AFRICAN CULTURES AND THE CHALLENGES OF QUALITY EDUCATIONFOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: In 2015, the world, through UNESCO adopted the 2030 agenda for sustainable development floated on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to "transform our world." SDG4 titled *Quality Education* seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning." An ordinary look at SDG4 would make it appear as an extension of *Education for All*. However, there are differences. One difference that stands out is the undercurrent of the need to connect education to the key indicators of existence in its context especially through learning and equity. SDG4, as indeed many policies and agenda at the global level, tends to face challenges peculiar to the uniqueness of the African continent. Most governments struggle to include such goals in their national plans in ways that connect the real context of their people. One major area of concern for us is the area of culture where most programmes introduced into Africa, including into schools, are dressed in cultures foreign to the receiving communities. The authors of this paper argue that for SDG4 and similar programmes to fulfill their objective; they must find ways of embracing and adapting authentic African culture. The authors theorise in literature and use African cultures to drive its analysis. We conclude that African culture is the most viable framework for ensuring quality education that causes and sustains development along the lines envisaged by SDG4.

Keywords: African, Akan, culture, quality education, Yoruba

Background

Beyond earlier clamour of educational provision for everyone, Sustainable Development Goal4 (SDG 4) requires that education should be of quality by incorporating beliefs and norms of the people to the planning and implementation of school systems. Quality education could be referred to as education with cultural components that connects to the meaning-making schemes of the people's world. What then is culture? Ayisi (1972) after interrogating so many definitions of culture describes it 'as a way of behaving; it is the way we do things and… the means by which we do things'. He also came up with the description of culture with a structure that takes social realities of society into consideration.

We must be quick to point out that the idea of *the* **African culture** risks being a fallacy because of the intimidating diversity of Africa and Africans. In spite of this diversity, there are central cords that bind these contrasting diversity of culture and people in Africa. Central to these cords is religion. Mbiti (1969) had submitted that the African is "in all things religious." He further affirmed that "religion is in their (Africans') whole system of being" (p. 3). Closely woven around religion are ancestors, community, marriage, kinship, household, inheritance, vocation, government, judicial processes,

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festivals, rituals and taboos. This culture oozes out of the people's daily interactions with the physical and spiritual world. This is what Anyanwu (1983) was referring to with his submission that to the African "culture is not established as a result of empirical research but as a product of the African experience in the world" (p. 24). These structures are important because what we call African culture have been influenced greatly by other associations especially European and American cultures (Falola 2016, Carne 2001, Rodney 1972). However, and in spite of these influence, we subscribe to the African culture that represents the totality of the meaning-making schemes of the African. Our use of culture aligns with Anyanwu's (1983) summation that "the African cultural process is one of discipline. It insists that the individual should be seen in the light of the whole – family, group, community, the past and the future generations" (p. 24). The African culture pivots on corporate existence with a holistic worldview. Despite other influences, some elements remain in African societies that survived the colonial experiences. For example, the Yoruba who find themselves in multiple places have contributed to the ideas about reality of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Tolerance is a core element in Yoruba character as we do not seek cultural insularity but cultural inclusion (Falola, 2016).

African Cultures

Ezedike (2009, p. 455) defined African culture as: 'the sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterise Africans. It can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from one generation to another. African culture, therefore, refers to the whole lot of African heritage'. Ezedike's conceptualization of African culture highlights the fact that our culture trickled from generation to generation through oratory practices of the people: a reason for which most of the important aspects of the culture might have been lost or altered.

Having defined culture as the African experience in the world, we align with the presentation of African culture as enunciated by several African writers including (Anyanwu 1983, Falola 2016, & Dickson, 1985) who severally concur that culture is a complex whole that embodies the totality of the African in a community, a lifelong process that bestrides birth and death. African culture embodies knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, and customs. However, there is the need for programmes and policies introduced to Africa to take cognisant of the structure, texture and tendencies of their indigenous conceptual schemes. Since they cannot do this without attention to African culture, it becomes necessary for them to allude explicitly to the "product of the African experience in the world" (Anyanwu 1983, p. 24). And finally, this perhaps is what Idang (2015) calls cultural manifestations which cannot be devoid of language. However, we share the sentiments of other writers who noted that irrespective of the cultural manifestations, underlying beliefs and practices bring together people, which make culture capable of defining people on the African continent.

We fully subscribe to the fact that some aspects of the African culture needed to be checked out of African societies due to the dangers they posed to corporate society. We are, however, by this paper setting the tone that elements of our culture such as vocationalization, character formation, the idea of common good and stories of heroic

exploits are capable of positively contributing to quality education for sustainable development if they are given a place in modern forms of education.

