

**THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN EAST AFRICA: LESSONS LEARNT FROM
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION IN RWANDA AND KENYA IN THE
1970s-80s**

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ABSTRACT

The UN Sustainable Development Goals and their predecessors – the Millennium Development Goals emphasise the importance of education in promoting development. By the same token, in many African countries, education is seen as a passport to success. In this article, the author will use the lens of his experiential learning to explore the alignment of the right to education and the actual practices in the delivery of education in East Africa. This will be complimented by reflections on his experience with education in Europe from the mid-1990s onwards.

KEY WORDS

Eastern Africa, Development, School, Education, Discrimination.



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RESUMO

Os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável da ONU, bem como os seus antecessores, os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento do Milénio, enfatizam a importância da educação na promoção do desenvolvimento. De modo similar, a educação é vista como um passaporte para o sucesso em muitos países africanos. Neste artigo, o autor usa a lente da aprendizagem pela experiência para explorar a coerência entre o direito à educação e as reais práticas de oferta da educação na África Oriental. Em complemento, o autor apresenta reflexões sobre a sua experiência com a educação na Europa a partir de meados da década de 1990 em diante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

África Oriental, Desenvolvimento, Escola, Educação, Discriminação.



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The Right to Education in East Africa: Lessons Learnt From Personal Experience in Education in Rwanda and Kenya in the 1970s-80s

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It is widely acknowledged that education is an important tool in development. This is more so where access to good education is a privilege and only available for the elites or those who are very intelligent and able to pass regular exams and tests. The author has always valued education. His view of its value was enhanced when he lost all the other resources he had, when he headed to exile. This awakening moment strengthened his view that education is a transferable resource that can help in the restoration of life after a big shock in the system. Once settled in Europe, the author embarked on a self-searching exercise looking at how far education goes back in his family history.

This was a very tricky exercise because he was born in a society where oral tradition was the norm. Education was done through action learning and storytelling in his formative years. Growing up in a patrilineal society, the author lost an important opportunity because of the fact that when he was born both his grandfathers had passed away. Traditionally parents were revered but children were encouraged to engage and talk to their grandparents. They were de facto teachers and role models. On a positive note he had good relations with his grandmothers. These relationships along with his intellectual curiosity helped him in bridging the gap in knowledge about education in his family history in the absence of written records.

So, what did he discover? He noted that on his mother's side he was part of the third generation in the country to go through formal education. On his father's side, he was part of the second generation to get "educated". The main differences on the two sides of his family was the proximity to mission fields established by Christian missionaries during the colonial period. His mother's family hailed from an area close to a missionary field. The irony is that before the first world war (under German Colonial Rule), his father's ancestors lived close to a missionary field. It was abandoned once the German left at the end of the First World War. It is more or less likely that if the missionary post has been sustained, his father's family would have benefited from education earlier than they actually did. Who knows, may be going back generations, his ancestors on his father's side got some formal education from the German Missionaries. The information was not passed on through family history and the author at this moment in time can only rely on the information he managed to access. There are many ifs and many unknowns, thanks to the absence of written records. We have to move into the present and look at the author's education experiences from the late 1960s onwards.

One of his motivations to get educated was his observation of the status of his father in their community. His father was at the time a school principal. The society held him in high esteem and the author would later associate his father's status with educational attainment. He was seen as a role model, a leader and a wise person. The status ascribed to people with education in post-independence East African countries indicated in the



author's view the importance of education. Growing up in a society where oral tradition was prevalent and where the elders were venerated, the author noted that young people were venerated as much or even better than the elders, if they were educated. This posed many questions, that he would later discuss with older members of his family.

Being surrounded by books at home meant that the author started opening books and pretended to read them. Because of his intellectual curiosity, his parents had no choice but to teach him how to read and write long before his peers. He could not wait to meet the seven years age requirement to start primary school. His parents enrolled him when he was six. He might have been younger than his peers but his cultural capital compensated his age deficit.

