Education and training in multicultural societies

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Africans post-independence preoccupation with educational reform has a long history, probably dating back to the early stages of the colonial impact which, particularly impressive in its technological effects, awakened in the African mind the need for more and better knowledge. Since independence itself came to Africa largely through the efforts of educated men with trained minds, it is understandable that African states should regard the education of their population and the training of necessary experts as the most logical next step towards economic parity with the industrialised world.

Educational objectives in Africa

Representatives of 35 African states met at Addis Ababa in May 1961 to consider problems relative to the development of education in Africa. In the absence of basic statistical and other data, the conference could do no more than outline a plan for educational development over the next twenty years, subject to periodic review in accordance with socio-economic progress in the various African regions.

Several conferences were, in fact, subsequently called for this purpose, but the 1961 conference at Addis Ababa still remains the most articulate statement regarding short-term and long-term objectives. These were based on various common needs, the most important of which can be summarised as follows:

- quantitative and qualitative improvements in educational facilities;
- reorientation of educational systems to the socio-economic needs of Africa in accordance with a generally expressed wish for emphasis on African cultures to balance outside influences deriving from exposure to scientific and technical training;
- unrestricted access to education and training for adults as well as the school-going youth; and
- massive international assistance to help cover the high cost of educational expansion to which many African states were reportedly contributing from 19 to 25 percent of their gross national product.

In discussions on priorities, the conference expressed itself in favour of emphasis on secondary education which provided the bulk of secondary level skills such as teachers, technicians, agricultural assistants, nurses, bookkeepers, clerks, secretaries, etc. Primary education was placed second, closely followed by adult education and in-service training schemes. Higher education (university level) was placed last, since positions for people with advanced qualifications were relatively few and could be filled by expatriates until developing African states could supply their own needs. In addition, curriculum reform and teacher training figured prominently in suggestions for educational adjustments.

Amongst the short-term objectives of African states, as interpreted by the conference, were the following:

- an annual rise of 5 percent in primary level enrolment, resulting in an increase from 40 to 51 percent over the short-term period, 1961-1966;
- an extension of secondary school enrolment from the 1961 figure of 3 percent to 9 percent of the appropriate age group; and
- special attention to teacher training and adult education programmes.

Long-term targets (1961-1981) included the following:

- primary education to be free, compulsory and universal;
- secondary education to be available to 30 percent of those who completed primary school;
- higher education to be provided, preferably in Africa, for 20 percent of
the pupils completing secondary schooling; and
—improvements in the quality of
African schools and universities.

Subsequent developments and problems

While noting a significant improvement towards the objectives of the Addis Ababa conference, Aimé Damiba, Director of the Educational Planning Service in Upper Volta, found that African states had in general failed to meet specified targets. Reviewing progress made in the light of the 1976 conference at Lagos he pointed out, for example, that the short-fall in primary enrolments was greater in 1972 than in 1965 and that the projected 100 percent enrolment figure was missed by 23.5 percent. Drop-out rates remained high, since only 46 percent of the pupils who had entered the first grade in 1965 reached the sixth grade in 1970.

While pupil-teacher ratios were approximately on target, the percentage of qualified teachers remained relatively low at just under 50 percent in 1965 and 57 percent in 1970. The main problems experienced by African states can be briefly summarised.

Regional differences

In spite of the collective approach adopted at Addis Ababa, Damiba's review of educational development clearly indicated that regional differences prevented certain African states from meeting common targets as effectively as did some of the others. Of the four groups into which Damiba classified the 44 participant states at the 1976 Lagos conference according to enrolment ratios, at least two were considered to have no hope of achieving their goals for several decades, while only one group seemed likely to do so in the near future.

In South Africa the number of schools for blacks has increased at an average annual rate of 6.8 percent over a ten-year period from 1967 to 1977. The previously mentioned 3.8 percent increase in the number of pupils would seem to indicate a convenient convergence of these two trends at some point where, in the foreseeable future, educational facilities would be adequate. However, calculations based on the 1970 official census, using a conservative population growth rate of 2.2 percent, indicate that only about half of the 7 102 538 school-age children could be accommodated in 1980. The present capacity of existing schools would therefore have to be doubled almost immediately in order to meet current requirements. Like the rest of Africa, South Africa could benefit from an intensive study of the latest developments in educational hardware and its most effective management. It is certainly not enough to acquire the latest and best in buildings or equipment without providing for the management skills required for their practical design and efficient operation. Available facilities may well be inefficiently utilised because of poor management and an outdated classroom system.