The Traditional African Concept of Development

Several scholars such as (Avoseh 2009, Dickson 1985, Falola 2018, Gaba 1975, Nyerere 1979, Prah 1993, 1995, & Rodney 1972) have presented the nature and process of development in traditional Africa from various perspectives but which all subsist in the holistic framework in line with the nature of the African way of life. For example, Falola (2018) juxtaposed cultural identity and development. His central question was "how Africa can develop without losing its identity?" (p. 266). He presented cultural identity in its formative sense as complex and "involving the multiple issues of history, environment, values, social stratification, knowledge, power, and wealth" whose boundary coincides with the "domain of development" (p. 266). He used three themes as focus of his analysis of the cultural identity and development synchronicity. The first two themes are pertinent to our discussion. They are (i) "indigenous patterns" and identity in pre-colonial Africa, (ii) "how foreign contacts and domination have created dislocations…and alternative values" (p. 267). Falola's second theme has its antecedent in scholarly history in Rodney's (1972) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. History and the African reality have since made Rodney's thesis an incontrovertible pronouncement. Beyond Falola and Rodney, Prah (1993 & 1995) used the linguistic lane of culture to argue for mass education, scientific and technological development in Africa.

In a similar vein Dickson (1985), argued for a symmetric relationship between education, culture and development. He pointed out that there were still fundamental flaws in the form and content of education in Africa that disrupt the education-development continuum. Drawing from personal experiences; he pointed to the hollow nature of the literature used in African education. While he acknowledged that most of the literature from the West may be of the highest scholarship he raised doubt about their relevance to the African context. According to him, the content of such literature "may be so divorced from the reality of the African life experiences that the knowledge acquired remains somewhat unreal…(with) no impact on the learner or society to which they belong" (p. 47).

Furthermore, Avoseh (2009) drew from the African Ujamaa (African socialism) in relation to the community and participatory development in traditional Africa to establish the interconnectedness of life and living. He reaffirmed the intricate connection between everything in the community, including the "material and the spiritual, the unborn, the living and the departed – all combine to define life in the community" (p. 15). He further argued that the values (cultures) of the community are in symmetry with the educational system. According to him; "traditional African education is synonymous with life and living in a community" and that "the values are couched in songs, festivals, celebrations, myths, taboos, proverbs, and stories" (p. 15). Avoseh concluded by drawing attention to how Nyerere adapted the holistic traditional African perspective of education and development into modern development efforts in Tanzania.

Similarly, Gaba (1975) in his analysis of *The traditional African way of nation-building* presented development from the perspective of indigenous Africans. These Africans are

"guided by their indigenous values despite their exposure to the acculturising influences of impinging value systems which stem from milieu other than the traditional African" (p. 6). The United Nations (UN) has established that Africa is the fastest growing continent while Europe is shrinking the fastest in terms of population. However, there is no data (official or unofficial) to indicate that Africa's cultural values are growing at the pace of its population. In the absence of official data: our hypothesis is that African culture and values have been overwhelmed by "milieu other than the traditional African" and that African culture is shrinking at the pace in which its population is growing. This creates a huge wedge between African cultures and education for development. Dickson (1985) warned of the danger posed to development by this dislocation of culture and education. He put it more poignantly describing the path to development as a path to "stagnation and confusion." Furthermore, he warned that development in Africa will continue to be a mirage as long as "the conception of development does not take into account the African cultural reality…" (p. 49).

It is worth noting that in the traditional African setting, the younger ones needed not to worry about their future occupations because their culture catered for the vocations of the younger generation. This value was naturally imbibed in the younger generation as they served as apprentices in the trade of their fathers/mothers or the men/women who took care of them. Typically, a hunter's son will follow the status quo, so will a farmer, carpenter or a goldsmith's son. When it comes to the societal level, Idong (2015), in what he captures as the 'economic value' of African culture noted that groups in the same vocation will come together to help a member and this will continue when others needed same. In the Nigerian set up, this form of cooperatively working and helping each other is termed 'osusu'. Among the Akans of Ghana, if farmers engaged in same, it is termed 'nobua'. With this system at work, there was hardly any member of the society who remained unemployed, except for those who were lazy and did not want to fend for themselves and their families.

Character formation is yet another tenet that we seek to explore within the African culture as a way of promoting quality education for sustainable development. It is noted that among the Akan of Ghana, the elders like, other Africans, used stories (mostly called 'anansesem' among the Adkan of Ghana) to instil into members of the society, obedience, hard work, manners, fairness, good behaviour and submission to authority (Pinto, 2008).Thompson (1946) reflects on the excitement that was generated when families gathered by the fireside to entertain themselves by way of the elders artistically expressing their imaginations to engage, excite and amuse their audience. We are of the firm belief that aside the stories that were told as a way of imbibing in people, especially the younger ones, virtues held in high esteem by their societies, the art of sitting together, singing together and perhaps sharing of roasted corn or a local drink was enough to help socialise the younger ones and newcomers into the society. Again, it helped to get people to live, reason and develop together, an equivalent of cooperative living and learning from the West and a strong means of character formation among Africans.

It is regrettable that African philosophies have not been able to permeate our educational setups as strongly as the Western philosophies have done. We are in no way arguing that the Western philosophies are not helpful. Our argument is that local problems can best be

solved with local solutions, hence a call to incorporate the African culture into the curricula of our schools. Cues can be taken from South Africa that has laid emphasis on the philosophy of oneness or humanity (Ubuntu), which is an important aspect of the indigenous African system. As captured by Van Wyk (2018), institutions of higher learning in South Africa engaged in strategies to transform their curriculum with a focus on integrating decolonization, Africanism and Ubuntism in the already existing curriculum.

