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## Holistic Leadership in Education

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# HOLISTIC LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION. AN AFRICAN CALL

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### **Introduction**

Education in traditional Africa was, by and large, adapted to local needs. ‘The older generation passed on to the young the knowledge, the skills, the mode of behaviour and the beliefs they should have for playing their social roles in adult life.’<sup>1</sup> In that sense education in traditional Africa was both preservative and conservative.

This traditional conception of education, however, was supplanted with the introduction of formal education, particularly the introduction of the Western type of education in Africa by the early Christian missionaries. ‘Whereas continuity and survival of the community and its culture were the primary motivations lying behind and goals of Africa traditional education, Western missionary education sought to inculcate European ideals and values that were considered superior.’<sup>2</sup> Western education, in that sense, was negatively transformative. It led to the alienation of the schooled from their people and culture. Western education was by and large used as a tool to replace the ‘backward’ African culture. This assumption is reflected in the colonial education policies which were largely unsympathetic to the African culture and its values.

Needless to say, education has several reference points. It may refer to:

- what parents, teachers, and schools do, i.e. the activity of educating – what is at stake here is the teaching process;
- what goes on in the learner, i.e. the process of becoming educated – here one is touching on the learning process;
- what the learner gets as the end product, i.e. the content of education; or
- what the discipline of education is about, i.e. the study of above.

## 1. Different Philosophies of Education

Underlying any conception of education is a philosophy of education. A people's philosophy of education depends on what they have in mind, in respect of the objective of education as well as the first principle from which their philosophy of education derives. This first principle, normally, includes the people's theories of values (axiology) as well as their theories of reality (ontology) and of knowledge (epistemology). The traditional African conception of education, on the one hand, borders on somewhat idealistic and pragmatic philosophies of education. The educational goals of idealism and pragmatism may be presented as follows:

- the preservation of cultural, social and spiritual excellence;
- the promotion of things of the spirit;
- the development of ideal humanity and ideal society;
- the organisation and reorganisation of experience as adaptation to life and its environment;
- practical adaptation of needs rather than intellectual excellence alone.

*Pragmatism* holds that knowledge is relative, instrumental, practical and problem solving. As we shall see, in traditional African conception education was relative, practical, and instrumental. In that sense education in traditional Africa was pragmatic.

## 2. Idealism and Realism of Western Education

The Western conception of education, on the other hand, borders on idealism but it goes beyond that in that the Western conception of education also reflects realistic philosophy of education. In addition to what we have already observed in respect of *idealism* in relation to Africa, idealism holds the following principles which are highlighted and emphasised in Western education:

- the world is dependent on the mind or intellect;
- the truth is objective and discovered.

These principles of idealism are ignored or given less emphasis in the African conception of education.

*Realism*, which also informs Western education, holds that the goal of education is the transmission of the following:

- universal truths independent from minds or points of view (the intellectual emphasis);

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- cultural values or excellence – education should make one aware of the real world including values and potentialities of life;
- truth is objective and discovered. The rational man is the one who discovers truth.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas both the African and Western conception of education are informed by idealism as a philosophy of education, as we have noted, they differ in terms of where they place the emphasis. African idealist philosophy of education places the emphasis on intuition, subjectivity, preservation and conservation of culture and values. The Western idealist and realist philosophies of education place the emphasis on precision, intellect, objectivity, discovery, transformation, exploitation, conservation, globalisation and assimilation of culture and values of the educator.

The African traditional philosophy of education tends to be *essentialist*. Here education is seen as the transmission of cultural essentials with a view to perpetuating the culture and one's identity. Personal identity is more important than the factual and self-knowledge more important than world knowledge. Education is geared towards practical adaptation to needs and the realisation of the self as a community entity.

