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Sustainable Development through Education: The Role of Private Higher Education Institutions in Africa

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Abstract

Sustainable development is defined differently by various scholars, though they all agree that it is a process in which we learn to build our capacity to live more sustainably in the future, a notion which is related to a learning that is multi-disciplinary and diverse (Scott and Gough 2003). The connection between sustainable development and higher learning institutions is that the latter are expected to produce effective citizens who have values and capacities, and who are dedicated to securing the needs and capacities of the future generation. Thus, the paper discusses the role of private higher education institutions in Africa in molding citizens and communities that make the optimum and sustainable use of Africa's natural resources, and influencing policy makers and scholars to incorporate indigenous knowledge into the current education system so that sustainable development is secured in the continent.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Education, private higher education, institutions, Africa

Introduction

The concept of sustainable development, which was first popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its 1987 report entitled "Our Common Future", appears to demonstrate the necessity of global change in handling and understanding the feature of human development. This global change should be the concern of the higher learning institutions as they deliver education to societies that address their crucial and challenging issues, and hence the higher learning institutions need to bear the responsibility of bringing about change that comprehends and implements the principles of sustainable development. Higher learning institutions in Africa ought to deliver education that focuses on sustainable development in such a manner that it nurtures the world of tomorrow, prepares individuals and societies with all the necessary skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to fit in the periphery of sustainable development. On top of that, their teaching should pave a way to securing human and economic well-being and ensuring value and worth use of natural resources.

In order to achieve sustainable development through higher education in Africa, it seems indispensable that scholars, learners and senior members of communities are empowered with the indigenous knowledge and formal education to promote and assess alternative strategies to achieve the ultimate objective of sustainability. Thus, the paper discusses the role of Private Higher Education Institutions in integrating Africa's Indigenous Knowledge with the current education system to secure sustainable development.

Learning and Sustainable development

Sustainable development is defined differently by various scholars, though they all agree that it is a process in which we learn to build our capacity to live more sustainably in the future, a notion which is related to a learning that is multi-disciplinary and diverse (Scott and Gough 2003).

The relationship between sustainable development and learning in the context of higher learning institutions encompasses the skill of learning to learn in a new and varied environment, which should be practiced not only by scholars but also by students and members of societies in Africa. Also it should include raising appropriate questions with regards to environment and development affairs, which would assist in assessing, analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting information to reach sensible conclusions. These skills would play a vital role in equipping African societies to tackle the challenges of environmental and developmental issues.

The notion of sustainable development is open to various interpretations, as it is a dynamic process, which may reflect not only ideological but also contextual differences. The bottom line is to employ the idea of sustainable development to reflect on the nature of our world, including vulnerability and risk, on key emerging solutions of what is wrong and how we should work towards sustainability and what it implies for tertiary institutions.

A tremendous value is demonstrated in the context of tertiary institutions in mirroring the various interpretations of sustainable development rising in international forums, local and national governments, the corporate sector, education and other key players. It is worth considering to thinking critically what interests these interpretations mirror, what the ethical and practical implications of following any one particular interpretation would be, and how these interpretations shape and impact the learning processes in the learning institutions and how this in turn may shape and nurture society.

Higher Learning Institutions and Education for Sustainable Development

Higher learning institutions in Africa are faced with a huge challenge of bringing about education for sustainable development in the 21st century. UNESCO recommends the following areas to be addressed by Africa's higher learning institutions in developing education for sustainable development:

- Increasing the relevance of teaching and research for the societal process leading to more sustainable and discouraging unsustainable patterns of life;
- Improving the quality and efficiency of teaching and research;
- Bridging the gap between science and education, and traditional knowledge and education;
- Strengthening interactions with actors outside the institution, in particularly local communities and businesses; and

- Introducing decentralized and flexible management concepts.

Moreover, UNESCO emphasizes the significance of multi-disciplinary approaches in dealing with societal problems, which are more of multifaceted problems, and hence higher learning institutions should provide conducive atmosphere for learners to be problem solvers in their societies. Thus, according to UNESCO (2005), learning environments ought to:

- offer access to scientific knowledge of good quality;
- enable students obtain the competencies needed to work together in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams in a participatory process; and
- bring the global dimension into individual learning environments.