An equivalent of the concept of Ubuntu in both Nigeria and Ghana is captured in what (Idang, 2015) captures as 'social values' of African culture. Idang, in this regard, has articulated how festivals and customary laws have together worked to ensure that people work together for the good of society. Without a doubt, Idang has made a strong case for how African social values help to bring unity among its people. We argue that Idang's statement is limited to the context of the festivals, hence, incorporating these social values into the formal education system will, to a large extent, help bring about oneness among the people. In the long run, cooperative existence and learning found in African societies can be emulated in the educational circles too.

The last element of the African culture that captured our attention as being able to bring about quality education for sustainable development is the use of stories of heroic exploits of African characters. As common with African settings, stories come in the form of folklore, folktales, proverbs, etc. and these forms of African culture do not recognize borders. This explains why the same folktales or proverbs could be heard in several distinct African ethnic groups but not without the local spice. This argument is validated in Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart,* through the statement "Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folktales. Even those which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavour of a different clan" (p.25). The beauty of these stories is how they always ended with good omen for good characters and the reverse for those who had negative tendencies. In effect, these stories were not just to praise the heroic exploits of characters who were mostly fictitious, rather they were meant to ignite in the listeners a fire to emulate the good things they heard about those good characters.

Challenges of Quality Education for Development in Africa

The challenges of quality education can be explained by the story of someone called Olu, for the sake of this study, who failed thrice his School Certificate Examination (a public examination that is sat for at the end of six years after primary school education in most West African countries). Olu failed his examination because he sat for the examination in a secondary school where he was taught it is more honourable to fail an examination than to cheat. At the fourth attempt he passed just with the minimum requirement to enter a University where he did very well and made a good grade and was appointed a teaching assistant immediately after graduation.

Olu noted that among his classmates in the university were many who had better results in their school certificate examination. His colleagues in the University then believed that there was nothing really bad in seeking help in examination halls and even allowing

someone to impersonate for them. Some of his mates dropped out from school and for those who suddenly found out that they could not continue to behave in the way they used to behave ended up making very lower grades. The challenges of quality education can be deduced from the story as: problem of character; deviant behaviour in society, incompetence of workforce and craze for certificates.

Some authors, including, Okoye (2008) and Enoh (2013) have differentiated schooling from education by placing emphasis on the affective domain alongside the cognitive and psychomotor. Okoye stated that 'the import of education includes acquiring the knowledge and skills required for proficient professional services, in addition to character formation while Enoh indicated there is nothing more fraudulent than making the claim for a group of individuals having a certain level of education when this is not supported with corresponding qualitative content.

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development has been recognised internationally as a component of quality education which can make sustainable development achievable in 2030. This can be seen from the targets 4 and 7 of SDG4. Sustainable development dates back to United Nations conference on the environment in Stockholm 1972. This was followed by the United Nations world commission on environment and development (our common future) report of 1987 and the United Nations conference on environment and development of 1992 (otherwise known as Rio Earth Summit.

The term sustainable development resonated at the end of 2015 millennium development goals when the United Nations again set seventeen goals to be achieved on or before 2030. In all of these engagements with development agencies, education for sustainable development has become an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach that covers social, economic, political and environmental scope of formal, non-formal and informal learning arrangement. Like other goals of education that have pursued individual, organisational and societal purposes such as self-reliance, employability, peace, citizenship, empowerment and political stability, sustainability has acquired an educational system that supports learning about and developing skills for sustainable development. These skills are what Down (2013) saw as finding ways of developing society in ways which will improve everyone's quality of life without damaging the environment and without storing problem for future generations. It means attending to issues of social justice, equity and environmental protection, learning to respect each other and the earth.

Conclusion

In education for sustainable development, there is the aspect which emphasises the respect for persons, which in turn imposes cultural implications on educational practices in African countries. This means that African culture as typified by Akan and Yoruba pay attention to the dignity of human beings. Educational efforts at all levels should make respect for the beliefs and norms of the people that take the prime of place. Those constituents of social, economic and environment can be addressed by the African culture when it is introduced to the learning environments that are found mostly outside the

school systems. Our central argument is that to ensure inclusive and quality education that drives development, SDG 4 in Africa must avoid the danger of what Onwubiko (1991) calls "externally induced culture change" (p. 132) and which Oguejiofor (2001) calls "cultural alienation" (p. 41). Our concluding argument is put more poignantly by Dickson (1985):

> …any policies which fail to take account of the reality of African culture, properly understood, run the risk of being only half-heartedly embraced…because they would be seen to be destructive of the African's understanding of the coherence of life. The kind of education which ignores Africa's cultural circumstances runs the risk of producing young men and women whose visions is distorted because it is almost irreconcilably bifocal (p. 50).

The thrust of Dickson's warning above is the core of African cultures and the challenges of quality education for sustainable development. This challenge especially so for UN SDG 4.

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