

TITLE : EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role played by education in an all-round empowerment of people. Definitions of the term 'education' by various scholars have been examined. Indicators of socio-economic status have been discussed and they include income, occupation and wealth among others. The means through which education was provided in African traditional societies was mainly informal. This paper also discusses the Kenyan experience of education from independence to the current situation. Such policies as the Free Primary Education (FPE) and the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) and their role in empowering learners have been highlighted. Emerging issues in education such as Information Communication and Technology (ICT), Vision 2030 as well as international conventions in education, for instance, the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), are discussed. Comparatively, the Tanzanian experience has also been briefly highlighted. Right from independence, the Tanzanian Government aimed at advancing a system of education which promoted a socialist society. All policies were developed geared towards the achievement of this objective. The aim of this system of education was to promote a sense of social responsibility as well as the economic empowerment of all people. In conclusion, this paper highlights the fact that education can and has been a means of social stratification. It empowers those who acquire it because they can acquire jobs (all other factors held constant). However, for those who do not get access to formal schooling, their chances of being employed are reduced. For education to empower learners, what is offered in schools must reflect the wider society. The dominant group, in terms of socio-political and economic power must not impose their values, concepts and cultures on the minority group. The status quo of the social and economic gap between the rich and the poor should not be maintained or allowed to grow but should be eradicated so as to allow the empowerment of all members of the society.

INTRODUCTON

Education, whether formal, informal or non-formal plays a crucial role in the lives of people in any given society. In whatever form it is provided to individuals, it equips them with knowledge and skills which they did not possess earlier on. According to Mbiti D. (1981), education is a deliberate attempt to acquire and transmit worthwhile and accumulated skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding. This implies that whatever is learnt should be of value to the individual. Oluoch G. P.(1990) defines education as the process of acquiring and developing desired knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Therefore, education is not a one time event. It is a continuous activity. It goes on throughout an individual's life be it in the formal, informal or non-formal settings.

Education is one of the basic agents of progress for any society in the contemporary world. It is an agency of both modernization and reconstruction; modernization in the sense that it preserves the functional cultural heritage expressed through the media of Art, Music and Literature. Example, African traditional songs relived through music and dance performed annually by schools, colleges and universities. African beliefs, traditions and practices preserved in literature books, some of which have been set books in schools and colleges.

Education is also an agency of reconstruction in that it prepares the individual to be vigilant in recognizing useful situations and changes which may be anticipated in the near future and which may serve as the basis of survival and continuity of society.

For instance, the contemporary issues which have necessitated changes in the syllabuses of schools and colleges. This is because of the changes taking place globally and thus the need to impart to the learners various skills related with the contemporary issues. By doing so, they will be in a position to play active roles in their own societies and even elsewhere. The social order is constantly changing. Therefore, education has the responsibility of inculcating in each generation those forms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes which society needs in order to prosper. In such a situation, education plays a very important role because it is a very powerful weapon which is at the disposal of the individual or society. It can be used either for the advancement of human welfare or for human awakening. That is, improving people's lives physically, psychologically, culturally, economically, socially and even politically. In this case, schools play a very important role because they are the institutions where education is carried out thus bringing about social development. Education also promotes economic development. This is because educated human resources invested in economic activity usually generate increased wealth (Mbiti, 1980). Example, better health care, improved methods of farming leading to increased food production and increased exports which brings in foreign exchange. Some of the agents of change include the family, society, learning institutions and religious institutions.

Indicators of socio-economic change

Socio-economic status (SES) is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position, relative to others based on income, education and occupation. Socio-economic status is broken into 3 categories, that is, high SES, middle SES and low SES to describe the 3 areas an individual may fall into. The variables used to determine the SES of an individual or family include; income, occupation and wealth.

Income: It refers to salaries, profits, rents and any flow of earnings received. It can also come in the form of pensions, dividends, royalties, public or family financial assistance. Low income families focus on meeting immediate needs and do not accumulate wealth that could be passed on to future generations, thus increasing inequality. Families with higher and expendable income can accumulate wealth and focus on meeting immediate needs while being able to consume and enjoy luxuries and weather crises.

Wealth: This refers to economic reserves or assets, accumulation of income and savings. Income, occupation and level of education are all predictors for wealth.

Example, a highly educated person who is in a well-paying job, like a chemical engineer, is likely to earn more and thus will be wealthier. This is in contrast to another one with a

low level of education, is in a low paying job like a parking vehicle attendant and thus earns much less. The amount a person inherits, either during a lifetime or after death, can create different starting points between two different individuals or families. These different starting points also factor into housing, education and employment discrimination.

Occupation: Occupation is the most difficult factor to measure because so many exist and there are so many competing scales. Many scales rank occupations based on the level of skill involved, from unskilled to skilled, manual labor to professional or use a combined measure using the education level needed and income involved. Some of the most prestigious occupations are; physicians and surgeons, lawyers, chemical and biomedical engineers and communication analysts. Jobs with lower rankings are food preservation workers, counter attendants, bartenders and helpers, dishwashers, janitors, maids and housekeepers, vehicle cleaners and parking lot attendants.

