

RENEWAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION: THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Education in Africa derives from its rich historical heritage. The continent of Africa is replete with noteworthy educational practices. This study reviews some of these educational practices, tracing trends and issues related to its culture and traditions.

Significant contributors to modern education are the practices of communal learning, oral traditions, moral education and philosophy, and practical and vocational education from Africa.

Changes in the traditional educational system began with the colonization of Africa by Europeans. Adventist and other Christian missionaries pioneered the establishment of a network of schools with attempted contextualization of curriculum. The study moves on to present an overview of the current state of Adventist education in Africa. Identified are heart-warming reports of progress in different divisions of the continent. The study concludes with a special focus on Adventist higher education in Africa and a model for renewal of its educational system.

1. Introduction

Africa has been a continent very dear to my heart. Among the many reasons, my educational connections with this continent have been quite strong. First, my best friend in college, who took up Mathematics major at Spicer Memorial College, was from Africa. She and I shared many countless hours sharing not only academic matters but also our personal and cultural issues. Second, as a teacher for more than 40 years, I have had students from different parts of Africa as a teacher at Spicer Memorial College, India, and at AIIAS, Philippines. A number of these students are holding responsible positions as missionaries, and educational leaders, or in private sectors in African countries and in other parts of the world. Third, my brief sessions with graduate cohort students in Solusi and Baraton has imprinted very fond memories of teaching and learning in Africa. I found the interactions as some of my most satisfying professional

experiences. With such enduring memories and connectedness with the people from Africa, I wish to share a few ideas related to education in Africa.

How does one go about generalizing about Africa, a continent that is large and diverse? Yet people from African embrace common traditions and values (Teferra & Altbach, 2004) in the context of educational practices. One of the profound features of Africa is its rich educational history. This is true both in terms of secular education and Adventist education. Here is a brief review of African education in the general context as well as in the Adventist context.

2. Historical Imprints of African Education

In the study of history, there are details that are already known and accepted as well as there are details that are known but have been neglected. The educational traditions of non-Western countries belong to the latter—the overlooked details—till the recent past (Armstrong, 2003). Perhaps literature mentions these educational contexts, but alludes to a sad or backward state of existence not worthy of emulating. Africa, being a non-Western continent has been subject to this attitude, along with other countries in Asia and elsewhere. “Different means inferior” (Armstrong, 2003, p. 28) had been the perspective of the West resulting in a neglect of traditions that provided alternative education (Reagan, 2005). The traditional educational practices of many countries in Africa and Asia have been those neglected ones in literature and discussions on educational practices.

Perspectives have changed in more recent times. As Armstrong (2003) observes of the current trends in the West (where much of the educational literature are published) “There is a broader acceptance of the idea that the varied cultural background students take to school add strength to the learning experiences of all” (p. 28). Attempts are being made to understand and recognize the historical underpinnings that have shaped the worldviews of non-Western people and their contribution to education (Armstrong, 2003). So what is the contribution of traditional African education and culture to the present educational practices? Here are four of the aspects that are interesting to consider.

2.1 Communal Learning

Historically, education in Africa has been seen as a societal responsibility. The proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" has been very true of Africa, even in the context of educating a child. Thus, a child's education was considered not just the responsibility of parents and teachers but also of the community members. This collective responsibility increased the number of "significant others" giving a growing child immense support. Education was considered as life itself, "a natural process in which the children gradually acquire skill, knowledge, and attitudes appropriate to life in their community" (Reagan, 2005, p. 62). This practice developed in a child a sense of rooting to a large society (Armstrong, 2003).

The modern impetus for collaborative and cooperative learning paradigms of teaching methods in classrooms, its roots can be thus traced to the practices in Africa. Group work, and connecting content to needs of the society (society-centered curriculum) are trends that run parallel to the educational practices of Africa from ages. We are grateful to Africa for its communal learning practice.

2.2 Oral Tradition

Teaching children the oral tradition was an established practice of ancient Africa. Folktales, and dilemma stories stimulated discussions. Similarly proverbs, word plays, and riddles as "important intellectual mode of communication were used to develop the child's reasoning power and skill, and in expressing the deeper thoughts most essential in settling disputes and in decision-making processes" Fajana (as cited in Reagan, 2005, p. 64). Music and praise poems (*izibongo*) on a wide array of themes enhanced the knowledge of history and culture of the community, improving ones language skills as well (Reagan, 2005).

