowledge, but also on imparting relevant skills and attitudes necessary for an individual’s positive contribution to the society.

The general perspective of education system in Kenya today seeks to have an academically excellent student. This perhaps explains why every Kenyan parent and/or guardian wishes his or her child to be admitted to a top ‘performing’ school. The Kenyan educational system appears to put more emphasis on academic performance, developing the cognitive domain at the expense of the psychomotor and the affective domains. The local press (at the announcement of results, and even days before results are announced) will focus on academic performance, an indication that the educational system does not embrace implementation of the national educational goals, and does not show commitment to the evaluation of the goals. The authors have observed that participation in co-curricular activities is not fully supported by most schools, which is clear evidence to this. Getting a vacancy in schools with track record of good academic performance is not easy in Kenya. The Kenyan educational system is exam-oriented, and cases of exam cheating are on the increase – for example in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education

(KCPE), 1835 candidates had their results cancelled in 2008 while in 1904 candidates had their results cancelled in 2009 for cheating (The Daily Nation, 30 December 2009:2).

The national goals of education in Kenya as explained by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE, 2002) are as follows:

1. To foster nationalism, patriotism and promote national unity,
2. To promote the social, economic, technological and industrial needs for national development,
3. To promote individual development and self-fulfilment,
4. To promote sound moral and religious values,
5. To promote social equality and responsibility,
6. To promote respect for and development of Kenya's rich and varied cultures,
7. To promote international consciousness and foster positive attitudes towards other nations,
8. To promote positive attitudes towards good health and environmental protection.

The above goals are never evaluated under the Kenyan examination process, and this probably explains why teachers would devote most of their time in curricular activities.

This article seeks to address the following questions: (a) what is education? and (b) Is education knowledge in basic skills, academics, technical, discipline, citizenship? In its focus on good academic performance and putting on notice teachers whose schools are not performing well or whose subjects are not well performed, the Kenyan education system seems to say only academic basics are important and that is based on collecting knowledge without understanding its value: this does not mean that academic basics have no value but their acquisition should be coupled with development of the entire personality of the learner. How about the processing of knowledge, using inspiration, visionary ambitions, creativity, risk, ability to bounce back from failure, motivation? Most educational institutions focusing on academic performance do not seem to consider skills associated with understanding the value of knowledge. There is a huge disconnected gap. The content of the various subjects should be so delivered as to enhance mastery through appropriate methods that do not encourage memorization. Such methods should be heuristic, as opposed to being expository, hence the need to allow the learners to participate in both curricular and co-curricular activities.

It appears from this description that education comprises of knowledge in basic skills, academics, technical, discipline, citizenship, the processing of knowledge, using inspiration, visionary ambitions, creativity, risk, ability to bounce back from failure, motivation and more (Schofield, 1999). This would be ideal and sounds good, but "all" is not possible where performance must be measured. Only what can be measured will be selected and the measuring tool is the written test. This implies that anyone who does not have the ability to put clear thoughts on paper is labelled a failure. In this case, all natural skills, including knowledge processing, do not count. As such, what is exercised grows stronger, what is ignored stays dormant. The classroom exercises and the collection of academic materials are never taken into consideration and this leaves out all other natural skills in the closet. (high stake tests have been criticised in many places around the world because they only measure one dimension).

Some achievers in life never finish school but they succeed because they know how to research, collect information for a selected project and process knowledge. Classroom environment does not work that way because it focuses on the collection of knowledge without a clear purpose, other than high-class grades. If the purpose does not motivate the pupils but merely pleases the teacher, then there is nothing to process outside of memorizing answers for test. The typical student is academically challenged while being motivation starved. The lack of motivation implies the lack of knowledge processing skills. The typical learner will have a professional skill that supplies life's basic needs. .

A written test does not measure intelligence or ability; it does not measure how the mind processes information, how motivating experiences develop persistence, or how the mind sorts out instincts, opinions, evaluations, possibilities, alternatives (Ediger, 1999). It only measures knowledge and not other processes related to acquisition and application of knowledge, especially in one's life. This implies that knowledge by itself has no value because it is like a dictionary filled with words. Words by themselves have no value because it is the process of stringing them together that gives them value. How they are strung together determines the level of value.