As he had covered material for the first three years of primary education, instead of getting bored, he started observing and researching education policies and practices. His main interest was to explore who was in the classroom and who was absent. It did not take him too long to realise that although in theory, there was free primary education, children without uniform were regularly expelled from school. School inspections were routine during the roll calls in the morning. The main issues teachers looked at were the uniforms and pupils' hygiene. Pupils who did not meet the "standard" were sent home. Needless to say that in general the have not were the ones negatively affected by these inspections. The other important learning at the time was the fact that with the exam system, at the end of the academic year, the bright students passed, the next tier repeated the year and the third tier were expelled.

This was nothing like the western system where in some countries you have year group, where the student of the same age are in the same year, irrespective of their individual academic abilities. Having said that the western education system often have underpinning selection processes. Moreover, in most western societies pupils are expected to stay in school at least until they are fifteen or sixteen years old.

The other important learning was the fact that there was no requirement, at least in practice, for the parents to ensure that their children were attending school. One would suspect that enforcing rules would have meant more students and by extension more teachers for the government's payroll. The governments did not necessarily have the resources to fund it. At the end of the sixth year, the author along with his peers sat for national exams. At the time only 3 per cent of primary school leavers were admitted in public secondary schools. There were very few other options. These included Roman Catholic Church's seminaries and very few private secondary schools. Some of those who were not successful after the national exams went on to do their secondary education in neighbouring countries where the tuition fees were reasonable.

The selection outlined earlier continued in year one and two of secondary school. At the end of third year, pupils sat at national exams. These were used in the selection of those continuing education in high school. The high school meant an additional two, three or four years depending on the stream taken by the successful students. When it came to third level education, it was the department of education that processed applications of those who had passed their high school exams.

When the author moved to Kenya to start his third level education, his interest on access to education and educational outcomes expanded. It came as no surprise to realise that although as a proportion more Kenyans has access to education, there was a divide between those accessing good education in public and private schools and those attending what was known at the time as "Harambee" (community) schools, which were

not fully funded by the government. These schools being mainly frequented by pupils unable to afford fees in private schools or get grades needed for admission in public secondary schools on completion of their primary schools. Based on the limited information, the author had at the time, those attending Harambee schools tended to come from socio-economically disadvantaged families. In other words, even in Kenya, the elites and children with excellent academic skills had a separate path to education and had better learning outcomes. Although there were exams on the completion of secondary schools, children with means unable to get the scores needed to head to local universities went on to study abroad. India was a very popular destination at the time. The emergence of private universities over time reduced the urge to head to India.

The airlifts for studies in the United States (US) that had started in the early days of independence had somewhat continued and many of the educated elites the author came across in Kenya had studied in United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. The Airlifts also known as Kennedy airlifts that started in 1959-1960, were arranged through Tom Mboya and Senator John F Kennedy and helped hundreds of East African to get scholarships to pursue their education in US universities.

Moving to Europe was an eye opener and gave the author the opportunity to compare and contrast education in the West and home from home. This became more so when the author worked in social inclusion in a Dublin inner city. Having lived in Ireland up to then, for over five years, the author was surprised to realise that unlike the middle class contacts he had met and made friends with, many in the inner city had not maximised from universal access to education (up to the age of 15). The author met people who could not read or sign their names. Many middle-class people he knew and those in the inner city lived in parallel universes. They were separated by a few miles but lived worlds apart.

The disparity between educational outcomes in the inner city and the suburbs where the author lived had generational dimensions too. Whereas the author's middleclass friends and acquaintances had good and fulfilling jobs, in the inner city, there was poverty, high level of unemployment, drug misuse, high proportion of prison population, poor housing situation, teenage pregnancies, early school leaving and other manifestation of social exclusion. His observations and interest would lead him to read the work of Pierre Bourdieu and explore his take on education.

The author's observations above are in line with Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that education helps in class reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The differences in the experiences between his middle class friends and the residents in inner city neighbourhoods is what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. He argues that cultural capital depends on "total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 66). The author then understood how growing up in house full of books gave him an early advantage compared to his neighbours, most of whom left school before the age of ten and with very limited prospects.

