

Essay 17

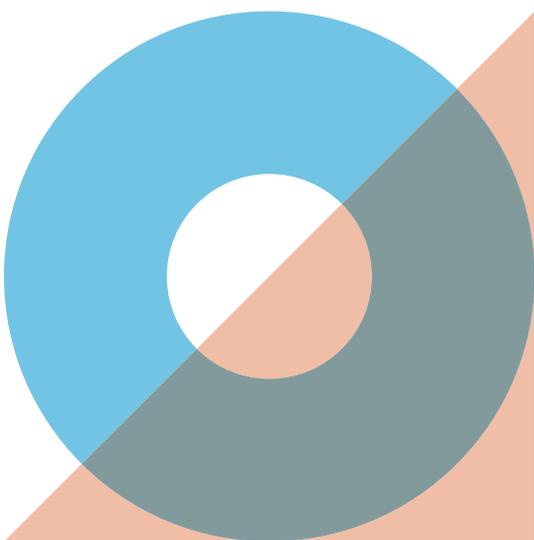
Education System Change

Perspectives from Kenya

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My intrigue with the education system dates back more than three decades when I began as a fresh graduate teacher with the aspiration of literally igniting the classroom.

I finally had the license and authority to teach and management entrusted me to groom learners to be “great!” Shortly into the adventure towards greatness, I realized that the process was already pre-determined and I was expected to tinker with classroom interactions within the boundaries of the syllabus. The goal was to cover the syllabus—and any thought of introducing new content was frowned upon. There was no room for knowledge for knowledge’s sake, a teacher was in class to teach and how well one taught was evident through students’ exams. But I wanted to excite the learners, introduce them to new concepts and ideas, make them think, and yearn to know more.

Soon enough, the parents and guardians came to expect more from schools: They had high expectations that school would transform their children. In some cases, they even saw the teacher as a miracle worker of sorts, after all, a teacher could make a child learn. A common assumption was that schooling would shape the children and the teacher would be the one person to ensure this happened. However, things were not as simple and practice was indeed different from the theory covered in university lecture rooms.

It gradually dawned on me that maybe the system would yield different results if it catered to the unique classroom circumstances that the teacher faced. I had come to expect more from the learners, and by extension, I expected to offer more as a teacher. This conviction inadvertently led me on a journey to try to change the way classroom instruction was carried out, through curriculum development and reform. As a researcher and curriculum specialist, I questioned and examined the curriculum and began working to address the concerns raised by teachers, academics, civil society, parents, and learners.



This led to my realization that policymaking was complicated, and any change of the curriculum would require extensive decision-making at a national level. I eventually moved on to become an education officer, joining the national level team of senior government officials responsible for education management and administration. This opened engagements with a wide range of stakeholders: Legislators, field officers, entrepreneurs, parents, employers, industrialists, civil society, faith-based organizations, academics, pastoralists, and development partners. The idea of change resonated, but most efforts had not borne fruit. It was a humbling realization to look back and trace my path from a classroom teacher to a curriculum specialist and now as a senior education officer. All through, the idea was to contribute towards changing the system and make it better for the child, the teacher, and ultimately, the country.

NEW SYSTEM FOR NEW SKILLS

Today, as the Director of Policy, Partnerships, and East African Community Affairs in Kenya's Ministry of Education, I think a lot about how innovation can help our schools. How can new approaches help teachers best serve the unique circumstances they face daily in the classroom? How can the education system best address the needs of a developing economy and propel it the heights of industrialization? I often turn to innovations outside the education sector for inspiration.

I think about M-Pesa, the decade old mobile money transfer service targeted to Kenyans without access to banking services, which has evolved into a key component of not only the Kenyan economy, but the global economy. Mobile money is an innovation that brought change in a local context but has had a global impact. How can we then bring about innovations in the education sector and achieve exceptional systemic impact that benefits entire generations?

Reflections on the education system in Kenya take on the nature of the wider system: Policy and legislative reforms, curriculum reforms, education innovations, skill-based approaches, industry and classroom linkages, acquisition of employable skills, lifelong learning, and the provision of education for the 21st century learner. It is the demand for change that propels education systems to produce a country's innovators, inventors, creators, problem solvers, entrepreneurs, global citizens, changemakers, and critical thinkers.