Our current education system encourages rote memorization of the content. . When students have memorized selected knowledge, then they will be given a one-day test, based on dictionary definition which will influence employment opportunity for the rest of their life. Currently, the typical employer in Kenya appears to want employees with dictionary knowledge???, not visionaries (Schofield, 1999). This is seen in the practice of job advertisements, which stipulate only academic qualifications as criteria for eligibility. In addition, being visionary cannot be measured and no form of certification is issued for this trait. Such practice only promotes emphasis on academic performance, hence the focus on academic performance by schools. In his outline of six myths about the foundations of modern education, Orr (1991) cites that the purpose of education is that of giving you the means for upward mobility and success and identifies this as the mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade. Natural skills are not considered. Knowledge only has value when used with a process and process in an artificial environment is not predictable or measurable.

Who can argue against high academic standards? High academic standards are not a bad thing; the major concern of educators is the focus on text book knowledge at the expense of conceptual knowledge. It appears that society has bought the education establishment's belief that every learner can, and must, learn academics in classroom environments before given opportunity. With no opposing forces, society has embraced the opinion that academic achievement is the only path to success. Some people view this as right, whilst others view this as wrong. Parents are influenced by the demands of the society and they want their children to reflect the ideal for success, that is, academics, becoming a polished professional, achieving a status that can change the world. Parents want the education system to maintain high standards so their children have the opportunity to achieve this ideal. Although this sounds great in theory, however the problem is that this standard robs learners' job skills they need to enter the real world (Thomas, 2000).

This explains why it is necessary to re-define performance in the contemporary Kenyan educational system.

### **National Goals of Education in Kenya**

The national goals of education in Kenya are, in essence, the foundation of education in Kenya. They focus on individual and societal development and cover more than acquisition of knowledge; this means that their evaluation is beyond what written tests can reveal. Education has a strong social dimension; that is, education is perceived to involve the participation of the entire community in one way or the other; and the way education is conducted at any level would equally have far reaching implications for the entire Kenyan society (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2007). In brief, the goals depict education as a social endeavour and not an individual enterprise. Secondly, effective teaching and social responsiveness of the teachers are key to the realisation of these goals. Whether we are talking about national unity or international consciousness, we require competence, for example, we require citizens who are competent communicators in English language as it will provide the medium of communication among the Kenyan linguistic communities and also with the neighbouring countries and the wider international community. The national goals require instructional methodologies that encourage development of heuristic skills. Implicit here is the need to allow learners to experience and discover as they learn, and engage them in interactions beyond the classroom. This calls for a shift in focus from passing in national examinations to excelling in other areas a learner is good in; of course the confidence and achievement ensuing from excelling in what a learner can best do results in good academic standards.

The national goals of education, if achieved, can result in a liberated individual who can serve his/her society and enhance national development. However, the curriculum context in Kenya does not guarantee equality in the achievement of these goals. The context is characterised by a number of things.

First, there are regional, cultural, and economic disparities among schools; the Kenyan schools experience a differentiated resource endowment in terms of human and material resources. In terms of interactions, some schools are “inaccessible” by even the most important education officers while in terms of development there are disparities in infrastructure, rendering some schools “hardship” areas. Secondly, there are cases of social stratification witnessed in Kenya as schools are classified as national, public, or private. This form of stratification affects schools’ and learners’ individual development as it influences the quality of instruction and interactions in the schools.

A third characteristic, which is particularly significant to a learner’s holistic development is the evaluation system in Kenya; it only recognizes academic skills and students’ intelligence is measured by this standard. Non-academic skills and associated intelligence are ignored under the Kenyan examination system – they are not evaluated. The commitment to achieving the national goals of education cannot be ascertained as none of them can be measured, and no measurable results are required for any of the goals. Finally, schools in Kenya are characterized by mass enrolment; Kenyan schools register high enrolment rates and the task of individual instruction is overwhelming to the teachers, whose numbers are so low compared to the number of learners. This renders evaluation of the national goals of education difficult, except at national academic

level, implying that written tests are the only measure of performance. Quantity education, as opposed to quality education is thus offered as teachers strive to teach large numbers and focus on academic performance. The notion of a top ‘performing’ school in the Kenyan context is therefore one that needs careful scrutiny if overall development of a learner is to be achieved.