Attitudes towards education

It has often been reported, inter alia by such eminent writers as Harbison, a well-known UNESCO consultant on manpower and training, that attitudes towards education in Africa are often unrealistic, leading in the first instance to a confusion of certificates and competence. Such a certificate — often the first obtainable — is regarded as a status symbol entitling the holder to membership of a privileged class. Its attainment becomes a short-term ambition unrelated to the true relationship between qualifications, experience and productivity. Holders of such certificates seldom pause to reflect upon the marketability of the skills they have acquired. Such attitudes, common to the rest of Africa, are also found among many blacks in South Africa, although increasing numbers of competent men have successfully set themselves up in responsible positions within the urban network of commerce and industry. Too many blacks in South Africa none the less interpret educational attainments in socio-political rather than realistic economic terms.

In the second instance, policymakers in Africa are too often inclined to approach education as a panacea for all socio-economic ills. In a sense, it may well have been one of the misconceptions responsible for the enthusiasm with which some emergent African states pounced upon educational reform as a means of making themselves economically as well as politically independent. In assuming correctly that education is a most important instrument of social transformation, they were not necessarily prevented from confusing their priorities. It is not often realised that education must be used to build up some kind of socio-economic infrastructure to support the technological advancements so fervently desired. As pointed out by Pierre Liard-Vogt of Neslé in a recently reported interview, many developing countries want to produce goods which did not even exist in the industrialised countries about 50 years ago.

Wastage

The high incidence of drop-outs, repeaters and early school-leavers in those African states represented at the Lagos conference has already been noted. In South Africa post-primary enrolments in 1980 amounted to just over 16 percent of the total, while pupils in primary school formed almost 84 percent. Since the percentage of passes is consistently satisfactory with an overall figure of 72.9 percent, other reasons must be found for the drop-out problem. As elsewhere in Africa, wastage is closely related to such factors as shortages of teaching staff (leading to an unfavourable pupil-teacher ratio), inadequate facilities and unrealistic attitudes towards education. The need to earn cash, coupled with favourable job opportunities, tend, however, to divert from school many pupils who might otherwise have continued on to more advanced levels of schooling.

Shortage of teaching staff

While indicating in his review of educational development in Africa that the pupil-teacher ratio was approximately in accordance with the Addis Ababa expectations, Damiba also conceded that there was a shortage of qualified teaching staff. This has been
confirmed by Robin Hallett, a well-known writer on development in Africa. In South Africa the pupil-teacher ratio is somewhat inferior to the figures quoted for Africa by Damiba. According to official figures the number of black pupils in South Africa increased by an average annual rate of about 3.8 percent in the period 1970 to 1980, while the number of teachers at black schools increased by an annual average of 9 percent for the same period. This should place the South African figure more in line with the Addis Ababa objectives by the end of the decade. According to the 1980 Annual Report of the Department of Education and Training only 16 percent of the total number of teachers in black schools were classified as unqualified, 84 percent possessing professional teaching qualifications in addition to their other educational attainments.

The need for improved facilities

It is difficult to gauge the actual shortages of educational hardware in Africa. Statistical data are fragmentary and, where available, unreliable. However, it was noted at Addis Ababa that the attainment of educational objectives would depend on drastic expansion of facilities such as school buildings, equipment and textbooks.

Even with extensive international aid, such expansion of basic facilities would depend on appropriate socio-economic development. Thus far the almost explosive population growth in Africa has seriously complicated the situation, one of the detrimental effects being a reduction of cost-efficiency standards. Lallez, a French educationalist working in Cameroon, has calculated that the actual cost of lower secondary schooling in the region was twice as much as the theoretical cost, and in the case of vocational proficiency almost two and a half times as much. Such a discrepancy between actual and projected costs of education can only aggravate the shortage of facilities.

Some African countries have apparently appreciated this fact. The realisation that their potential for development lies chiefly in agriculture (as was the case with the present industrial countries) is reflected in their willingness to direct educational reform towards the revitalisation of rural areas as was done in Cameroon. In many other instances — Benin, Tanzania and the Ivory Coast — attempts have been made (with varying success) to use education as a means of facing the practical problems of a changing environment. It remains to be seen whether, in South Africa, policy-makers and educational planners have grasped the significance of the multicultural en-

vironment in which its people must find their way.