In contrast, the Western philosophy of education, though also essentialist, tend to be dominated by *perennialism* and *progressivism*. Here education is not only seen as the transmission of perennial or absolute and universal truths, it is also seen 'as the process of intelligent problem solving, with emphasis on precision and method.'<sup>4</sup> What is emphasised in respect of Western education is intellectual excellence and universal or representational education. Thus there is a big gap between the Western and African conceptions of education. The Western education which is experienced in Africa in terms of schooling is hardly sympathetic to the values, norms, attitudes and practices of traditional Africa. In the words of J.N.K. Mugambi, 'schooling pedagogy tends to presuppose and inculcate the idea that "modernity" is preferable to "tradition"'.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of this, the general outlook of post colonial Africa is still traditional. This means that, in spite of its transformative tendency, schooling, understood in terms of the Western conception of education, unsympathetic to African traditional values as it is, has hardly succeeded in facilitating authentic social change among traditional Africans. Thus one agrees with Mugambi that 'it is difficult to induce constructive change through externally imposed values, norms, attitudes and practices.'<sup>6</sup> This goes to stress 'the negative consequences of externally superimposed schooling which fails to blend traditional values with new ideas and insights.'<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Way Forward

In the face of the problems outlined above in respect of Western education and its negative impact on traditional Africa, what should be the way forward? Mugambi, in his paper, called for ‘schooling system in post colonial Africa to take seriously the traditional values, norms, attitudes and practices as a prerequisite for endogenous development.’<sup>8</sup> According to Mugambi, ‘one of the greatest pedagogical challenges in Africa today is how to reform schooling so that it affirms traditional African values, norms and attitudes while at the same time encouraging innovation, inventiveness and creativity.’<sup>9</sup>

One could not agree more with Mugambi on this. The option is not the rejection of Western education. Indeed, it does post-colonial Africa no good to reject Western education. The issue is how to use Western education, what Mugambi has referred to as schooling, to enhance traditional African values, norms and practices in the context of dynamism of culture and globalisation. In other words, the issue is not to choose between traditional African education and post-colonial African schooling with their different pedagogical approaches and epistemologies. The issue is how to blend the two in the nexus of post-colonial education that will be both critically transformative and conservative, and holistic.

What philosophy of education will facilitate such a blend of education?

### 4. Pragmatism

In my view, the philosophy of education that will best facilitate the blend of education we have in view is *pragmatism* critically appropriated within the context of educational *holism*.

In the context of *pragmatic* philosophies of education, the goal of education is:

- the successful organisation and reorganisation of experience as adaptation to life. Here science will not be seen as a means to a detached end but as that which leads to the holistic becoming of the human;
- the promotion of the growth of a life which is fruitful and inherently significant – critically appropriated, one would say that this calls for the knowledge of God as well as the knowledge of the human and the natural order;
- the process through which the needed social transformation may be accomplished;
- the practical adaptation to present needs rather than intellectual excellence alone.

Pragmatism as we noted earlier holds that knowledge is:

- relative and instrumental rather than universal or representational – the value of knowledge of the past lies in its usefulness for the present;
- experimental problem-solving inquiry, a practical activity: knowing how, rather than knowing that or correct intellectual judgment or idea as such.

In pragmatism ‘truth is a “thing done” (pragmatism), a function of practical value, made to happen, i.e. brought about rather than discovered to be the case.’<sup>10</sup>

## **5. Holistic Education**

All of this, in my view, boils down to what has been observed by some contemporary scholars as holistic education. Writing on the subject of holistic education, a commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) observed as follows:

‘The concept of holism and holistic education refers to a worldview or theoretical position that opposes reductionism, positivism, and the Cartesian dualism of self and world with an emphasis on the ultimate unity, relatedness, and inherent meaningfulness of all existence. Holism draws upon newly emerging ecological and systems approaches in science as well as the “perennial philosophy” – the core wisdom of most of the world’s spiritual traditions. Holistic educators attempt to address the fragmentation, alienation, competition, violence and gross materialism that pervade much of life in the late twentieth century. A holistic education seeks to heal the many divisions our civilisation has induced between mind and body, intellect and emotion, rationality and intuition, science and art, individual and community, humanity and the natural world.’<sup>11</sup>

As the above statement indicates, holistic education is intended to serve a number of purposes:

- as a critique of the dominant paradigm of education informed and defined by a mechanistic worldview, which is a paradigm of education which continues to ‘instrumentalise and dichotomise people and their relationship with each other, with the earth and the divine.’<sup>12</sup>
- as an alternative to the existing paradigm of education, holistic education affirms the different ways of living and acting by embracing ‘the quest for meaning and knowledge, rooted in the values of wholeness and healing’; it ‘affirms individuals as persons in the context of community and communities as a whole.’<sup>13</sup> In

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that sense, holistic education seeks to be all encompassing, drawing from a variety of traditions while affirming the centrality and unity of all creation in God.