Therefore, higher learning institutions in Africa should bridge the discrepancy between knowledge generation and the application of this knowledge to society, which is of paramount importance for development, creation and innovation of welfare. Furthermore, higher learning institutions should take an upper hand in the process of life-long learning in society by integrating indigenous knowledge and the modern education system, and ought to expose young African learners not only to formal education but also to an informal learning, skill training and life-long training, in which these higher learning institutions should focus not only on teaching but also on research activities that are community oriented for sustainable development. These perspectives could be encapsulated by the existing theories of education, which are the critical education, instrumentalists, conflict, afrocentric, and functionalist theories of education.

The Critical education theory

This theory was originated from the ideology of Marxism, which views higher learning institutions as a dependent organization because the views and life styles of the ordinary people are promoted. Rorty (1979) deliberates the theory by pin pointing the distinction between the contribution of education in promoting individuals' capacities and adopting the dominant ideology, which is better explained by the current theory. In other words, the theory promotes western culture and ideology in a school ethos without considering the useful local indigenous knowledge.

In Eritrea, for instance, farmers were given a short-term training about the advantages of integrated farming using sophisticated and heavy machinery, an idea which was borrowed from the west. It was tried but disproved to be useful due to two reasons. In the first place, the land became out of use, where there was no possibility of using it again, though it had been fertile. Nevertheless, if the farmers used local knowledge and instrument to plough their land, probably the land would not be out of use, and its fertility would be retained. Secondly, people, who did not work hard, got equal share of those who worked hard, which encouraged dependency rather than the culture of hard work and independency. There seems to be a tendency among some African scholars that this indigenous knowledge is not worth considering, though it appears to play a great role in securing resource for the future generations.

Also, in Ethiopia there is a traditional medicine made from plants for the disease of tap worm. Though these medicines such as tap worm tree and *Meteri* (a kind of leaf baked like bread and taken as a medicine) are taken by people, they do not seem to be considered as worth medicines because the knowledge is indigenous or local. Thus, this theory promotes the dominant ideology rather than the local knowledge, which is associated with the culture and identity of the local people.

The Instrumentalist Education Theory

John Dewey, who is credited with the creation of this theory is recognized by his support for teaching through experimental observation. Education is perceived to be a means of putting out culture, which carries norms, values, customs and the like. Dewey, who had worked much on culture and society, believed in pragmatism which was credible in a society that is most honored, harmonious and prosperous with itself (Ryan, 1995)

Dewey was associated with progressive education in which he argued that schools should focus on the themes that deal with individuals' feelings and thoughts. Even though there was argument that the modern education was more pragmatic than the traditional one, Dewey disagreed to dismiss traditional education as less pragmatic (Johnson, 1995).

He emphasized the complexity of coming up with an educational experience that would generate a discipline and an approach to the syllabus, and the teacher's authority created out of experience in a classroom situation. The bottom line is learning wisdom from experience, which is a full human activity, and thereby being a commendable communicator (Ryan, 1995), and hence practically an individual manages all his/her activities in the real life situation.

Eventually, this theory underscores that learning comes out from pragmatism, where education affects the learner's conduct, and this influence appears to be reproduced in a pragmatic way in a certain social environment.

The Conflict Theory

This theory considers the purpose of education to be inculcating social inequality and maintaining the power of those who dominate society. Conflict theorists look at the same functions of education as functionalists, who regard education as a useful contribution to an orderly society. Nevertheless, conflict theorists see the educational system as perpetuating the status quo by dulling the lower classes into being obedient workers.

Although functionalists and conflict theorists view education as a tool that implements sorting, they seem to disprove how it endorses the sorting. While functionalists assert that schools are engaged in sorting on the basis on advantages, conflict theorists stipulate that schools nurture individuals in the working class to view themselves as a lower-class member of society, which is called the 'hidden curriculum', according to the conflict theorists.