Linguistic problems

These are universal in Africa. Even in countries where cultures are similar in pattern, different languages exist and so every national education department is obliged to select one as the official medium. This often causes social and political problems which are aggravated when the languages are not sufficiently related to be mutually intelligible. Fortunately, many of these are structurally similar and often, for historical reasons, one at least has become an unofficial lingua franca in most regions. In South Africa the grammatical structure of all bantu languages is similar and many blacks speak at least two of these in addition to either the one or the other of the official languages.

The chief problem, however, is the adjustment of African languages to the problems of modernisation. In most African states, including South Africa, first grade school-children are taught to read and write in the vernacular. Often this medium is used until the end of the lower primary cycle but thereafter, because of the increasingly technical nature of education (particularly in science and mathematics), tuition is given in a foreign language, usually French or English, depending on historical ties with former colonial powers. Here most African children suffer from a natural and inescapable disadvantage. It is well-illustrated in the South African situation where, as recently pointed out by professor White of the Educational Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand, children who learn either of the official languages at mother’s knee do so naturally, without suffering from the drawbacks of an imperfect teaching method. Such children are surrounded from first awareness by the things most closely related to the language they learn and later use at school where a great deal of tuition is based on intangibles subliminally absorbed during the first five years of childhood. Books, periodicals, pictures, radio, television and the continuous example of elders, friends or relatives constantly supply such children with a wealth of ex-
The problems of multicultural South Africa

Shortages of teaching staff and educational facilities, unbalanced priorities, wastage, unrealistic attitudes, linguistic problems and illiteracy have all been shown to be common to all African states. Admittedly, they do not affect all states equally, a factor which in itself accounts for varying approaches and educational policies. This, in fact, is what makes the feedback from Africa so important to southern Africa. By the same token, the educational problems of multicultural South Africa may well be of equal interest to the rest of Africa, not because they are exclusively South African, but because of an underlying urgency deriving from the multicultural environment which is characteristic of this region.

In Africa the basic lesson seems to have been learnt, namely that there is a definite relationship between educational planning and environmental challenges. On current evidence, there are obvious gaps in the South African educational system. It is only fair to note that, belatedly, a massive research effort has been launched by the Human Sciences Research Council, presumably as a basis for much-needed revision of the system. The Council's report is expected to be tabled in abbreviated form during the current parliamentary session.

Environmental problems can be viewed from many angles. The two selected here for brief discussion are the cultural and the regional.

One of the main goals of an educational system is to acquaint the younger generation with the environment in which it will be expected to function, and to train emergent adults to do so efficiently. In South Africa the cultural (man-made) part of the environment has two perspectives — Western and African. Black and white communities constitute for each other very urgent ones. Cooperation and conflict, convergence and divergence of values are parts of a continuous process, the nature of which must be studied and understood if social order is to be maintained. Yet, nowhere in the South African educational system is there any provision for studies relating to the problems of life in a multicultural society.

Regional problems relate to the disfunction between urban and rural areas. Emphasis in South African curriculum is general and academic or, in the more specialised institutions, technical, directed mainly towards skills usually associated with urban areas. Large parts of South Africa are rural and according to the latest official statistics, most schools for blacks are in such areas. If, however, farmland, land and mission stations are taken into account, approximately 80 percent of all schools for blacks are in rural regions. Yet any form of agricultural training, which would seem best to serve the needs in these regions, is peripheral rather than central to the educational process. This is in sharp contrast to the educational system of Cameroon. In Malawi it is the concentrated government-directed effort in rural development that is chiefly responsible for the country's economic viability.

The agricultural colleges or schools in some of the South African national states are not controlled by the Department of Education and Training which is mainly responsible for black education in South Africa. They are directed instead by the departments of education in the various national states or, in some cases, administered by the Department of Cooperation and Development. It is probably true that such facilities are regulated by demand, but according to an official spokesman of the Department of Cooperation and Development, the places in these colleges or schools are fully occupied.

In addition to these environmental challenges, the educational system in South Africa is also faced with structural problems. It is hardly possible in an article of limited extent to deal with all of these or, even to identify the most urgent ones.

Faced with the problem of differentiation or integration of educational effort, South Africa finds itself in a position which is probably unique in sub-Saharan Africa. This is due largely to the complicated socio-cultural system in which Western and African values need to be attuned with each other in interests of mutual advancement.

