

Educating Kenyan children for productive citizenry: Cultural relevance in curriculum development

OPINION

Faith Maina

“A mathematics book for a pupil in Nairobi Primary cannot be the same as the one for a pupil in Wajir because they are at different levels,” said Sossion. (*Standard Newspaper*, 2019, December 3rd).

This statement recently made by the Secretary General of the giant Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), Mr. Wilson Sossion, was brought up by one of my alumni friends in a WhatsApp group forum. The member raised the question: “Can someone explain this logic to me – slowly like a two-year-old?” As it is characteristic of such forums, members responded with humorous messages, indicating the ridiculousness of the notion that students in Wajir could be different from those in Nairobi. One member mischievously explained that, “[The] Wajir book will be ravaged by excessive heat much sooner than the one in Nairobi,” to which another member advised Sossion to, “Print the Wajir books on camel hides to enhance toughness and durability.” All the members of this group are educators who attended Kenyatta University in the mid-1980s and, therefore, are currently well established teachers, principals or heading various government education offices.

Even though Sossion may not have been articulate, I thought he was making a significant point in terms of how we are educating Kenyan children from diverse cultural and class backgrounds. It did not escape the members to notice what Sossion proposed would disadvantage students from Wajir by teaching them about pastoralism at the expense of the content that would prepare them for the national examinations. National examinations in Kenya are cut throat events where students are engaged in stiff and relentless competition. Those who get the top grades are generously rewarded with seats in prestigious national schools, while those with low grades are pushed to small unknown schools where their chances of getting into institutions of higher learning are diminished. It is no wonder a few days later members of the same WhatsApp group forum found it incredible after the release of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results that the most improved student who had recorded a mere 279 points (below average) at the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) was now headed to an institution of higher learning having obtained an A-. The question to ask then is whether the focus on passing national examination is a detriment to Kenya’s ability to harness the human resource endowed in our children by labeling them as failures while inflating the sense of achievement for those who pass the exams based on access to more resources and social class!

The release of national exam results every year in Kenya is a spectacular event. The media usually shines the light on top performers who are often photographed carried shoulder high by proud parents amidst song and dance by relatives and community members. The children are heaped with praise as they share their dreams of getting into the prestigious national schools where they will replicate the same by joining Ivy League schools such as Harvard in America at the completion of their four-year secondary education. It is clear that the eight-year education prepared the students for Europe and North America rather than being productive citizens for their own country. In addition, these top performers almost always credit their hard work and discipline to attaining the top grades without any acknowledgement of the structural social class inequalities that provides access to those who can afford high cost private schools.

Kenya has failed to educate productive citizens at the expense of passing national exams to acquire paper certificates. The insistence that English is *the* and only language in which students are examined is a clear indication that we are yet to decolonize our curriculum. Students are denied

authentic learning material which links the knowledge they bring from their own environment to complement the concepts they learn in the classroom. Indeed, using students' cultures as the point of reference does not undermine learning as members of my WhatsApp forum insinuated, but instead enriches it. Learning happens best when children can relate the knowledge to what they experience in their homes and surrounding environment. Culturally relevant pedagogy would be the greatest equalizer. It would be remiss to ask a child in Wajir to count the number of *matatus* that pass by the school if there are no *matatus* in the vicinity. Instead, they should be asked to count something that is familiar to them and can be easily found in their own environment. It is only then that we can safely assess them through the national examination for mastering the concept of counting and not the contextual knowledge of a *matatu*. In so doing, Kenya will educate a generation of students that have mastered their own environment with the desired outcome of being productive citizens.

In his own way, Sossion was right! Developing culturally relevant materials to educate diverse children across the country is a notion to be considered by educators and other stakeholders in order to tap the human capital and resource necessary to grow Kenya!

Reference

Standard Newspaper (2019, December 3rd). Another teachers strike? KNUT issues 22-day notice. Retrieved on January 4, 2020 from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001351783/another-teachers-strike-knut-issues-22-day-notice>