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The Challenge of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Today

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Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s thoughts and policies on education remain as relevant today as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, when they had their biggest impact on education practice in Tanzania. I will begin with a summary of key issues and/or objectives promoted by Mwalimu in the first section, followed by a brief sketch of the education situation today in the context of liberalization and privatization in the education system, and end with concluding remarks on ‘education for all’.

Education for Liberation

Mwalimu’s words and actions expressed a call for *liberating education*, in terms of access, content and quality. The first step in that process of liberation was the creation of one *unified public school system*, in place of the racially segregated system put in place by the British in the colonial days. Barriers of both race and religion were abolished, so that all schools and colleges were open to all children.

A second major step taken was to *expand enrolment* at the upper levels of the education system, which had been kept highly restricted against Africans in the colonial education pyramid. Hence, a first priority was to expand upper primary school and secondary school, and to establish the University College of Dar es Salaam. However, more than 50% of school-aged children were still denied primary education by the early 1970s; the proportion of children out of school was much higher in the disadvantaged regions. In other words, access to education remained a major issue, with inequalities persisting according to race, ethnicity, gender, and urban-rural location. This was totally contrary to the basic principle which Mwalimu held dear – that all children had a right to a basic education.

Abolition of school fees at primary and secondary school level in the late 1960s/early 1970s was a first, necessary step towards *universal education*. However, true universal primary education (UPE) was only achieved with the implementation of the *Musoma Resolutions* of 1974. Musoma Resolutions called for a *national campaign for UPE*. This was in response to popular demand, associated with earlier campaigns for villagisation. The people had been challenging their party and leaders: ‘We have moved into development villages. Where is the school you promised us? The health centre? The markets?’

In most regions of the country, villagers and townspeople built UPE primary schools with their bare hands, providing land, raw materials and labour. The government’s contribution remained the provision of a tin roof, if at all, and providing teachers who benefited from only a few weeks of training. Innovative forms of long distance teacher education were adopted to train teachers while they were on the job in the schools.

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1 Based on a paper presented during the celebration of Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere’s birthday, 13th April 2000, Karimjee Hall, Dar es Salaam; updated to take into account developments in 2003.

2 Manager, Policy Analysis and Advocacy Program, HakiElimu
Comparative evaluation studies in the early 1980s found that ‘UPE’ teachers performed as well if not better than those trained in normal residential training colleges.

Schooling was not completely ‘free’, not then, not ever. Not only did parents and other members of the community build their schools; they paid taxes, bought uniforms, notebooks, textbooks and other school supplies. In addition, a contribution of twenty shillings was made for each child every year.

Contrary to revisionist views today, UPE was highly successful; at least in quantitative terms. By 1984, the number of children in school had doubled: more than 90% of school-aged children were enrolled in school, a higher proportion than found in most other African countries, including those in the middle and high income groups. Of even greater significance to women, UPE led to gender parity in primary school enrolment. The proportion of boys and girls in primary school became equal only as a result of UPE.

What about the content of education, and teaching methodologies? These help to determine the question of access to what? The ‘Education for Self Reliance’ (ESR) Policy was a direct call for liberating education, in contrast to the kind of education then available in the late 1960s. ESR criticized the existing education system for being individualistic, competitive, and based on rote memory learning. Earlier education reforms had made the content more ‘Tanzanian’ and ‘African’, by teaching about local leaders and traditional rulers, for example, rather than the Queens and Kings of England. Kiswahili was adopted as the medium of instruction, beginning with the primary level, but with the intention of extending it right up to the University level.

Nevertheless, the structure of education and pedagogy remained much the same, and was not supportive of the new kind of society being built: a society based on equality and cooperation and human rights. To quote Mwalimu:

“This means that the educational system of Tanzania must emphasize cooperative endeavor, not individual advancement; it must stress concepts of equality and the responsibility to give service which goes with any special ability, whether it be in carpentry, in animal husbandry, or in academic pursuits. And, in particular, our education must counteract the temptation to intellectual arrogance; for this leads to the well-educated despising those whose abilities are non-academic or who have no special abilities but are just human beings. Such arrogance has no place in a society of equal citizens.” (March 1967, in Nyerere 1968:273-4)

ESR calls for the curriculum to be relevant to the rural livelihoods of most of Tanzanians, but this was not to be the adaptive education of the colonial days.