For many years the educational system in South Africa has been subject to conflicting forces. Early missionary
activity, as elsewhere in Africa, was concerned with education as a means of converting Africans to a universal Christian religion. At the same time, members of all communities — black and white — were drawn closer by their collective participation in a common economic system. The integrating effects of religious and economic objectives were counteracted, however, by the differentiating action of social, political and linguistic forces.

Inasmuch as the children remained members of their respective communities, the schools remained part of such societies, extending the educational efforts of the basic family by providing training for literacy in the vernacular. Faced with the need for acquiring marketable skills in a common economic system, the black pupil found himself torn between two worlds with all the disadvantages that this condition imposed. This is still the situation at present, in itself a prime cause for continued differentiation.

The problem therefore arises: at what point should differentiation be introduced, continued or terminated? As a corollary, when and how should educational integration take place? In this limited sense the problem is certainly specifically South African, although there are more general implications which affect the African continent as a whole.

The problem of alienation which affects schools in relation to the rest of society is perhaps general rather than unique. In the American system, it has been said, schools tend to become divorced from the community: a mere repository for children whose parents are too busily engaged in their own specialised activities to concern themselves with educational processes.

In South Africa “school” has become the attribute of a certain class, also common to other African states, of aspirant white-collar workers, affecting particularly the black population. Even in white South African society, schools tend to develop subcultures with their own linguistic peculiarities and a growing opposition to the adult world, collectively classed as the “establishment.” Predictably this disappears only when the younger generation is itself transformed into the class of parents and, because of their former alienation from adult life, have to adjust anew to a strange world, viewed for the first time from the opposite side of the generation gap. It is this condition, coupled with the Western-oriented slant of colonial educational systems, that has moved African states at the Addis Ababa conference to emphasise the return of the school as part of the community and its rapid “Africanisation.”

A further problem is one of organisation, which in South Africa is unnecessarily complicated, not only because of its differentiated nature, but because of the many agencies through which this service is administered. The South African multicultural background merely compounds the problem and underlines the need for an encompassing blueprint which will accommodate the many, often conflicting, interests. Quite apart from pre-school institutions (kindergartens), lower primary, advanced primary, secondary, technical secondary and a small number of special schools for the handicapped, there are agricultural colleges, technicons, universities and the specialised kind of university institution of which Medunsa (Medical University of South Africa) is the first South African example, as well as a host of private sector installations and in-service training institutions of which some are government-controlled.

Such a confusion of installations and institutions is the outcome of uncertainty as to the fundamental and detailed objectives associated with the educational system. The experience of Taiwan has shown that a definite, informed political decision on broad economic policy, coupled with special studies such as manpower surveys, are the best bases for educational planning. Taiwan, at a historically identifiable point in time, decided to proceed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, and definite steps were taken to determine accurately the immediate and projected requirements for such a change. This made it possible to establish the nature of the educational “mix” — the relationship between general (academic) and technical training facilities — and to plan accordingly.

It is clear that, in South Africa, such effort has been attempted by the educational research project just completed by the Human Sciences Research Council. The commendable speed with which this programme was designed and carried out is an indication both of its urgency and importance. One wonders, however, whether, in the course of one year, all the variables could have been properly considered; and, in the final analysis, no clear conception has yet been produced as to the constitutional dispensation which, after all, is to be the framework of the entire cultural reality future generations will have to face.

In conclusion, then, one is forced to consider not merely the detailed adjustments required of an educational system facing the challenge of a rapidly changing environment, but also its position in relation to the total system of which this is a part. It is not enough to overhaul the institutional mechanisms of an educational system or even to replace them with new ones unless the system itself is seen as a component of a more complete unit — the cultural system — within which it has to function in harmony with political, economic, social, legal and other kinds of institutions. Adjustments to the educational system must necessarily require concomitant adjustments in all of the others — a complicated task which requires rather more than a crash programme on the part of a research body, no matter how comprehensive its methods or how respectable its credentials. One can only hope that the complexity of educational reform together with guidelines as how best to deal with it, will be among the findings of the Human Sciences Research Council.

Above all, it should be noted that the cultural system, as it applies to white society in South Africa, is no longer the all-encompassing system educationalists until now have supposed it to be. Beyond it lies the broader system comprising all of multicultural South Africa and, less remote than in past decades, the global community, brought into closer contact than ever before because of advances in communications technology, struggling on a macro-cosmic scale with the same order of problems that should now occupy the best minds South Africa can muster in the interests of educational reform.