

Essentialist Education as Foundation for Lifelong Learning: A case for Development of a Versatile, Skilled Human Resource in Kenya

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Abstract: Ideally, education has a default role of developing skilled human resource necessary for development of civilizations, going by the human capital theory. Accordingly, an analytical study (philosophical analysis), complemented by a phenomenological one, were conducted in a research that sought to establish the ingredients of an education that could guarantee development of a skilled human resource in Kenya. This followed a reported deficit in the latter. The said methods were therefore employed to examine the manner in which education was conceived and practiced in Kenya, and the extent to which the former had succeeded in fulfilling its role of developing a skilled human resource. Instructively, goals of education are evaluated against observed outcomes. Accordingly, a deficiency would certainly indicate a problem, necessitating an inquiry such as this. Even so, today's world is such that skilling per se is not sufficient. This follows the reality wherein work environments and requirements are dynamic, rendering many individuals redundant. Consequently, a kind of education that will accommodate the fluidity of today's careers and occupations is needed. Hence, arising from the study, the current paper vouches for an essentialist education for the sole reason that it creates room for further training and retooling, ostensibly in the face of redundancy and obsolescence that saddle most careers today. Further, this kind of education prepares individuals for trainee programs and on-job apprenticeships that are becoming popular with most employers, especially the emerging situation that is characterized by increasing mismatch between existent education and the needs of industry. The government therefore ought to be clear on its educational philosophy, and subsequently, move to align education policies with fiscal plans to guarantee proper implementation of the curriculum, hence, development of a skilled human resource.

Keywords: Adaptiveness, Education, Essentialism, Human resource, Kenya, philosophical analysis, Skilling, Versatile.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is drawn from a larger philosophical study which sought to establish suitability of the Kenyan education as concerns development of relevant skilled human resource. Indeed, one of the study's research questions sought to establish the kind of education that could lead to development of skilled human resource relevant to the needs of society. This was in response to persistent public sentiments to the effect that the system of education that prevailed was churning out individuals who were either poorly skilled in their respective careers, or equipped with obsolete knowledge and skills (RoK, 2012; Maria *et al*, 2018.). Instructively, preparation of workers to meet the requirements of the modern workplace begins with development of a strong generic foundation of skills (World Bank, 2013). Such a foundation finds home in a robust, responsive education system. Whereas Kenya has often responded by reviewing its system of education as a remedial measure (RoK, 2015; RoK, 2019), this study remained quizzical of the fate of those who had experienced the former systems, in this case the 8-4-4 one. Was the country content with declaring them as irredeemable failures? What recourse did they have, given that they have a life to lead? Can systems of education be made responsive to industrial dynamics?

Whereas one cannot change the past, there is so much that can be done to make the future relatively manageable. It is on this backdrop that the study set out to inquire into the possibility of formulating a versatile education system that would afford individuals options of retooling, once their knowledge and skills became obsolete. Instructively, this thought found grounds in the spirit of lifelong learning as advanced by UNESCO (2018; 2020). Among its key messages on how the world can shift to a culture of lifelong learning by the year 2050, the organization recommends that the workplace should be more engaged in training, in which case employers should create opportunities and widen access to learning while on the job, and consequently recognize the outcomes of such learning. Others include establishing lifelong learning as a common good, recognizing lifelong learning as a human right, and promoting interdisciplinary research as well as intersectoral collaboration (UNESCO, 2020, P. 9). Delors (1996) and European Commission (2000) view lifelong learning as that which transcends school and college education, stretching throughout an individual's lifetime. In a nut shell, lifelong learning enables individuals to deal with change and realize their future aspirations. Granted, what should be pursued, this study posits, is the development of an educational foundation upon which individuals will be socialized into lifelong learning so that they turn out adaptive and resilient in the face of change. Accordingly, basic education ought to be formulated thus.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

In its bid to inquire into the kind of education that could help the country meet its national goals of developing a relevant skilled human resource, this study employed both content analysis and philosophical reflection methods. Here, various documents in form of national education policies; education reports from task forces, committees and commissions; curriculum framework; sessional papers; and other public documentaries and commentaries on the state of affairs in the country were assembled and their content analysed in terms of inherent educational purpose, philosophies, theories, and scope. Eventually, a meta-analysis – philosophical reflection – was carried out with an objective of establishing grounds, clarity, and consistency in the education systems proffered *vis à vis* the set educational outcomes.