It has always been the desire of successive governments in Kenya to bring about system reforms in line with national and continental aspirations. At the Africa Union level, member countries have agreed to Agenda 2063, which includes education aspirations to catalyze an education and skills revolution and actively promote science, technology, research, and innovation, with the goal of building knowledge, capabilities, and skills for Africa's future. This is given impetus by the African Union's vision of an integrated, peaceful, and prosperous Africa, driven by its own citizens to take up its rightful place in the global arena. This required pursuing a process of change guided by evidence-based decision-making, supportive legislative frameworks, and resource allocation to the actual teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Sharing strategies and lessons with peers across the continent has always been a source of useful reflection of our work in Kenya. As part of the regional East African Community, peer learning and peer support is always a key component of building on partner states' strengths for enhancing the quality of life for the citizens in the region. For example, as one of the Learning Champion countries engaged with the global Learning Metrics Task Force, I participated in an East African workshop that heavily influenced my thinking. How could we expect our children to develop the full breadth of skills needed to thrive in the 21st century if our national curriculum had not changed in 30 years?

CURRICULUM REFORM AS PART OF WHOLE-SYSTEM CHANGE

Today, Kenya is developing a new curriculum for a new era. The National Policy on Curriculum Reforms is guided by the vision of "Nurturing every learners' potential" and is championed at the highest political levels by the Kenyan Head of State, His Excellency Uhuru Kenyatta and the Cabinet Secretary in charge of Education, Dr. Fred Matiangi. In line with Kenya Vision 2030 and the Constitution of Kenya 2010, the overall aim of the new curriculum is to equip citizens with skills for the 21st century and hinges on the global shift towards education programs that encourage optimal human capital development. Education should be viewed in a holistic spectrum that includes schooling and the co-curriculum activities that nurture, mentor, and mold the child into productive citizens. There is emphasis on the learner's character, patriotism, citizenship, and ability to coexist as a responsible citizen without sectarian inclinations.



The proposed curriculum reforms are a part of system-wide reforms: School-based quality assurance, offering instructional leadership, improving the learning environment, quality and cost-effective teaching materials, standard learning infrastructure, continuous professional development of education officials and teachers, and a drive towards an inclusive education. Additionally, the reforms introduce vocational and technical education early in junior secondary school to encourage attaining dual qualification (i.e. academic and industry) and education as a continuum from Early Childhood Development (ECD) to tertiary level.

A central focus of the reforms is how we approach teaching and learning around the child. This includes place of the teacher and the learner in the change process and whether it is possible to increase trust in the teacher. Therefore, implementing these reforms on the ground will require reviewing teacher training, upgrading teacher training certifications to a minimum of diploma, promoting specialization, strengthening internship/teaching practice, action research, mentorship, community of practice and peer education, and procurement and provision of quality instructional materials.

In order to facilitate the reforms through an evidence-based policy decision-making process, Kenya has piloted several interventions which have scaled up national-wide. For example, based on the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) pilot, the roll outs of the Tusome national literacy program and the Primary Education Development (PRIEDE) project have greatly contributed to the evidence in literacy, numeracy, supervision, provision of instructional materials, and teacher support. The purpose is to plan for significant impact from interventions with an eye for enhanced skill acquisition and training for the global economy.

The reform process is expected to produce a flexible curriculum that allows for complementary alternative pathways, which provide learners with choices of specialization and interest. The guiding principles of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 establish holistic, inclusive, and equitable education as a core for sustainable development the establishment of scientific and technological innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship.

NEW CORE COMPETENCIES FOR BASIC EDUCATION

To realize this pan-African vision, we have shifted our focus to competencies and skills that reach beyond traditional academics. We are proposing core competencies for basic education that cut across subject areas and expanding subject areas to include essential topics for this century. This is summarized in the table below:

Broad Area	Pertinent and Contemporary Issue
1. Citizenship	Peace education, integrity, ethnic and racial relations, social cohesion, patriotism and good governance, human rights and responsibilities, child's rights, child care and protection, gender issues in education.
2. Health Education	HIV and AIDS Education; alcohol and drug abuse prevention; life style diseases; personal hygiene; preventive health; common communicable and chronic diseases.
3. Life Skills and Values Education	Life skills, values, moral education and human sexuality, etiquette.
4. Education for Sustainable Development	Environmental education, disaster risk reduction, safety and security education (small arms, human trafficking), financial literacy, poverty eradication, countering terrorism, extreme violence, and radicalization.
5. Non-Formal Programs	Guidance services, career guidance, counseling services, peer education, mentorship, learning to live together, clubs and societies, sports and games.
6. Community Service Learning and Parental Engagement	Service learning and community involvement, parental empowerment and engagement.

