

The Crisis of Democratic Education: Building on African Indigenous Principles and Social Science Studies in Developing Sustainable Democratic Education in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper argues that education for democracy can strengthen democratic structures in the Republic of the Kenya and that developing knowledge and skills in democratic education among lecturers and teachers could play a significant role in democratic awareness among citizens. The paper also considers the institutionalization of principles of democracy in the teaching and management of learning institutions as well as the recognition of African indigenous principles and western democratic ideals in the development of democratic education in Kenya. The paper addresses the basic question of whether the prevailing education practice in Kenya is supportive of the development of democratic education and how teaching and learning in Kenya can be structured to support democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, as elsewhere, the entrenchment of principles of democracy among citizens can only be attained if the teaching system institutionalizes the ideals of democracy and if teachers are adequately prepared through the curriculum to dispense principles of democracy in their teaching methodology. Teachers also have a critical role to play in supporting the democratic activities in the wider community. In short, education plays a central role to the realization of ambitious national and international principles and goals of democracy. However, there are growing concerns that education in Kenya, as in other developing countries, pays limited attention to the development of democracy, which is reflected ultimately in deteriorating commitment of citizens to the state and institutions of governance.

To what extent, then, is there democratic education crisis in Kenya? This paper marshals the findings from primary research as well as evidence from other sources in order to answer this question. Given the importance of 'Democracy for All', the focus was on 300 respondents composed of pupils, students, teachers, lecturers and Sub-county education officials from education institutions in Bondo District and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University. Due to growing trends in abuse of democracy coupled with inter-ethnic conflicts and politically motivated violence,

concerted efforts should be made to ensure that the education sector should participate in nurturing democracy among the youth. To this end, the education sector in Kenya has recognized the participation of students through the Student Councils in the administration of schools and universities as well as the recognition of Staff Unions in the management of learning institutions.

The link between education and democracy

The link between education and democracy is a matter of great concern for social science researchers because of the growing need for the realization of sustainable democracy in developing economies and especially a among fragile and transitional democracies. Due to this significance, focus should be specifically directed on the role of formal education in political modernization as well as its contribution to the development of democratic citizenship in different societies. This is because formal education influences people's understanding of democracy and thus contributes greatly to the stability of new fledgling democratic regimes in most parts of Africa with low levels of education((Ake,1996). In the context of Kenya, this paper argues that education for democracy can deepen and strengthen knowledge and awareness on democracy among citizens in the Kenya. This can be realized through the development of knowledge and skills in democratic education among teachers and lecturers institutions in Kenya. This responsibility for a long time has been alienated from teaching and learning institutions and dominated by civil society organizations, Non Governmental Organizations(NGO) and Human Rights Groups. The greatest concern of this paper is, essentially a matter of how learning and teaching systems in Kenya could be structured to support the development and growth of democracy. However, in trying to answer this question, this paper, tries to address some pertinent questions that, seek to assess whether; the prevailing political culture in Kenya is supportive of western model of democracy; whether formal education in Kenya can be structured to positively add to the development of democratic political culture according to national standards or whether lecturers in Kenyan Universities and teachers in Kenyan schools teach students to question or conform to national ethics and norms.

Conceptualizing Education for Democracy and Democratic Education

In order to realize the goals of democracy through the education systems and processes in Kenya, two key interrelated concepts must be interrogated; **Education for democracy** which refers to the form of education, describing the processes, structures and content of learning in institutions directed at spreading democratic awareness. The other concept is **Democratic education** which involves the dissemination of concepts and practices that result in integrated democratic awareness essentially through public institutions (Abdulghani, 2008). Democratic education is concerned with the articulation of specific content and knowledge on democratic awareness, enriching what people believe and have established on democracy, improving people's perception regarding democracy and their relationship to the political system and institutions of governance for instance, with the legislature, executive and legal systems(Abdulghani, 2008). When this concept is applied in the process of teaching and learning, the citizens will be able to acquire knowledge which will enable them to understand how they should relate with political objects, issues and events around them, in order to adjust their behavior accordingly to realize democratic purposes and good governance (Cowan, T., (2006)).

Democratic education is therefore more of critical rather than passive learning. When properly developed in learning institutions in Kenya, it may be useful in laying the framework for shaping

political cultures as a core basis and an integral part of the shared culture of society. For a fragile and transitional democracy like Kenya, this process should be focused at producing a democratic culture based on principles that extol values such as human and public freedoms, and social justice apart from teaching. Public freedom is concerned with human and civil rights and the right to political participation. It also reaffirms social justice by advocating for principles of universal adult suffrage to achieve democratic purposes of equal 'citizenship' and faith in rule of law (Birch, 2001).