As an evaluation criterion, the study adopted William Spady's Outcomes-based Education model – OBE – (Spady, 1994). This followed an observation that all the systems of education formulated by the country reflected the spirit of OBE in principle. Consequently, there was need to establish the extent to which the attendant education practice remained true to the tenets of OBE. Instructively, OBE entails organizing curricular activities around essential things that learners must be able to successfully do at the end of the learning experiences (Spady, 1994; Sainy, 2018; Killen, 2007). OBE therefore roots for clear expected learning outcomes so that all educational activities converge on them. If, for instance, the country aspired to develop particular skills in its citizenry, such was to be clearly provided for in its education system. The country would set conditions right for developing adaptive individuals if at all this was its intended purpose or end product of the education process (what Aristotle would refer to as *telos*). In short, the system would provide for educational experiences which would predispose individuals to competencies that would render them trainable in various fields. Accordingly, this would call for an education that would equip individuals with cross-cutting essential knowledge and skills which would render them adaptive to the ever changing work-related environments.

According to Acquah *et al* (2017), the essentialist educational philosophy espouses five major principles. Firstly, students are taught established fundamentals of education that portray a universal characteristic. Secondly, all learners have to be exposed to particular core subjects including philosophy, literature, grammar, science and such great works, which, for them, train the intellect by inculcating wisdom and sense. Thirdly, certain knowledge, designated as core, has to be identified and imparted onto learners systematically and in a disciplined way. Fourthly, the child must be seen for what they are – learners – hence should be shaped and developed accordingly. Lastly, education should be seen as preparation for life rather than an imitation of life.

Pursuant to the foregoing, this study identified the Essentialist educational philosophy to augment its theoretical framework, owing to the fact that the country's envisaged educational goals presupposed major elements of essentialism. In brief, proponents of the Essentialist educational philosophy held the view that some properties of objects were essential to the latter; hence, the objects would cease to exist if such properties were amiss (Britannica Online Encyclopedia). The philosophy finds company in William Bagley and Herman Holme, who stress the need for teaching not only essential but enduring knowledge that has been accumulated from years of experience (Tan, 2006). For them, education could not be contemplated without abstracting its essentials. Consequently, there were basic knowledge components that each education worth its while was to constitute; components that were not to be haphazardly identified, but selected on the basis of their productivity.

In the course of the study from which this paper was derived, the researcher established that essentialism, together with perennialism, had been accorded little premium compared to progressivism and reconstructivism. Instructively, the latter educational philosophies were advanced as the much preferred ones, with the former being viewed as conservative (Uyangor

et al, 2016). Regardless, the study did not find compelling evidence that Kenya subscribed to the supposed progressive educational philosophies. Instead, there were many indications pointing to the fact that the country adhered to educational thoughts which were more inclined to essentialism than progressivism. For instance, learners came to school to be exposed to an already designed curriculum so that theirs was to conform by following whatever their teachers dictated. But again, the teachers would not be blamed; there was a syllabus to be adhered to, and consequent national examinations which determined one's future. Clearly, such a situation did not predicate a typical learner-centred education that is ordinarily characterized by student participation in choice of learning experiences as well as construction of knowledge.

Be that as it may, the study focused on how the country would best achieve its educational goals – specifically that of developing not only a skilled but also versatile human resource – within its education framework. Here, the versatility would be guaranteed through adaptiveness which, incidentally, lifelong learning provides for. This paper therefore pitches a case for adoption of the progressive aspects of essentialism, such as the identification and pursuit of core knowledges and skills that are essential for lifelong learning. The question that should disturb one's mind, then, is how to establish this essential knowledge. Is there a possibility of creating knowledge that will be enduring, given that the world is in a state of flux? If so, what should be its components? How should the latter be determined?