The theory is better reflected in a situation where, for example, learners from the wealthy family have an advantage of racing ahead those who are in the lower class family. The former are proud of their dominant cultures, and this becomes an advantage for them to feel superior and face any kind of challenges, whereas those from the lower class suffer from detecting their identity and culture, as they are considered to be alien. Such learners are sorted and grouped together because they are thought to have the same learning intricacy and problems, and hence should get a special attention, a pretext to make them feel inferior. All in all, conflict theorists see education not as a social benefit or opportunity, but as a powerful means of maintaining power structures and creating a docile work force for capitalism.

The Functionalist Theory

This theory considers education as a tool to address the needs of society and as a bridge to pass on basic knowledge and skills to the next generation. Durkheim (the founder of functionalist theory) identified the latent role of education as one of socializing people into society's mainstream. This "moral education," as he called it, helped form a more-cohesive social structure by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, which echoes the historical concern of "Americanizing" immigrants.

Also, functionalists consider that education plays a role in maintaining core values and social control, which may be characterized as endorsing the political and economic systems that originally fueled education. Thus learners learn following schedules, directions, meeting deadlines, and obeying authority.

Furthermore, the theory regards education as sorting, where students are grouped based on merits. It is deliberated that the society needs the most capable people get channeled into the most important occupations. Schools single out the high achievers in the classroom or in any standardized test and are prepared for college education. Sociologists Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis, and Wilbert Moore referred to this as social placement. This procedure was taken as a beneficial function in society.

Functionalists stipulate the twofold function of education as maintaining and changing the culture. It is believed that as students move to college and beyond, they usually become increasingly liberal as they face a variety of perspectives. Thus, more educated individuals are generally more liberal, while less educated people tend to develop conservatism. Moreover, the focus on research at most institutions of higher education puts them on the cutting edge of changes in knowledge, and, in many cases, changes in values as well. Therefore, while the major role of education is to preserve and pass on knowledge and skills, education is also in the business of transforming them.

The Afrocentric Theory of Education

These theorists see education or knowledge from the center of African consciousness, and have had the deep and rich experiences of Africa. They have taken initiatives to mirror not only their own but also other's experiences of Africa. Moreover, they believe that Africa owns a particular and

peculiar body of knowledge, which came into being after accumulated experiences of centuries in Africa (Asante, 1995; Ayittey, 2008).

After some time, these experiences turned into systems of knowledge called African Traditional Knowledge System dealing with particular issues of technology, agriculture, crafts, traditional healing etc. within the spectrum of Africa. Thus, education is one of the systems making up the African Traditional Knowledge Systems (Omolewa, 2007).

Patterns of Education in Africa

Education opens the gate for the younger generation to take responsibilities and ensure the continuity of generations and cultures. Africa is home to the earliest humans with rich experience in caring and educating children within the family system. Callaghan (1998) asserts that Africa is well known of bringing up its own children through African culture because human kind naturally works to equip the future generation with all the necessary skills so that the social, economic, cultural and political life of the society is improved tremendously. The root cause of this improvement could be the traditions of the people with an influence from the environment. Africa's current education system originates from Islamic-Arabic education and Indigenous knowledge or sometimes called Traditional Education (Aggarwal, 1982), though the paper focuses on the discussion of the latter one.

When raising the origin of the education system in Africa, there is a Eurocentric view which stipulates that part of education is writing, and Africa's education was not written until it was conquered by the Arabic-Islamic and European education systems, which seems to imply that there was no education practice in the continent. Nevertheless, Africa's education system was attacked and confined to the capacity of childbearing, mainly due to the ideological and technological influence of western education. It appears to be imperative to consider the Africa's indigenous knowledge and the principle of moving from the 'known to the unknown' (Dipholo, 2013), if the current Africa's education system is to play a pivotal role in securing sustainable development in the continent. This may be the reason why relevant education that promotes African perceptions and sustainable development has proved to be a failure, and hence private higher education institutions in Africa should take a leading role in bridging this gap.