However, studies done by Mazrui, (2008); Good, (2002); Duignan and Jackson, (1986) both indicate that the good objectives of democratic education may be challenging to realize in the African and Kenyan context because, the themes of democratic education are well articulated in most liberal and representative western models of democracy while studies of African democracy indicate that experiments with democracy in most states have remained largely faulted. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the meaning of democracy may be different in terms of concepts and form to Africans and Europeans. It has therefore been challenging to determine what form of democracy that may be fashioned to guide the development of African education. Because formal education in Kenya is premised on western model, western model of democracy may appear to work for Kenyans hence, in the search for what form of democracy for Kenya, this study suggests, the strengthening of western model of representative democracy which according to Ozor, (2009: 319) calls for institutional changes in the mainstream structures of education in terms of organization and management. Thus the role of interest groups should be included as important players in education sector.

The merit of this lies in the application of democratic principles in the teaching and learning process which follows respect to values and themes of tolerance, opposing views and concerns, respect to basic freedoms and liberties (Harber, 2006). This spirit of tolerance (in the lecturers/teachers and the learners) has all important and obvious implications for providing enabling environment for democratic education in Kenya. This model of democracy towards which education in Kenya should work is expected to create a platform 'where all stakeholders are institutionalized entities and legitimate actors in the education process, capable of articulating their views, making possible decision-making through discussion of issues and consensus (Ozor, 2009: 317). It allows for all points of view from both majority and minority views, and therefore, recognizes and extols the democratic principle of tolerance and critical participation in decision making processes in education sector.

The learning system in Kenya needs to be re-engineered, if it has to serve as a veritable and pragmatic means of creating awareness of these democracy values. The education system must borrow from positive aspects of indigenous African learning like mentorship and apprenticeship while carefully choosing new ideas, methods and technology from abroad (Harber, 2006). Through the indigenous approach, the education system may benefit from the African learning systems and thought by drawing on the strength of informal educational framework to enable lecturers and teachers to create democratic awareness in more or less informal class sessions in which wisdom teachings of African ancestors are taught and in which African folklore may be employed to teach democratic values and beliefs. Kenya therefore needs to ground the framework of her education on the positivity of indigenous education and thought while placing borrowed western education ideas and technology within African cultural and conceptual framework (Tedla, 1996).

Impact of western models of education in the development of democratic education

Because of unchecked reliance on western education models and practices, the system of learning and education in Kenya has been unable to overcome the pitfalls of imported western education system. Consequent to this, the education system has tended to produce African educated elite who continue to either ignore or despise African principles of life and perpetuate the marginalization of the weak, political disempowerment of minority interests and, through ignorance or mis-education, the exclusion of majority of 'rural' people from political decision making process (Davis, 2001).

For this, Freire (1998:40) argues that the system of education will at times cause children and students to adopt rebellious positions and defiance to any institution or authority while on the other hand, may lead to apathy, excessive obedience, un-critical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom. Freire (1998) also suggests that in order to check on such developments, the education system must transform the teachers and lecturers into progressive educators who can encourage learners to think freely and democratically a part from simply passing the prescribed content. They must subordinate class differences and practically demonstrate democratic spirit of tolerance and humility that allows them to listen and understand the needs of learners, and encourage learning through discussions and reflections. With this, the teaching and learning, will be a democratic process capable of promoting the development of democracy.

The western model or elitist approach has negated on the African principle and philosophy that considers the transformation of the majority and not the minority thus in order for the learning process to realize democratic concerns, the teaching and learning process in schools and higher institutions of learning must be developed around the philosophy that majority of the people must be able to think freely and be thought to imagine better ways of relating to their political system and of improving their circumstances (Cowan, 2006). The commercialization of education in Kenya has focused mainly on the development specific skills that inform employment priorities with limited focus on how the process may account to democratic attention.

Relevance of African Indigenous Systems in the development of Democratic Education

African indigenous system is rich in values and beliefs which constitute the bedrock of African democracy. These values are sustained by some indigenous African social concepts such as self-discipline. These social concepts are drawn from ethical and religious principles which provide valuable information from which Kenyan education can draw material for creating democratic awareness (Tedla, 1996). The possibility of recreating and utilizing informal educational structures that informed the traditional mode of education and the principal traditional means of political socialization could then be highlighted. Informal platforms could enable lecturers and learners to share knowledge about their political system and increase democratic awareness through interactive sessions where state/community stories, folktales, and ancestral wisdom sayings that portray values and messages of democracy may be shared. The assumption is that African education will impact on democracy by increasing understanding of democratic concepts by means of providing knowledge, skills and values associated with African political culture that support democracy (Osabu-Kle, D.T., (2000).

Empirical Findings on the state of Democratic Education in Kenya

In Kenya, as in most parts of Africa, school organization and teaching approaches appear to be autocratic and tend to relate towards authoritarianism, as students end up possessing political values that keep them passive participants in the political process. Schools tend to be authoritarian institutions and teaching methods hold no regard to the students previous knowledge and the need to encourage ability to investigate knowledge on their own (Christie,1992; Du Bey et al, 1979; Mbilinji, 1979; Harber,1997;Davies, 2001).