“This does not mean that education in Tanzania should be designed just to produce passive agricultural workers of different levels of skill who simply carry out plans or directions received from above. It must produce good farmers; it has also to prepare people for their responsibilities as free workers and citizens in a free and democratic society... They have to be able to think for themselves, to make judgements on all the issues affecting them; they have to be able to interpret the decisions made through the democratic institutions of our society, and to implement them in the light of the peculiar local circumstances where they happen to live.
It would thus be a gross misinterpretation of our needs to suggest that the educational system should be designed to produce robots, who work hard but never question what the leaders in Government or TANU are doing or saying...” (ibid:274, my emphasis)

Mwalimu therefore linked the education process with the development of a participatory democratic political process, beginning, for him, at the village level, right up to the national level. The two needed to reinforce each other: democracy in the schools and in society. With hindsight, we know that neither was fully achieved, or else could not be sustained, but real attempts were made to implement this liberating vision at different locations in Tanzania. The history of those initiatives needs to be retrieved and analyzed, so as to capture the lessons to be learned for the road ahead.

The ESR policy paper then goes on to discuss cognitive and affective objectives – and these continue to be quoted today in educational foundation courses all over the world.

“The education provided must therefore encourage the development in each citizen of three things: an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he does and not for what he obtains.” (ibid: 274)

Hence, ESR was calling for an enquiring mind, critical thinking and self-confidence among students at all levels. Again, links are made between these educational objectives and the kind of politics and society being built.

“...the free citizens of Tanzania will have to judge social issues for themselves; their neither is, nor will be, a political ‘holy book’ which purports to give all the answers to all the social, political and economic problems which will face our country in the future...Only free people conscious of their worth and their equality can build a free society.” (ibid: 274-275)

In those days, we thought the holy book referred to Marx’s writings. Today, it probably refers to neo-liberal economic writings of the World Bank, IMF and their local experts. There is no holy book on which Tanzanians can build their freedom and justice – only critical thinking, asking questions of everything and everybody, and self-confidence.

The policy also called for the insertion of practical activity and productive work into the educational curriculum, not as punishment, but as an integral part of the learning process. Linkages between the school and the community were to be made, by inviting local intellectuals, elders and others to share their knowledge and experience with the students. The reliance on paper examinations as the sole means of selecting to higher levels of education, from secondary up, was to be reduced, and alternative mechanisms of selection to be adopted (ibid: 288). Productive work should also be geared to provision of some of the education costs. However, students were expected to be key decision-makers in determining what kind of economic activities to engage in, and how the produce was to be allocated and consumed – “the pupils must be able to participate in decisions and learn by mistakes” (ibid: 284-285).
What were and are the implications of ESR for pedagogy i.e. teaching methodology? Committed teachers began to develop problem-solving approaches to teaching and learning, based on cooperative group work. Students were encouraged to challenge their teachers and fellow students in the classroom with alternative solutions to problems. Positive forms of reinforcement were to be encouraged, including praise for correct answers or good attempts at solution. Competitive ranking of students, especially when displayed publicly, were discouraged. Being ranked as in the bottom of the class was no way to encourage self-confidence. Nor was caning. Corporal punishment began to be challenged at this time by ESR-minded teachers and students at all levels, as a major barrier to achieving ESR objectives. It encouraged passivity, not creativity; obsequience, not a free independent citizen and/or student; humiliation and shame rather than pride.

Many aspects of ESR were tried, but in fewer and fewer schools by the end of the 1970s. Teachers, students and school administrators faced many barriers by the early 1980s, which eventually worked against ESR principles and objectives. Some of these were:

- Economic crises that led to declining financial resources for school equipment, buildings, teacher salaries, books, etc
- Overcrowded classrooms, which made innovative child-centered pedagogy very difficult
- Inadequate supply of school books, textbooks, visual aids and other equipment
- Declining teacher wages in real terms
- Restrictive education pyramid, denying upward mobility beyond primary education for all but a tiny minority
- Bureaucratic institutional structure.

**Education Situation Analysis**

The education system was turned around by macro reform policies that began to be adopted in the mid-1980s, along with sectoral reforms. The very first blow against the principle of ‘education for all’ and equity in education was the imposition of school fees i.e. cost-sharing, which was one of the conditions for World Bank loans in the early structural adjustment days. Tanzanians were told by World Bank representatives and consultants that ‘your country is too poor to afford universal primary education’, a cynical justification for the growing education inequalities at global level between ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ nations and peoples.