The jobs that are less valued are also paid significantly less and are more laborious, very hazardous and provide less autonomy. Occupational status measures social position by describing job characteristics, decision making ability and control as well as psychological demands on the job.

Psychological Effects: According to a study published in the December 2008 issue of Psychological Science, children of parents with a high socio-economic status tended to express more “disengagement” behaviours than their less fortunate peers. In this context, disengagement behaviours represent actions such as fidgeting with other objects and drawing pictures while being addressed. Other participants born into less favoured circumstances tended to make more eye contact, head nods and signs of happiness when put into an interactive social environment.

Social Class: Social classes are economic and cultural arrangements of groups in society. In the Social Sciences, social class is often discussed in terms of ‘social stratification’. In the modern western context, stratification comprises three layers, that is, upper class, middle class and lower class. The most basic class distinction is between the powerful and the powerless. Social classes with a great deal of power are usually viewed as ‘the elites’ within their own societies. Various social and political theories propose that social classes with greater power attempt to cement their own ranking above the lower classes in the hierarchy to the detriment of the society overall. This shows that socio-economic factors bring about social groupings which influence the manner in which people live, work and relate with one another in the society. This affects the overall functioning of the social fabric.

Education in the African Traditional Societies

This type of education played a very crucial role. It was aimed at improving the lives of people and the society in which they were living. It also aimed at promoting economic development, for example, growing crops, weaving baskets, making various items using the knowledge acquired in blacksmith and keeping livestock whose products could be used in barter trade with other communities. As Sifuna(1990) explains, indigenous education was not only concerned with the system socialization of the younger generation into norms, beliefs and collective opinions of the wider society; it also placed a very strong emphasis on learning practice skills and the acquisition of knowledge which was

useful to the individual and society as a whole. It emphasized social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and spiritual and moral values. In these societies, education grew out of the immediate environment. Children had to have knowledge of the important aspects of the environment in order to overcome and exploit them. For instance, the wet seasons, the dry weather and what they meant for the farmers, the pastoralists, the traders (both local and long distance). They had to make proper adjustments to the physical environment by using axes, hoes, spears and other tools which the experience of the past had helped to evolve. They were taught how to farm, hunt, fish, prepare food, build a house or run a home. Every person knew his or her economic part and performed it with others. The economic role of the children featured prominently in their training. Elders aimed to adapt children to their physical surroundings and to teach them how to use it (Sifuna, 1990). Within the homestead and its environment, parents and older relatives were responsible for the training in economic responsibilities. Learning by imitation played a big part as the smaller children followed the example of the older in building, herding or hunting in the case of boys or sweeping, carrying firewood and water or cooking for girls. Therefore, this kind of education molded children to grow up into community members who understood their roles and obligations and observed the rules, regulations and norms of the society. Every member of the society was to live and serve other people in accordance with the accepted manners, customs, as well as laws, avoidance of taboos and observance of a rigorous code of morality. This went a long way in promoting social harmony.

The Kenyan Experience

When Kenya gained its independence in 1963, there was an acute shortage of skilled manpower to run the economy. As Eshiwani states, *'the great evils of society, that is, poverty, ignorance and disease were yet to be eradicated'*. Thus the Kenya Education Commission of 1964 popularly known as the Ominde Commission was appointed to survey the existing education resources of Kenya and advise the government on the formation and implementation of the relevant national policies. Among the recommendations of this Commission were: Education should serve the needs of national development and it must promote social equality and remove divisions of race, tribe and religion. In order to bring about equality among people and develop the economy, the education system had to be streamlined. In so doing, the inequalities brought about by racial and religious differences could be eradicated. Thus schools initially set aside for Europeans or Asians only started admitting Africans.

In 1976, the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies (NCEOP) was set up. Among the objectives of education in Kenya as stated by this committee were: Education should inculcate economic values (attitudes to work and incentives) among the youths; eradicate negative attitudes towards work, especially manual work (Eshiwani, 1993). It was important for those graduating from various levels of education to develop positive attitudes towards manual work. This is because, Kenya basically being an agricultural country, its economy depended much on it for growth. This in turn could promote national development. In the 1980s, the government changed its policy on education. This was because of the problems which were faced by graduates of Kenyan education, particularly those from primary and secondary school levels. Most school leavers could not be absorbed in employment. Therefore, the government found it