In order to measure the opinions of the public on democratic conduct of teaching and learning in Kenya a research survey was carried out by the researcher using random samples drawn from five departments in the school of Humanities and Social Sciences of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University (JOUST)-Kenya.: History, English, Kiswahili, Religion and Geography and the target groups of secondary school teachers, students and university undergraduates, and officials of Sub-county education departments in Bondo District. A total of 270 structured questionnaires were administered to participants out of which 70% were successfully retrieved. The primary data were collected and statistically tabulated. While descriptive statistics was used to present data in a statistical format to facilitate initial data analysis, inferential statistics was introduced to make statistical inferences about the population from which the sample was drawn so that important patterns, relationships and analysis could become more meaningful (Bailey, 1994).

The tests were done to measure two variables; if teaching methods in the educational system were authoritarian or democratic and on Possession of knowledge, skills and concepts of democracy among the teaching force.

Fig 1

Teaching methods in the Kenya educational system being authoritarian

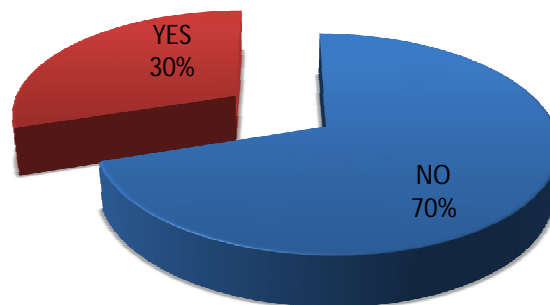


Figure 1 shows that 70% of the respondents believe that teaching methods are authoritarian as taught by the teacher, the students learn, and the principal is considered the all powerful commander while the school system tends to be a bank from where students come and take knowledge.

Table 2

Possession of knowledge, skills and concepts of democracy among the teaching Force

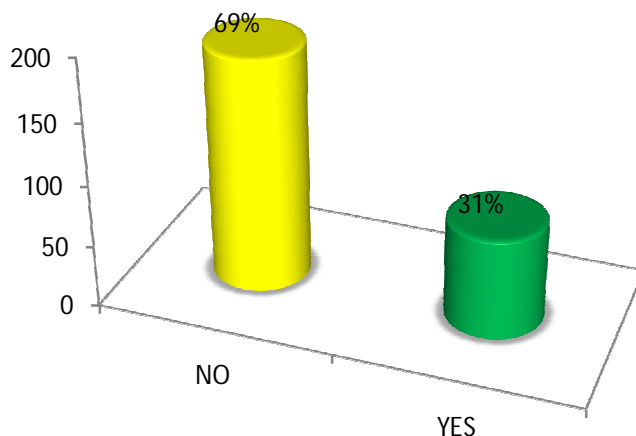


Figure 2 indicates that only 31% of the teaching force in Kenya possesses knowledge, skills and concepts of democracy, specifically democratic concepts of tolerance and of a good/democratic citizen as an active political participant with a sense of social justice and who develops critical attitudes towards authorities and demonstrates allegiance to the community of the people, not one that imbibes and displays unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the abstract state. On the other hand 69% believe that democracy is all about obedience to the state and nation building.

The implication is that learning encourages uncritical allegiance to the state, teachers teach students to conform, and citizenship education, simply, is about nation building in line with neo-liberal educational models which are destructive of democratic purposes, for instance, such purposes that essentially seek to liberate citizens' critical minds, encourage active political participation and guarantee or protect basic rights and liberties (Reid, 2002). Mc Cowan (2006), in a case study in the local municipality of Pelotas, Brazil, argues that good citizenship does not mean unquestioning allegiance to the abstract state but to the community of people of a state; and so schools do not need to develop conformity to policies that promote the glory of the nation but one that develops a sense of justice and of critical participation in the political process.

Consequently, the paper argues that the teaching force must necessarily develop appropriate knowledge, skills, concepts and attitudes around which 'African' democracy must necessarily be built while citizenship education in Kenya has to be redesigned in ways that teach democratic values which empower citizens to defend their rights, actively participate politically and to develop critical attitudes towards authorities and allegiance to the people rather than the nation. Developing knowledge and skills in democratic education among lecturers and teachers can, therefore, play a significant role in developing democratic awareness.

The data analysis, further, support the view that authoritarian teaching methods prevail in Kenya in spite of stated government policy on education which 'is based on the principle of inclusive

education, where every person, child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs’ (World Conference on Education for All, 1990). These needs, include, knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to equip the individual for survival, develop their full potentials, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions, and participate fully in development. The espouse policy, therefore, encourages student participation and learning through critical thinking.