According to the study, the starting point should be establishment of a robust educational philosophy such as essentialism, as long as the choice can reasonably be justified. The place of educational philosophy has been canvassed times without number. According to Nodding (1995), this branch of applied philosophy deals in issues that touch on the aim of education, pedagogy, policy, the learning process, and curriculum development. In brief compass, an educational philosophy is the string that runs through the whole affair that is considered education (Magulod, 2017). Accordingly, any goal that is designated as a function of education, for instance development of skilled workforce, ought to be seen as a product of the whole process contemplated by a given educational philosophy.

On the basis of the foregoing, the said study vouched for the essentialist philosophy, ostensibly its perennialist overtones, since it predicated aspects that are typical of the concept of transfer; thus, what one learned in a particular discipline would be instrumental in helping them learn other concepts that were not directly related to the initial ones. At this juncture, it is instructive to refer back to one of the overarching principles of essentialism, that is, a core curriculum that is in line with the prevailing knowledges, as well as preparation of learners for a changing society (Null, 2007; Martin & Loomis, 2007). This alone illustrates the potential that an essentialist type of education has as far as development of versatile human resource is concerned.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Essentialism, Deeper and Lifelong Learning

This paper has already indicated its preference for essentialism partly because the latter presupposes lifelong learning. Indeed, lifelong learning is at the centre of any successful education system. As mentioned before, new skills keep on cropping up, rendering most occupations obsolete. This implies that individuals must be ready to adapt to emergent situations; a subtle way of recommending retooling. Now, an individual can only retool if they have pliable minds and attitudes capable of re-inventing and adapting to new situations. This is where lifelong learning finds relevance, lending credence to the maxim that education has no end.

The concept of deeper learning is not far-fetched from that of lifelong learning. Defined as the art of helping learners develop transferable knowledge applicable to solving novel problems or responding effectively to new situations (Pellegrino and Hilton, 2012), deeper learning cannot be overemphasized enough. Instructively, reference to The Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO 1997) helps illustrate the proximity between deeper learning and lifelong learning, wherein the latter stands out for its role in developing autonomy and sense of responsibility in people and communities; and reinforcing their capacity to deal with transformations of economic and socio-cultural nature. Further, lifelong learning covers both formal and informal education, together with training, such that individuals who continue to learn stand higher chances of gaining employment and having stable income (Maclean and Wilson, 2009).

B. Overtones of Essentialism in Kenyan Education

Kenya has recorded three major reforms of its education systems since it gained political independence in 1963. Instructively, the first system of education under the new dispensation was the 7-4-2-3 one, where learners spent 7 years in primary school, 4 years in secondary school, 2 years in high school (Advanced Level) and at least 3 years at the university – depending on one's programme of study (RoK, 1964). The main purpose of this education, coming immediately after its

independence from the British colony, was to develop a skilled workforce that would replace the departed colonial personnel – administrators, teachers, medics, technicians, among others (ibid). At that point in time, literacy, numeracy and general science were the essentials, since some jobs – such as basic clerical work – just required basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. With time, more knowledge and skills would be required. This explains why unemployment levels rose afterwards, since most citizens had only a modicum of knowledge and skills (Mse, 2016; Inyega *et al*, 2021)). It should be noted that one of the objectives of the education was to develop individuals capable of adapting to change (an essentialist ideal).

In response to the foregoing situation, more reforms were carried out in the country's education system. Notably, the Mackay report of 1981 (GoK, 1981) recommended a new system of education which would develop in individuals knowledge and skills that could make them self-reliant. Consequently, the 8-4-4 system of education (8 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary schooling and 4 years of university education) was established. The system had basic literacy and numeracy, basic science, humanities and technical subjects as essential knowledge – at least at the primary school level. This meant that anyone dropping out of school at the initial level would find some meaningful occupation around which they would built their livelihood. This was reflected in the kind of subjects taught at this level – English, Kiswahili, Mathematics, Religion, Geography, Science, Agriculture, Business Education, Music, Art and Craft, Home Science, and History.