necessary to change the educational approach from one which had existed since independence to education for self-reliance. In 1981, the Presidential Working Party on the establishment of a second university was formed. It also had the mandate of looking into the education system in Kenya with the aim of changing it. From the recommendations of this commission, the education system changed from the 7-4-3-2 to the 8-4-4 system. It was designed to provide life-long education to make individuals self-sufficient and productive in agriculture, commerce and in any other service. It was regarded as education with production because it involved all learning activities that resulted in producing goods and services to satisfy societal needs (Eshiwani, 1993). In compliance with the EFA(Education For All) goals of 1980, the government in 2003 put in place the Free Primary Education and the Free Day Secondary Education policies. In this, the government provides tuition funds while the parents and the community puts up boarding and other facilities. These policies are meant to make education affordable to children from low income or the disadvantaged groups and thus empower them mentally, socially and even economically, as the popular saying goes 'knowledge is power'. Contemporary or emerging issues focus on areas such as HIV and AIDS, drug and substance abuse, environmental and gender issues, child rights as well as Information Communication and Technology (ICT). Teachers at all levels are expected to integrate these issues in the process of teaching and learning. Information Communication and Technology is taught in secondary schools, middle level colleges and the universities. This is aimed at equipping the learners with the knowledge and skills in electronic communication, which has made the world a global village. Kenya is fast-tracked in addressing the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) in education, for example, gender issues (the one-third gender rule in all appointments), reduction of maternal and child deaths (the Beyond Zero Campaign by the First Lady, Margaret Kenyatta). Kenya also has the blue-print plan Vision 2030, which has three pillars; that is, the Economic, Social and Political. This plan states that Kenya will provide a globally competitive quality education, training and research for development. This indicates that education will impart in the learners the knowledge and skills which will enable them to compete with others socially and economically at the local and international levels.

The Tanzanian Experience

The independent state of Tanzania inherited a system of education which was in many respects both inadequate and inappropriate for the new state. Its inadequacy and inappropriateness was obvious. In December 1961, there were too few people with the necessary educational qualifications even to man the administration of government or even undertake the big economic and social development work which was essential (Hinzen and Hundsdorfer, 1979). This was a big challenge to a newly independent state which needed to develop itself socially and economically. Thus there was need to address the system. After independence, the government wanted to create a socialist society which was based on three principles, that is, equality and respect for human dignity; sharing of the resources which are produced by the people's efforts; work by everyone and exploitation by none. This was contained in the Arusha Declaration and in the National Ethic. It stressed the equality of all citizens and that the economic, political and social policies were to be designed to stress equality in all spheres of life. This was in line with the practice in African traditional societies which promoted unity and strengthened

social cohesiveness. Thus each individual was socially responsible of the other. It also discouraged laziness and emphasized hard work and equality of all. This prevented a situation whereby a few people accumulated a lot of wealth while the majority was living in poverty. The Tanzanian Government aimed at promoting an educational system which was to encourage self-reliance. As Hinzen and Hundsorfer put it, *'It had to foster the social goals of living and working together, for the common good. It had to the young people to play a dynamic and constructive part in the development of a society in which all members share fairly in the good or bad fortune of the group and in which progress was measured in terms of human wellbeing, not prestige buildings, cars or other such things, whether privately or publicly owned'*. This meant that the educational system of Tanzania had to emphasize co-operative endeavor, not individual advancement. It had to counteract the temptation to intellectual arrogance and despising of the less-educated by the well-educated. Rather, it had to promote a society of equal citizens. The education system also had to prepare people to work in a Tanzanian rural society, that is, in agriculture and village development. The education provided had to encourage the development in each citizen of three things: an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do and reject or adapt it to his own needs and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he is and not for what he obtains. This indicates that the Tanzanian education system aimed at encouraging people to have enquiring minds, a sense of social responsibility as well as the economic empowerment of all people.

Conclusion

Education brings economic growth and empowerment but it can also be a means of social stratification and economic inequalities. Up to the 1970s, formal education or schooling was viewed in relation to economic growth, employment and overall national development. In this, education was viewed positively as it contributed to economic development, particularly so in the Third World. This shows that people went to schools so as to acquire jobs and only such select people could contribute to economic development. However, around the 1980s, peoples' perception about education started changing. This is because there were discrepancies in educational opportunity and equal access to education. Education in either form whether academic or vocational reinforces the age-old socio-cultural distinction between the elites and the masses. In such a case, education brings about socio-economic differentiation, between the rich and the poor. This promotes inequality in society. In most countries, whoever has control over society also controls classroom knowledge. Thus the dominant group automatically determines classroom knowledge. This group imposes what it considers as knowledge on other groups. It imposes its culture and concepts on the subordinate groups. This works to their disadvantage and they remain subordinate even after graduating and joining the wider society. Education in all cultures and at all levels must work towards reversing this trend. The status quo of the social and economic gap must neither be maintained nor allowed to grow. It is the responsibility of various governments and policy makers to put in place educational policies which will minimize and possibly eliminate this gap. The measures put in place should be aimed at promoting social, economic, political and even cultural development as well as social equality. In this way, every individual in the society will be

empowered to individually and collectively play active roles in promoting positive social change. This will in turn enhance social order.

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