However, public education practice in Kenya rather appears either to ignore, or is incapable of addressing, the twin needs of education for democracy, namely the need for sharpening understanding through critical learning as well as raising the level of democracy awareness among teachers and of designing appropriate public education curricula, or more precisely appropriate content of means of public dissemination of democracy concepts, values and attitudes. A major challenge for effective education for democracy in Kenya, therefore, certainly tends to arise from local interpretations, if not misinterpretation, of democracy particularly among teachers. Because formal schooling have immense potential to develop democratic culture and build democratic citizenship, the requisite democratic skills, values and knowledge need to be developed within the teaching force before these can be inculcated in the young (Schweisfurth, 2002).

However, these local interpretations of democracy among teachers in the Kenya tend to stray away from democratic concepts and values of tolerance, critical popular political participation and social justice. They tend to reflect support for citizens' loyalty to the state and greater concern for civic obligations, and so democracy for them is all about passive popular participation in the political process. This, therefore, calls for re- engineering of learning system in Kenya in order to equip teachers to become effective vehicles for democratic education (Posseme, 2007).

The Relevance of Social Studies and Humanities in Democratic Education

Content analysis also show that Social Studies and Humanities programs are more relevant to civic education at all levels of lower and upper basic education systems. Social studies have made great contributions towards national integration and the promotion of self-confidence, an understanding of one's own worth and upholding of the essential dignity of man (ASSP, 1995). Social studies can help children to be capable of coping with social change without despising traditional values and institutions, and in the long run to be a veritable tool for democratic education. Social studies must be taught through inquiry, with students learning to ask and answer questions and solving their own problems (Report on a Conference of African Educators, EDC and CREDO, 1968, p. 6-9). Through these skills, the attitudes expected of citizens are considered to be respect, appreciation, cooperation, compassion, tolerance, and team spirit which are of particular importance to democracy and democratic education.

Students can only develop these skills and attitudes by participating in experiences that call for their use. Therefore social studies must be taught in Kenyan learning institutions through inquiry, discussion and reflection with students learning to ask and answer questions and solving their own problems. However, lecturers and teachers are presented with a daunting challenge to implement these values literally in a context where formal instructions in social studies program is all about civic obedience, where knowledge of the true concept of democratic values, themes and practices remain largely uncertain (ASSP, Nairobi, 1985). Consequently, it

becomes necessary to reform the education system to permit learning through inquiry, discussion and reflection, to equip lecturers with appropriate skills, attitudes and knowledge of democratic concepts, to recreate and utilize informal structures, which were the traditional mode of education, in interactive class sessions.

The Role of Stakeholders

The demand for change in the education system and the demand for democratic education model must necessarily come from the people—from private individuals, the 'think tank', the academia, political interest groups, professional interest groups such as organized lecturers' interests, the church, NGOs with educational interests, and student bodies (Ake, 1996, p. 36). Policy process and policy change are essentially political and so these groups in Kenya can mobilize for political action to bring about the required education policy outcome and democratic political structures. For instance, they may demand for a policy change in education training which is capable of producing a teaching force with a fuller appreciation of democratic concepts, values and beliefs. They could also demand for policy change that enables the design of education curricula, especially formal social studies program, which supports and sustains democratic education in the country.

Youths and Democratic Education in the Kenya

As part of stakeholders and beneficiaries of democratic education, the youth should be involved in negotiation for change in the education policy processes through their articulate and active leaders of their groups such as students' and lecturers' associations. Youth political mobilization can serve the purpose of bringing about change in the Kenyan learning system through their effective input in public decision processes as well as increasing democratic consciousness among them. However, youth political mobilization in Kenya appears to fall short of the requirements and expectations of African charter of AU States while existing platforms for youth mobilization such as Youth Parliament merely provide opportunities for youth training in leadership skills, group decision making and service to the nation. They fall short of sharpening democratic consciousness among the youths.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper recommends a model of democracy towards which learning in Kenya must incorporate some practical aspects and elements of traditional African structures and philosophical concepts as the bedrock for developing a democratic culture. This spirit of tolerance both in the governors and the governed can support and sustain representative democratic structures in Africa and the Kenya because lecturers and teachers will not teach students to merely conform but will structure learning to permit critical thinking, de-emphasize authority dependence, and allow for the understanding of the learners, know their world and the language with which they relate with their world. The education system must make use of tolerant and progressive educators to encourage learners to think freely and democratically and encourage learning through discussion and reflection. Wisdom teachings of African ancestors need to be taught and African folklore employed to teach democratic values and beliefs. Lecturers and teachers must be equipped to become effective vehicles for democratic education. The teaching force must necessarily develop appropriate knowledge, skills, concepts and attitudes of democracy while citizenship education and social science studies in the Kenya have to be designed in ways that teach democratic values.

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