This system prevailed until recently when the country adopted the Competency-based curriculum, following recommendation from Prof. Douglas Odhiambo-led commission (RoK 2012a) and a subsequent Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012 (RoK, 2012b). Here, the point is that Kenya had an element of essentialism – where certain disciplines were considered critical and therefore compulsory, and where teachers had a bigger voice in relation to what students learnt. Ostensibly, it was largely a teacher-centred education where learners were exposed to ready-made knowledge which the country thought was good for them. Whereas this study does not approve of a teacher-centred education (a weakness of the essentialist philosophy), it nonetheless vouches for the aspect of identifying essential courses which every learner must study if they should remain relatively adaptive to the ever-changing world. Such include literacy, mathematics, general science, and digital literacy.

With such knowledge, an individual will be in a position to learn new trades just in case they are not comfortable with their occupation, or in the likely event that their jobs become obsolete. Further, digital advancements have necessitated workplace environments to change in quicksilver fashion, hence, individuals need be socialized into lifelong learning so that such changes do not pose major problems for them. Individuals ought to be prepared to operate machines, for instance, without necessarily being replaced by them. In similar manner, individuals ought to be inspired by existent technologies to create more advanced, if not similar solutions, a feat that can only be achieved if they are ready to learn continuously in a bid to upgrade their knowledge and skills. All these notwithstanding, the question of education practice cannot be divorced from milieu. This paper observed that a curriculum alone, however progressive, meant nothing if it was not implemented to the letter. Just like a ship remains useless on land, so is a curriculum that is not resourced in terms of the requisite personnel and materials.

In relation to the foregoing, this paper – in line with the original study – proposed a structured relationship between the country's education policies and its fiscal plans. Implicitly, it emerged that the country's previous systems of education had partly failed owing to poor implementation (Mse, 2015; 2016). The latter, this paper argued, partly resulted from lack of a shared philosophy of education. A good philosophy would spell out the purpose of schools (Magulod, 2017), hence, presuppose how the schools should look like if at all they are to achieve such a purpose. For instance, learning environments ought to provide for authentic tasks – practical application of knowledge – so that basic skills like farming and commerce are tried out in schools. Further, the basic level of education should comprise skills, knowledges and attitudes that once learned, can facilitate ease of trainability. But above all, this level, being the dominant qualification of majority of the Kenyan labour – ought to be made accessible to all. This will boost development of a skilled human resource since the products of the system will possess some basic skills for direct employment, if not, they will stand better chances of being trained on the job.

It is common knowledge that educational institutions cannot proffer all solutions for industry. Innovations, advancements in technology, and many other needs-based solutions emanate from industry. Educational institutions may not be in a position to adjust as fast, or even tweak their programmes to suit every slight change in the operations of industry. The best it can do, however, is to prepare individuals who are pliable and ready for upgrading or even being trained by industry. In a nutshell, the role of industry in preparing requisite human resource ought to equally be investigated, so that their relationship with educational institutions is clear.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has raised issues concerning Kenya's prevalent mix-up of educational approaches in relation to its expected learning outcomes. Specifically, it has illustrated how difficult it is for the country to achieve its goal of developing skilled and versatile human resource unless it adopts a favourable educational philosophy which will provide direction in matters to do with purpose of education and presupposed educational activities. Accordingly, the paper has recommended the essentialist philosophy of education in its progressive sense, owing to its provision for perennial and essential knowledge and skills, as well as its proclivity for lifelong learning. These two, the paper contends, will be instrumental in enabling individuals to have a wide range of training areas, as well as make them pliable so that they can easily adapt to the dynamic work environments through retooling where and when necessary. Indeed, the essentialist theory is not entirely new to the country's education scene, for the original study had observed that it existed albeit in a subtle, grounded form. Granted, there is need for its deliberate pursuit so that the country's education sector operates consciously and with certainty; a move that will increase chances of achieving expected learning outcomes. It is instructive that recently, the country adopted a competency-based system of education which seeks to produce relevantly skilled individuals. This feat that can only be achieved through a clear and consistent educational philosophy, such that all players – learners, teachers, and the government – are clear about their responsibilities.

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