DON'T FORGET TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (TVET)

The reforms and core competencies in basic education are expected to transcend into both TVET and university education levels. Following the Science Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA) 2024, whose mission is to “Accelerate Africa's transition to an innovation-led, knowledge-based economy,” Kenya and other countries in Africa, will need to find a nexus between basic education and TVET. The continental Agenda 2063 aims to address youth employment through quality and rel-



evant education that will result in a skills revolution. This will be achieved through rebranding TVET and making career options more appealing and meaningful. We need to make education and training count by responding to labor market needs, equipping youth with competencies in critical thinking and creativity, creating and expanding opportunities for youth re-skilling, and enhancing skills mobility across learning areas. Part of these reforms will entail introducing Vocational and Technical pathways at the secondary level as a way of orienting the learners towards the complementary options that are available at post-secondary level. This may also imply that secondary education through these pathways could lead towards dual qualifications for the learners—thus enhancing the employment opportunities after secondary education.

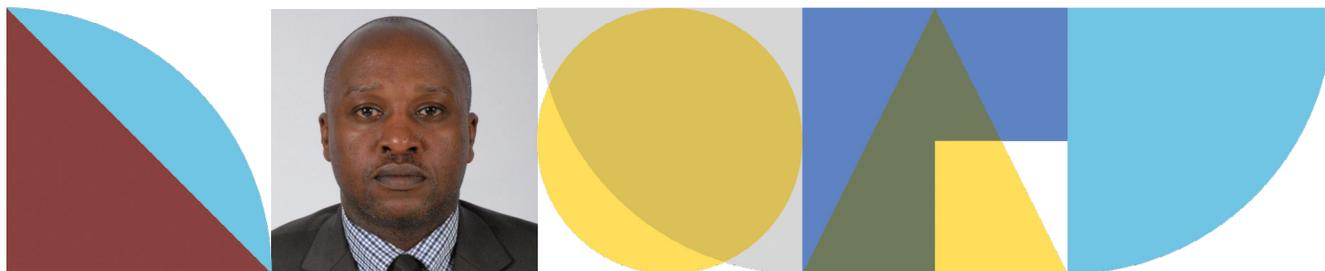
A PUBLIC GOOD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Education as a public good aims to provide quality education in order to reduce disparities (education as an equalizer). System change should address aspects of equity and equality as well as the broader quality imperative. To do this, the reform process must be integrated, disruptive, and transformative for there to be tangible results for all learners. It is a complex process that can only be realized through collaborative partnerships between government and other key players, such as parents, civil society, and the private sector. A mindset shift is required to create a new culture of progressive improvement of the status quo and I am heartened by the current momentum and excitement towards education system reforms.

Our hope is that these bold reforms should culminate in a learning environment crafted with the best interests of the learner at heart, the realization of the role of the teachers, tutors, and teacher trainers, the full engagement of government and households on the requisite resource allocation, and the quantum of economic development that we all aspire for.

Sometimes we expect too much from old education system models to deliver modern 21st century skilled learners. But we have no other choice but to pursue these ambitious plans. Kenya, like Africa, has a significantly young population that forms a critical portion of the human workforce. During the ADEA Triennale 2017 in Dakar, Senegal, thought leaders met and shared on how to sustainably prepare and engage the youth in Africa. Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank,

opined that “education is the key that opens up the realization of the objectives of sustainable development.” The youth form the critical mass that is poised to carry Africa through the next African Revolution spurred by education and training.



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Darius Mogaka Ogotu is a Director of Education in charge of Policy, Partnerships and East African Community Affairs at the State Department of Basic Education in the Ministry of Education in Kenya. He coordinates Policy Development, implementation of the National Education Sector Plan, Education Development Partners Consultative Group, and East African Community Affairs as well as spearheading the national curriculum reforms process. Current Kenya country-lead for the Inter-Country Quality Nodes (ICQNs) on Mathematics and Science and Peace Education under the auspices of Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Part of the Learning Champions under the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) and now a proponent of the Network of African Learning Assessments (NALA).

He is a member of the national steering committee for the following three national programs: USAID and UKAID funded-Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity, GPE funded - Kenya Primary Education Project (which focuses on Early Grade Numeracy, school management and EMIS) and CIFF-funded Tayari Program (which focuses on school readiness at early childhood level). In this role, Mr. Mogaka coordinates policy aspects within these three key national programs which are entrenched in the National Education Sector Plan. He is also a core-team member of the Education Evidence for Action (EE4A).