Holistic education as espoused by the WCC operates on the following eight principles:<sup>14</sup>

1. 'Belief that it is God who is the Creator and Sustainer of life.' This principle forms the basis of the affirmation of the centrality and unity of all creation in God.
2. 'Education is for transformation.' Education must facilitate social transformation – transformation of persons and communities. It also requires 'the transformation of educational institutions, policies and activities resulting in holistic practices at all levels; multi-disciplinary perspectives; a focus on wholeness in human development.'
3. Education should aim at 'the development of the whole person in community.' 'This includes physical, social, moral aesthetic, creative and spiritual aspects as well as intellectual and vocational.' Holistic education, in this sense goes beyond the cognitive dimension which dominates conventional education and 'encourages the quest for meaning by introducing a holistic view of the planet, life on Earth, and the emerging world community.'
4. Education should honour 'the uniqueness and creativity of persons and communities on the basis of their interconnectedness.' Here, holistic education 'affirms that we can build true learning communities in which people learn together from each other's differences, learn to value their own personal strengths, and are empowered to help one another.'
5. Education should enable 'active participation in a world community.' Holistic education, as indicated by this principle, 'promotes ways of mutual understanding and respect of the existing diversity of cultures and religions...' It seeks to understand how this diversity can enrich us but also how diversity can cause conflict. Thus 'holistic education includes methods of conflict management to establish conditions for peace and justice at all levels.'
6. Education should affirm 'Spirituality as being the core of life and hence central to education.' Holistic education focuses on 'those human depth dimensions that account for a spiritual basis of reality.' Spirituality, according to the WCC document 'is a state of connectedness to all life, honouring diversity in unity. It is an experience of being, belonging and caring. It is sensitivity and compassion, joy and hope. It is the harmony between the inner life and the outer life. It is the sense of wonder and reverence for the mysteries of the universe...'
7. Education should promote 'a new praxis (reflection and action) of knowing, of teaching, and of learning.' Under this principle, the

document affirmed that teaching is a vocation ‘requiring artistic sensitivity and scientifically grounded practice.’ Holistic education, in that sense, calls for mutual attentiveness in respect of teachers and learners. Both ‘teachers and learners are mutually accountable, above all, to seeking a meaningful understanding of the world.’ Here both teachers and learners are seen as partners in the project of education.

8. Finally the document affirms that ‘holistic education relates to, and interacts, with differing perspectives and approaches’ of education. The understanding here is that holistic education draws from the diverse educational approaches: ‘Critical pedagogy, traditional pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, constructivism and transformative learning theories and global education.’

All the above-mentioned educational approaches and theories raise some fundamental questions with respect to us as human beings in communities. Thus a holistic approach to education can hardly ignore any of them. Hence holistic education, understood as an all-encompassing educational approach, brings the different educational approaches together in the nexus of holism.

A comparison of the holistic educational paradigm with the prevailing mechanistic educational paradigm brings out the following (again we draw critically from the WCC document):<sup>15</sup>

**Mechanistic education paradigm**

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*Interdisciplinary*

Attempts to integrate accumulated knowledge according to the logic of mechanistic science.

**Holistic education paradigm**

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*Transdisciplinary*

Argues against isolated scientific disciplines and integrates within sciences and within a broader scale of fields of human knowledge such as art, customs, traditions, and spirituality. It is a global integration of knowledge.

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*Fragmentation*

Knowledge is broken into parts.

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*Integration*

Knowledge is interconnected.

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*Systemic*

Emphasises structure. Manifestation of an underlying process.

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*Holistic*

Emphasises process. Stresses the dynamism of the entire web of relationship.

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*Empirical-analytic*

Ascertains the simple elements or components of a given reality and studies the simple elements on their own. Everything exists in isolation.

*Empirical-analytic holistic*

Integrates science and spirituality in an expanded framework of human experience. Everything exists in relationship, in a context of connectedness and meaning.

*Development of thought*

Accumulation of knowledge and information. Emphasis is on literature and content knowledge.

*Development of intelligence*

Sees the essence or truth of things. Sees things holistically. Recognises the limitations of thought. Experience of things.

*Scientific-dogmatic*

Search for the external order in our world (objectivism). Elimination of non-scientific knowledge as false or inappropriate in an educational setting.