### **Redefining Performance**

In the light of the national goals of education required to be implemented in a curriculum context of schools experiencing extreme disparities, there is need to redefine performance.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2000) defines performance as how well or badly one does something, or how well or badly something works. Similarly, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2002) defines performance as manner or quality of functioning. In relation to education, here defined as the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for an individual to take up his role in the society, performance would then focus on all aspects focusing on the holistic development of an individual. Implicit here is the need to evaluate the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes and then rate the scores to be able to tell who or what is or is not working well. The contemporary Kenyan definition of performance is evidently the achievement of the year’s Kenya National Examination Council objectives, which is purely academic. This is not a true measure of excellence as the tests do not measure other natural skills such as using inspiration, visionary ambitions, creativity, risk, ability to bounce back from failure, motivation, and creativity. Looking at the goals of education in Kenya, one would note that they are aimed at having a learner who has gone through the education system develop in all aspects and able to face the challenges in the society. However, there is no form of evaluation focusing on each aspect of the goals. One then would doubt the criteria used to brand certain schools as “top performing schools” only rated on the academic/cognitive mode. There is however the dilemma arising from *credentialism* – where one’s credentials (academic) are used as a criterion for selection in the job market and further studies both locally and internationally. This should not be misconstrued to mean that academic achievers may not have other inherent qualities that make them to be successful. The danger may lie in the possible neglect of learners lacking in intellectual skills but abounding in other natural skills needing to be nurtured.

Achievers all spheres of life use inspiration and motivation to overcome barriers. Teaching to the test does not inspire or motivate anyone, memorizing does not inspire a love to learn, in fact, it does just the opposite, it turns off the desire to learn. Education’s goal should be to develop a love to learn that stays with students throughout a lifetime.

What can be considered as quality education? Quality education is custom design that addresses the unique abilities of each student and has a positive emotional experience. Custom education evaluates natural talent and how the student learns. This is why home schooled students out perform classroom students as parents learn what works and does not work, then focus on what works (Orr, 1991). With this method, students develop a love to learn and learning becomes a lifelong process.

Knowing how to learn, search for, and acquire information is more valuable to learners than being a learner-of-facts. When a skill becomes obsolete in a few years, then other methods of

learning are required. A person cannot keep going back to the classroom every time new technology replaces current skill. We need continuous education to revive our skills after leaving school, which is more valuable than examination-oriented education. Life-long learning requires the ability to learn without dependency on instructors, which is, learning how to learn. From the above discussion, the authors suggest that performance of schools should be gauged on the following criteria.

The first criterion is the level to which schools teach learners how to learn; this means that performance should not be measured on how learners 'give back' what they have received but on how they create new knowledge, on the intellectual independence that they display. The second criterion is the level to which learners' self esteem is boosted so that employers can train the learners, even in the blue-collar world; the learners may not come out of an education system 'market ready' but with a self esteem one can work on. The third criterion is the level to which learners' creative freedom is enhanced; this means that learner performance should not be limited to the confines of academic performance but that the learner should be encouraged to have wider horizons on what he can do best.

The fourth criterion is the level to which learners are given a vision and helped to discover their natural talent, thus giving them opportunity to develop it. Such a criterion, if fully adopted, would see learners engage in limitless activities and innovations that would not only change and shape the learner's life but also change the status of a nation. The fifth criterion is the level to which all the above national goals of education are achieved at appropriate points; this would ensure that learner evaluation is done on a 'level ground' and that the evaluation system exercises fairness. Finally, the sixth criterion is the commitment of the school to develop the learners in all other dimensions other than the cognitive; such a criterion would enable schools produce what has been popularly referred to as an 'all-round' child. This also helps the education system to serve its purpose – providing solutions to the societal needs. An all round child is able to responsibly take up his role in the society, but a child who has a bias towards academic performance only functions on the academic realms but should it be forgotten that he/she is a social being existing in a society with milliard needs, conditions, and expectations? It is therefore clear, from the foregoing, that certain interventions would need to be put in place to complement certification on academic grounds.

## **Proposed Interventions**

This paper proposes the following interventions to complement certification on academic grounds:

### ***Re-focusing or re-orientation in education***

There is need to move focus from exam-orientation to overall development of the individual. This does not mean that teachers abandon academic work and focus on co-curricular activities, but they should focus on both and realise that both reinforce each other. There is also need for national mobilisation and sensitisation on goal-oriented education - education should be given for its own sake, not solely as a means to gainful employment but as a means to overall development of the learners. Evaluation systems in school should focus seriously on all domains; this will enhance participation in co-curricular activities and inculcation of discipline. This way

education will be used to develop the right attributes in the learner, and it is suggested that the move from mixed to single-gender schools be given attention as it denies the learner the opportunity to interact with members of the opposite sex. In addition, it is suggested that benefits of democratized assessment be fed into high stake examinations to allow the latter capture certain strengths of learners who lack intellectual skills.

