

EDUCATION AS AN INTEGRAL ASPECT OF AFRICA'S EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

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Summary

Education in Africa is a product of all the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic factors that have influenced the course of the development of the region over the years.

Traditional beliefs, Islam, Christianity, and colonialism have combined to create a situation in which education is today broken into several webs or strands. A major challenge to African governments has been how to weave these disparate strands into a close-knit web.

Post-independence reform efforts aimed at evolving authentic national systems of education yielded mixed results, due to the combined effects of political instability and economic difficulties.

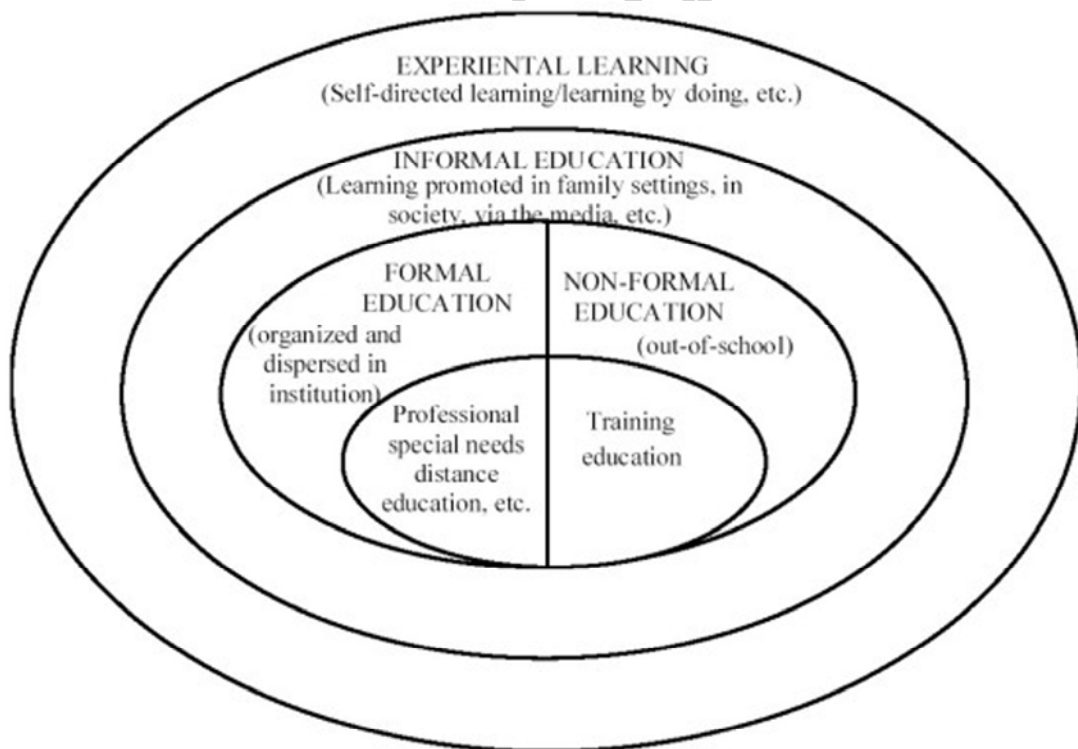
External assistance and the world summits on educational and social issues of the 1990s have also not yielded the expected results, mainly because of inappropriate analytical tools, the prevalence of imported and ever-shifting development paradigms, the strong persistence of the relics of colonial practices, and the unfavorable impact of international politics.

Africa has to address a number of political and socioeconomic challenges that affect education, such as democracy, nation building, and the cultural dimensions of development. This is one way of creating an enabling environment for the development of education.

A point that must, however, be stressed is that education still has a strong presence in Africa, and whatever problems it may be facing should be seen as an essential part of the region's evolutionary process.

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with education in its broadest sense. As generally recognized by educationists, and as aptly illustrated in the work of UNESCO, the concept is not simply schooling, not simply formal education, but a process of continuous development of the human potential for personal and societal good, a process that fully articulates the formal, non-formal, and informal structures and approaches to educating.



(Source: UNESCO, World Education Report: 1995 (Paris: UNESCO, 1995))

Figure 1. Education in its broadest sense

Education in Africa has been described as a web, with a variety of strands. Prominent among these strands are the following:

- traditional practices, which pre-dated colonization, which are still widely practiced, and which have been responding to the various factors which have shaped African societies in the past 200 years;
- Islamic beliefs and practices, which have had varying degrees of influence and impact in different parts of the region;
- Christianity, the channel by which “modern” forms of education came into Africa;
- Africa’s colonial experience, the impact of which has also varied from place to place, depending on such factors as the style and length of colonial rule.

A major challenge to education in Africa these days is to weave these various strands (and the sub-strands that go with each of them) into a consistent fabric, to make a beautiful web. This article will highlight the efforts so far made in Africa to produce this fine fabric (or beautiful web), and suggest what can still be done to reinforce the continued search for a workable education system for African nations.

2. Educational Reforms: Efforts and Results

Africa’s educational development efforts since the 1960s can be captured in one magic word: reforms. The concept itself has been interpreted in a variety of ways, as seen in the approaches adopted for the pursuit of this goal in various African countries.

These approaches range from the very radical to the very ad hoc, but they have all aimed at the single goal of evolving genuine national systems of education capable of serving the development imperatives of the newly independent nations of Africa. It will be shown what led to various countries adopting different approaches to attain this common goal.

Another feature of educational reform efforts in Africa is their evolutionary nature. Thus, approaches have tended to be influenced by changing times. As will be shown, Africa’s gradual integration into the global community has meant a series of new and unexpected challenges, and the education sector has been “manipulated” in nearly all cases to meet these challenges.

2.1. The First Decade of Independence

In the early years of political independence, two major challenges were posed to education: rapid “production” of qualified labor to occupy new posts opening up in the public services, and the decolonization of curricula. Expatriate civil servants were being replaced, and the establishment of new nation states involved an expanded bureaucracy, which needed school-educated people to run its different services. At the same time, those who fought for political independence wanted school curricula to reflect genuine national aspirations.

This period (roughly 1960–1975) coincided with the time of the first incursion of econocentric ideas into educational thinking. Five-year development plans (reminiscent

of socialist type economic planning) became the vogue. Labor forecasting became the main approach to educational planning and, in the minds of the people, education for employment (in the civil service) became the prevailing dream.

Most countries set up commissions (usually international commissions) to reexamine the inherited colonial educational systems, to produce projections of needs of the public service for various categories of personnel, and to outline how best the educational system could “produce” the required labor within a specified time frame.

This approach had a number of advantages. First, it enabled the new nations of Africa to take a very careful look at education, focusing on its contributions to nation building. Second, it helped to develop some methodological tools (e.g. educational statistics) that have become useful in educational development work. Third, it exposed Africans to the experiences of other regions of the world (since the commissions always had an international membership). Consequently, it exposed Africa’s educational issues to the international community, and led to the evolution of a good number of training programs on educational leadership for African nations. Fourth, it set up a chain of action-reaction of continuously questioning the relevance of the educational system, a process that has remained with Africa.

At the same time, the approach had a number of disadvantages. First, it tended to reduce education to mere schooling. The plans focused on the numbers the school must produce to meet the requirements of the civil service employer. Second, the emphasis on labor “production” tended to treat education as something that takes place in factories. The beneficiaries of education were seen as mere factors of production. There was thus a tendency to neglect the broader goal of education, that of the integral development of the human being. These problems have also remained with African education.

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Biographical Sketch

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