*Secular-spiritual*

Search for the inner-order within consciousness (subjectivism). Deep respect for diversity and the inner experience of individuals.

*Reductionist*

Rejects subjective knowledge or the inner experiences of people. Reduces knowledge to unrelated components.

*Integral*

Affirms an inherent interdependence of evolving theory, research and practice. Integration of knowledge. The interface of science, art, spirituality and traditions.

*Focused on teaching*

Teaching is transmission of knowledge or an assimilative tool. Learning is imbibition of knowledge.

*Focused on learning*

Teaching is a transformative tool, a tool for the enhancement of being. Learning is a creative and artistic process involving the emotional, physical, social and spiritual levels of human awareness.

*Paradigm of simplification*

Emphasises atomism in education.

*Paradigm of complexity*

Emphasises holism interconnectiveness of knowledge.

*Predatory conscience*

Promotes exploitative life style. Discriminating. Assimilative.

*Ecological conscience*

Cares for the whole of the cosmos. Affirms the intrinsic values of all beings of whatever species. Interconnect, integrative.

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The characteristic nature of the holistic education paradigm in contrast with that of the prevailing mechanistic education paradigm, as presented above, clearly indicates that 'holistic education creates the pedagogical conditions for an unfolding of the inner potential of the [learner]'.<sup>16</sup> We can hardly know the outer world, the planet, if we did not have an internal knowledge of ourselves. Mechanistic education affirms that we can know the planet without knowing ourselves. Holistic education affirms the contrary view. 'Only by knowing ourselves we can know the planet.'

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious from the foregoing that we have no other option in respect of ethical education than that of the holistic paradigm.

As Christians committed to ethical leadership in education, we naturally assume a fundamental commitment to peace, justice, integration, freedom and solidarity as an integral part of our educational commitment. The ethical values must be connected to the concrete educational actions we promote.

In our educational leadership, we must engage the whole person and not only the mind, given that the deepest learning is that which involves the whole person. The whole person can hardly be a whole person without the community which informs and defines the person. Human beings are gregarious. It means that a person's wholeness is defined by the community as the context of the individual human being into consideration.

'Holism asserts that everything exists in relationship, in a context of connection and meaning and that any change or event causes realignment, however slight, throughout the entire pattern.' Holistic education, in the sense of education informed by holism, promotes the quality of human relationship within a community characterised with diversity and individuality. Embedded in holistic education are ethical values that transform the educational process with a view to human responsibility. Tampered with ethical commitments, our educational projects must be holistically inclusive, and intolerant of the discrimination evident in mechanistic education, especially in the area of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical and material limitations and economic inequalities.

John Dewey, one of the United States' most famous pragmatist educators, is reported to have said: 'The objective of a progressive education is the correction of unfair privilege and unfair deprivation.'<sup>17</sup> According to Henri Levi, 'the most complete application of this principle is to create an educational system that intervenes in Lire social system so that there is no systematic relation between

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a person's social origins or gender and his or her ultimate social attainments.<sup>18</sup> The task of holistic education is formidable but is not insurmountable.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Busia, K.A.A., *Purposeful Education for Africa*, The Hague: Mouton, 1996 (3rd ed.), p. 13.
- <sup>2</sup> Asante, Emmanuel, 'Toward An African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God', in: *The Kingship of Onyame*, Lewinston/Queenston/Lampeter: Mellen University Press, 1995, p. 16.
- <sup>3</sup> Hunnex, Milton D., *Chronological and Thematic Charts of Philosophers*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986, p. 36.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Mugambi, J.N.K., 'Responsible Leadership in Education and Development. An African Perspective' in: Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi, J.N.K., *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, p. 25. See also Chapter 9 in this volume.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>10</sup> Hunnex, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- <sup>11</sup> Schreiner, Peter *et al.* (eds), *Holistic Education Resource Book. Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context*, New York/Munich/Berlin: Waxmann, 2005, p. 18.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted in Bull, Vivian A., 'Economic Justice,' in: *Education for Human Responsibility in the Twenty-First Century. Third International Conference of the International Association of Methodist-Related Schools, Colleges and Universities at the Methodist College in Belfast, Northern Ireland, July 16-20, 2001*, Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2003, p. 62.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*