***Improving all aspects of the quality of education, and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills***

Quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of learners (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living. Evidence over the past decade has shown that efforts to expand enrolment must be accompanied by attempts to enhance educational quality if children are to be attracted to school, stay there, and achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Scarce resources have frequently been used for expanding systems with insufficient attention to quality improvement in areas such as teacher training and materials development. Recent assessments of learning achievement in some countries have shown that a sizeable percentage of children are acquiring only a fraction of the knowledge and skills they are expected to master. What learners are meant to learn has often not been clearly defined, well-taught or accurately assessed. Governments and all other partners must work together to ensure education of quality for all, regardless of gender, wealth, location, language or ethnic origin. Successful education programmes require: healthy, well-nourished and motivated students; well-trained teachers and active learning techniques; adequate facilities and learning materials; and an environment that not only encourages learning but is welcoming, gender-sensitive, healthy and safe. They also require a clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, attitudes and, values; participatory governance and management; and respect for and engagement with local communities and cultures.

School systems need to focus on evaluating their visions and missions and clearly translate them for both their teachers and learners; they also need to change their perceptions of the learners – as consumers, clients, or participants.

***Develop responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management***

The experience of the past decade has underscored the need for better governance of education systems in terms of efficiency, accountability, transparency and flexibility so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continuously changing needs of learners (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). Reform of educational management is urgently needed - to move from highly centralised, standardised, and command-driven forms of management to more decentralised and participatory decision-making, implementation, and monitoring at lower levels of accountability. These processes must be buttressed by a management information system that benefits from both new technologies and community participation to produce timely, relevant, and accurate information. The following are useful recommendations: ensure that decentralisation does not lead to inequitable distribution of resources; make more efficient use of existing human and financial resources; and improve capacities for managing diversity, disparity,

and change. Other recommendations are: integrate programmes within education and strengthen their convergence with those of other sectors, especially health, labour, and social welfare; and provide training for school leaders and other education personnel. Such recommendations, if fully adopted, would positively influence leadership and management of schools and ensure good performance as defined in this paper.

***Create safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning, with clearly defined levels of achievement for all***

The quality of learning is and must be at the heart of education. All stakeholders - teachers and students, parents and community members, health workers and local government officials - should work together to develop environments conducive to learning. To offer education of good quality, educational institutions and programmes should be adequately and equitably resourced, with the core requirements of safe, environmentally friendly, and easily accessible facilities; well-motivated and professionally competent teachers; and books, other learning materials and technologies that are context specific, cost effective, and available to all learners. Learning environments should also be healthy, safe, and protective. This should include adequate water and sanitation facilities, access to or linkages with health and nutrition services, policies and codes of conducts that enhance physical, psycho-social and emotional health of teachers and learners, and education content and practices leading to knowledge, attitudes, values, and life skills needed for self-esteem, good health, and personal safety.

There is an urgent need to adopt effective strategies to identify and include the socially, culturally, and economically excluded. This requires participatory analysis of exclusion at household, community and schools levels, and the development of diverse, flexible, and innovative approaches to learning and an environment that fosters mutual respect and trust. Assessment of learning should include an evaluation of environments, processes, and outcomes. Learning outcomes must be well defined in both cognitive and non-cognitive domains, and be continually assessed as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Equitable distribution of resources in infrastructural development will ensure learning by all learners in the country under similar situations/environment

***Enhance the status, morale and professionalism of teachers***

Teachers are essential players in promoting quality education, whether in schools or in more flexible community-based programmes; they are advocates for, and catalysts of, change. No education reform is likely to succeed without the active participation and ownership of teachers. Teachers at all levels of the education system should be respected and adequately remunerated; have access to training and ongoing professional development and support, including through open and distance learning; and be able to participate, locally and nationally, in decisions affecting their professional lives and teaching environments. Teachers must also accept their professional responsibilities and be accountable to both learners and communities. Clearly defined and more imaginative strategies to identify, attract, train, and retain good teachers must be put in place. These strategies should address the new role of teachers in preparing learners for an emerging knowledge-based and technology-driven economy. Teachers must be able to understand diversity in learning styles and in the physical and intellectual development of learners, and to create stimulating, participatory learning environments.

## Conclusion

This article has presented discussions which point at the need to re-evaluate the performance evaluation criteria in our Kenyan schools. The educational system needs to ensure that schools show commitment to achieving the national goals of education, otherwise schools will put the goals in a closet in the guise of 'performing well' academically.

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