Educational practitioners of today who incorporate critical thinking, oral language skills, decision-making and problem solving abilities, and artistic language expressions can very well relate to these practices from Africa. With the modern advancement of technology in classrooms, the use of oral language in terms of traditional ways is being altered. The good news is that, technology can be used to enhance oral learning. In any case, we are grateful to Africa for its oral tradition.

2.3 Moral Education and Philosophy

Africa is known to have a tradition of moral education. Two of the seven cardinal goals of traditional African education were "to develop character" and "to inculcate respect for elders and those in position of

authority” (Fafunwa, cited in Reagan, 2005, p. 61). Seeing the moral as a communal responsibility, “Everyone in the home, in the village, and in the community . . . joined in correcting or praising any child whenever and wherever he [she] failed or succeeded in showing acceptable norms of behavior” (Okeke, as cited in Reagan, 2005, p. 71). Important was learning respect for elders. The concept of elders extended beyond age to those who are in authority in some way or the other. Such training led to obedience.

Perhaps the biblical reference stating that obedience is better than sacrifice was much easier for the African children those days to understand. Respect and obedience at all levels of education are still important today. We are grateful to Africa that reminds us of the time-tested attributes of respect and obedience.

2.4 Practical and Vocational Education

History supports the significant contribution of Africa in emphasizing practical subjects and vocational training. As the world of children was not clearly separated from that of adult life as today, children participated in the work life of grown-ups in a form of apprenticeship (“Egypt: Ancient Egypt Education and Learning,” n. d.). However, three distinct categories of occupation existed: “agriculturally related occupations, trades and crafts, and the professions” (Fafunwa, as cited in Reagan, 2005, p. 73). While agricultural and other domestic occupations were learned from parents, crafts (weaving, hunting, carving, sculpturing, painting, hair-plaiting, dressmaking, etc.) and professions (traditional healers, priests, chiefs, soldiers, etc.) were learned through indigenous apprenticeship. Especially to be mentioned in this discussion is the contribution of ancient Egypt. One can say without doubt that disciplines such as agriculture, architecture, navigation, trade and commerce have roots in ancient Egyptian education.

Curriculum today incorporates content at various levels of education those related to the above disciplines and fields. Life is made comfortable and enjoyable through professionals in these areas of expertise. We are grateful to Africa for pioneering practical and vocational education.

3. Changes in African Education

With the colonization of various African countries by the Europeans, the education system in Africa drastically changed (Thomas, n. d.). Multiple colonists such as Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, and Spain shaped the education in modern Africa. The entry of

colonists set the stage for formal education in Africa with both good and not so good results—modernization of education, good; and disregarding the cultural context of education, not so good. Due to the lack of written language has impeded the preservation of African culture and discoveries (Thomas, n. d.). Through the years formal education has evolved to the pattern of Western practices.

Worthy to be noted is the rise of the “Afrocentric” worldview, which has a powerful impact in education, leading to creation of curricular materials and specialized schools, especially in the United States (Reagan, 2005). This movement has helped create greater awareness of an understanding of African past and present. In some ways, this movement is a consequence of racism and neglect of the people of African descent in particular. Though one need not go overboard holding a romantic view of the educational practices of the African past, one should not neglect or forget this history. These are issues that modern educational thought and practice in Africa and other countries can benefit from. Next is a short discussion on Adventist education in Africa.

4. Adventist Education in Africa

Adventist and other Christian missionaries pioneered the establishment of a network of schools with attempted contextualization of curriculum. The important milestones in Adventist education in Africa include establishing a school in Cape Town, South Africa, at the Claremont church in 1892 followed by the establishing of the first Adventist tertiary institution outside the United States, Claremont Union College, at the same location. The rest is history. Oakwood Industrial School was established in 1896 at Huntsville, Alabama for training African-Americans (Greenleaf, 2005).

Analyzing the recent reports from various divisions of Africa for the last quinquennium (2010-15) as reported April/May 2015 issue of *Journal of Adventist Education*, progress and development as well as challenges are evidenced in Adventist education. For example, South Africa & Indian Ocean Division (SID) has seen increase in new school buildings, increase in schools as some government schools are being handed over to Adventists for managing, and upgrading of schools.