Discussion

Indigenous Knowledge and sustainable development in Africa

In Africa's indigenous knowledge, the educational concepts and practices are there, though they may not be disciplined as arts, science, agriculture etc. But the system blends all skills and knowledge of every issue of life into curriculum like the practices of living in the family and community. The curriculum is not written but tacitly organized in sequence to fit the expected milestones of different developmental stages that the culture perceives or recognizes (Nsamenang, 2005). This education system gives children pragmatic education that helps me survive in the society, teaches them to be skilled, respectable, reliable and cooperative in a certain social life of the society, and communicate with different social networks, (unlike the functionalist or conflict

education system), and hence it may be argued that the curriculum is needs-based. On top of that one's spiritual, social and political roles are considered in the system (Gwanfogbe, 2006),

Moreover, Africa's indigenous knowledge is based on traditions, where mothers are the first teachers of their children, as in the case of teaching them language, sanitation, ethics and autistics. Also, it incorporates physical training, but not in a European fashion, as the skill is inherited through social life and leisure activities, though there are organized trainings and competitions such as wrestling, swimming, canoe races, running, hunting and farming. The other activities are stated by (Gwanfogbe, 2011) in the following manner:

The development of character and communal spirit took various forms in different communities. Some used the wrestling exercises to instill the spirit of reconciliation and solidarity. Such healthy competitive spirits were also taught to peer-group right from the early age. In some communities mock wars were organized. Usually in all societies, both winners and losers were congratulated and sometimes rewarded because the essence of each competition was not to win but to acquire the spirit of gallantry, tolerance and solidarity. Aspects of communal solidarity were taught by the establishment of laws (usually referred to by Eurocentrists as taboos) against killing, witchcraft, stealing, adultery, incest, disloyalty, infidelity, perfidy, corruption, etc. The divulging of the secrets of the society was tantamount to committing treasonable felony against the ethnic community and very often attracted ostracism. These measures were taken to ensure the imbuelement of the spirit of honesty, kindness, uprightness, decency and cooperation. It was commonly accepted to remain childless than to have an uncouth child who would bring dishonour to the family and the society. When direct parental care and intervention was no longer required, children were better with their peer groups. The boys and girls who were poised for the responsibility of adulthood were assessed for proficiency on the basis of their social, moral, intellectual, and practical competency in peer cultures. Age-grades, i.e., children of the same community who identify with cohort members at all developmental stages are a common feature of many African cultures, as the learned from one another (P.44)

Moreover, indigenous knowledge addresses the ecosystems of the environment and efficient way of using natural resource in a sustainable manner, though it seems that it has been ignored by most African governments due to the massive influence of the former colonizers, who still show a zeal to rule Africans by impacting their standard of living and above all their independent mind and knowledge. Indigenous knowledge has a potentially great idea in making decisions about food security, human and animal health, education, and natural resources management, and hence it may play an important role in promoting cost-effective survival strategies and sustainable development in the continent. Thus it would be suggested that Africa's private higher learning institutions take an initiative to incorporate this rich and practical indigenous knowledge into the current education system, which may play a great role in securing sustainable development in the continent. There is nothing new about the concept of sustainable development, as it had been practiced in Africa long before the invaders spoilt everything, including abusing our natural resource (Dipholo 2013).

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the theories of education and the contribution of indigenous or traditional knowledge in securing sustainable development in Africa. Also, the paper argues that the kind of education system being practiced in Africa seems to promote western values and cultures rather than Africa's. Education in Africa may not play a role in achieving sustainable development, unless the students and scholars are exposed to the local knowledge first before learning the western knowledge. Thus, Africa's private higher learning institutions should play a tremendous role in promoting indigenous knowledge, which is the first step in achieving sustainable development in Africa. Part of the role could be to incorporate the indigenous knowledge into the current formal education system, and hence securing resource for the future generation, which is the definition of sustainable development, may not be a dream, as the indigenous knowledge already has the solution if it is formalized and modernized.

Recommendations

- In order to secure sustainable development in Africa, private higher learning institutions in Africa should fund more research studies to dig out the potential of indigenous knowledge.
- Private higher learning institutions as well as the public ones in Africa should consider the notion of blending indigenous knowledge into the current education system because learning should take place from the known to the unknown.
- Africa's private higher learning institutions should invite elderly people who have profound indigenous knowledge to pass on to the university scholars and students, as the indigenous knowledge is mostly oral.

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