Another element of Bourdieu's work that resonated with author was taste. Cultural capital is embodied in what Bourdieu calls taste, which, in his estimation, influences social and economic capital because "one has to take account of all the characteristics of social condition which are (statistically) associated from earliest childhood with possession of high or low income and which tend to shape tastes adjusted to these conditions" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 177). Finally, social scientists argue that education plays



a paramount role in the reproduction of cultural capital; it helps in gaining access to jobs that pay well, prestigious profession and higher social status (Butler & Robson, 2007).

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals that all 191 UN member states have agreed to try to achieve by the year 2015. The United Nations Millennium Declaration, signed off in September 2000 committed world leaders to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. The year 2015 is long past and the dreams the MDGs aspired to are yet to be realised. The 2nd MDG called for achieving universal primary education. The 8 MDGs were complimentary and interdependent. In 2015, in paragraph 54 of the United Nations Resolution ARES/70/1 of September 25th, the United Nations launched a new set of goals. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are also known as *Transforming our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, emerged from consultative processes involving the 193 UN member states and the civil society representatives. In addition to the 17 SDGs, 169 targets were set. The 4th SDG expanded on the 2nd MDG in so far as its aim is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The MDGs and undoubtedly the SDGs will have an impact on access and quality of education in the developing world. Even long before the MDGs, the author noted that since the late 1960s when the author started his schooling a lot has changed. Having said that, according to the United Nations

about 263 million children and youth are out of school, according (...) data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). This is equivalent to a quarter of the population of Europe. The total includes 61 million children of primary school age, 60 million of lower secondary school age, and includes the first ever estimate of those of upper secondary school age at 142 million. (UNESCO, 2016)

Worryingly,

of all the regions, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of exclusion. Over a fifth of children between the ages of 6-11 are out of school, followed by a third of youth between the ages of 12-14. According to UIS data, almost 60% of youth between the ages of 15-17 are not in school. (UNESCO, 2016)

In terms of differences based on gender,

girls are more likely than boys never to set foot in a classroom, despite all the efforts and progress made over the past two decades. According to UIS data, 15 million girls of primary-school age will never get the chance to learn to read or write in primary school compared to about 10 million boys. Over half of these girls – 9 million – live in sub-Saharan Africa". (UNESCO, 2016)



How can one explain these disturbing statistics? There are a number of potential causes of exclusion of children from education. These include poverty and lack of awareness; conflicts, wars and displacement; distance of travel between home and the school; lack of role models; limited parental involvement; lack of after school facilities and so on. These systemic issues are difficult to cater for all the children and in all situations. Societies where the resources are very limited are the ones where the needs for education are the greatest. There is hence need for international solidarity through development aid, fair trading arrangements and more importantly getting the leaders to take responsibility. Education has potential to affect the culture and social values of those educated and this has implication on health, economic and political outcomes, among other things.

Should we despair and throw in the towel? The simple answer is no. Education has an incremental impact. Educating one person as it is often said to be educating a village. The author has seen significant changes in terms of access to education and educational outcomes in many families where a child or children went to school. He has seen the importance of role models in Africa and in the west.

This opinion piece did not look into the quality of education or indeed the brain drain the developing countries have been experiencing. The focus was on access to basic education. Education is one of the important development tools. It opens many doors and in case of conflict and war when all the other resources are lost, education is portable and allows people to start a new life. The author explored how having universal access does not necessarily entail educating all members of the society. The opinion piece also explored the disheartening statistics about exclusion of children from education especially in sub-Saharan Africa. If we are to see education as a window to development, it is incumbent on all of us to play our part and ensure that the SDGs are achieved or at least expand access to education.

Although issues, like the postcode lottery that affect people's access to education and educational outcomes, in this day and age, people should not miss out on education because they are born in a remote place far from schools in Africa or in the inner city where there is lack of cultural capital. Education benefits the individual (portable resource) and the wider society through employment, innovation and other social, economic, cultural and political benefits. We live in a global village and modern communications gives us the tool to maximise our education reach. By the same token, we should feel the pain of others even if we are separated by a long distance because modern day migration has demonstrated that we can't completely close the door to others seeking opportunities. It is our duty to care for each other's education.

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