East-Central Africa Division (ECD) has seen an all-round increase in schools, programs, number of teachers and student enrollment. Several universities are upgraded. West-Central Africa Division (WAD) has made initiatives to promote integration of faith and learning (IFL) in schools. Baptisms through school influence have been phenomenal in this

division. Middle East and North Africa has also reported initiatives and progress despite the political and related economic challenges.

4.1 Challenges

The challenges reported by Education Department directors of various divisions in Africa include inadequate school buildings, enrollment issues, need for qualified Adventist teachers, care for orphans affected by AIDS (SID), language barriers, rebel activities (Congo) terrorism (Kenya), government takeover of schools (WAD), Civil wars (S Sudan), refugees (Central Africa).

4.2 Opportunities

With the challenges come also opportunities for Adventist education to progress. As recommended by the education leaders of Africa, the opportunities include accreditation of more schools, IFL in classes, sustaining work programs and industries, strengthening of research tradition, and a unified mission but varied methods. More initiatives to integrate Adventist values and African culture into the curriculum as that of Boakye-Dankwa (2010) are encouraged. Next is a discussion of the state of Adventist higher education in Africa.

5. Adventist Higher Education in Africa

Higher education in Africa has seen greater privatization in recent years (Varghese, 2004). Private higher education is also seen as the “most dynamic and fastest growing segments of post-secondary education at the turn of the 21st century” (Altbach, as cited in Varghese, 2004) in Africa. The main cause of this trend is the inability of the public universities to adjust to the change in demand for programs and subjects offered, and lack of efficiency in operation (Varghese, 2004).

Adventist higher education has in Africa is growing rapidly. The “institutions of higher education share the responsibility, along with agencies such as family, schools, and church to promote individual and societal integrity and values” (Gaikwad, 2011, p. 22). Currently there are 17 colleges and universities in the continent. These institutions, “while they continue to have a shared mission, their roles and functions may diverge” (Lashley, 2002, p. 9). To cater for the rapid growth of church work in general and education in particular, trained professionals are in


demand. Teachers trained in Adventist institutions are in demand. Church-sponsored and self-sponsored workers are seeking education in both local and foreign universities for higher education. Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) is a recipient of many of these individuals. Qualified Adventist professionals will strengthen the mission of the church and educational institutions. The following final section elucidates the direction for renewing Adventist education in Africa.

6. Renewal of Adventist Education

In a classic essay entitled, “The Devil Takes a Look at Adventist Education” Knight (2001, pp. 173-175) uses an allegory by playing the devil’s advocate and shares several pointers that can awaken educators. Three of these pointers are as follows:

1. If I were the devil I would do my very best to confuse Adventist educators on the aims, purposes, and goals of education, the primary aim of education being, leading students into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. First, if I were the devil I would get educators to downplay the importance of educational philosophy (Adventist philosophy of Education is based on the Holy Bible and the writings of White).
3. If I were the devil, I would do all I could to get good teachers out of the classroom (following Peter’s principle—“In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence”).

Another interesting and inspiring message to educators come from Anderson (2009) in a book *How to Kill Adventist Education*. Anderson gives the simple formula to kill Adventist education, “Keep doing what we’re doing,” (2009, p. 81). He is referring to trying out new methods must be found, keeping good methods that have worked. Some of the renewal experiences suggested are (a) Become a school of prayer, (b) Find the right leader, and (c) Get the good word out.

Such renewal of Adventist education can be represented by the symbol  and for infinity that has representation for past (left loop) and future (the right loop) and the present (the center point). Educators need to reflect on the historical and

cultural heritages of the country as well as the values passed on through the word of God, pioneers and forebears who have gone ahead of us, as we deliberate on the issues of today. Such deliberations results in looking ahead to facing the future, that in turn make us look at our actions of the present, taking us to our roots, and so on. This is what renewal in the

context of education in any place looks like and this is what renewal in Africa looks like.

In conclusion, African education system has strong roots in history both in the secular and Adventist history. The values and practices of the past can be used to inform the present practices in education as those concerned can look for a brighter future. Yes, despite the human difficult conditions we experience, God has “plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race” (White, 1952, 1995, p. 12).

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