The proportion of school-aged children enrolled in school began to drop immediately. From a peak of 98% gross enrolment ratio in 1980, gross primary school enrolment dropped to 71% in 1988, and gradually rose to 78% in 1997. According to the *State of Education in Tanzania* report (kuleana 1999:12), in 1999:

- Out of every 100 children of primary school age, only 56 enroll in school;
- of these, 56 children enrolled in school, only 38 complete primary school;
- of the 38 who complete primary school, only 6 proceed to secondary school.

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3 The net enrollment ratio (NER) is the ratio of ‘total number of 7-13 year olds enrolled in school’ to ‘total number of 7-13 year olds in the population’. The gross enrollment ratio (GER) is the ratio of ‘total number of children enrolled in primary school’ to ‘total of 7-13 year olds in the population’. The GER is significantly higher than the NER because of late enrollment. Many children do not enroll until age 9, 10 or older, in spite of PEDP policy to restrict Std 1 enrollment to 7 year olds.
Moreover, there were significant differences in school enrolment according to school location, reflecting regional, district, ethnic and urban-rural differences.

The present condition of basic education in Tanzania has improved considerably since 2001, as a result of the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP). The government’s abolition of primary school fees and cash contributions led to an immediate leap in enrolment. Net Enrolment Rates have increased from 59% in 2000 to 91% in 2003, and Gross Enrolment Rates have increased from 78% to 108% during the same period. Actual enrolment grew by 50%, up from 4.4 million in 2000 to 6.6 million in 2003, based on BEST 1997-2003 figures for enrolment data. However a large number of older children are finding themselves locked out of school. Some reports also indicate that actual attendance might be significantly lower than enrolment.

Access may be undermined by inadequate attention to the quality of education. The majority of pupils do not have access to good quality schooling, with well-motivated teachers, adequate learning materials and child-centered forms of teaching methodology. The deplorable conditions of most primary schools, especially in the rural areas, and the inability of many poor families to afford other costs of schooling (school uniforms, tuition classes, notebooks and the like) are among the major factors causing an extremely high drop out rate from school. In the late 1990s, just over half of all children completed Standard Seven, the rest dropped out. Another measure of school completion is the pass rate in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The results are even worse for girls, whose pass rates are 13-15% lower than for boys. According to BEST figures for 2001, only 21 students out of every 100 who entered primary school left with a Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) certificate. In recent years pass rates have improved; however they still remain very low compared to the PRS target of 50%

Where do the children of the wealthy and other elite groups go? One of the most challenging outcomes of neo-liberal policies in education, however, has been the government’s encouragement of the private sector to invest in primary and post-primary education. In the mid-1980s, this was combined with a major withdrawal of government [and donor] responsibility and funding for public education. Although PEDP connotes a renewed mandate for public responsibility in basic education, the damage has been done. Two contrasting school systems emerged by the end of the 1990s, one for the well-to-do and one for the poor majority.

The private high cost school system is characterized by its focus on English as the medium of instruction from pre-school up through primary and secondary school levels. The growing demand for English medium in part reflects globalizing forces in Tanzania, and contradicts the emphasis in the past on one unifying language, Kiswahili, as a means of building national unity and Tanzanian/Pan African identity.

There has been a rapid expansion of private English academy schools in Dar es Salaam, and other major urban centers. Very high fees are charged, which exclude all but the majority of children from enrolment. Being a product of one of the English medium pre-schools is considered essential by the ‘best’ schools. Child-centered pedagogy is used in many of the best schools; indeed, one incentive for parents to enrol their children in these schools is because they do not use corporal punishment. As one friend’s daughter said, ‘We go to non-whipping schools. We are lucky.’
Student achievement and performance in these schools ranges of course, but in general, children improve rapidly once they are enrolled. The products of these schools can compete with their peers who live abroad, which is the intention, as more and more young people go overseas for higher education.

Meanwhile, conditions in the public schools may have worsened since the introduction of PEDP. Teachers’ salaries remain low, and are often not paid for two to three months at a time. They lack adequate textbooks and other training materials, and the classrooms are severely overcrowded in many areas. However, some classrooms become half-empty, especially in higher levels of primary school, as one third of primary school children drop out of school before completion. The cane is relied upon in public primary and secondary schools, and in teacher training centers as well.

Privatization and liberalisation have therefore led to the creation of a dualistic education system, one for the rich, and one for the poor, with a middle education system of ‘best’ public schools for the middle classes. This contradicts the principles of equity and justice promoted by Mwalimu which were incorporated into education reforms of the 1970s. The marker of difference is no longer race as in the colonial days, but class. And class inequalities may be more explosive.

**The Way Forward**

I personally think it is an opportune time to reconsider the direction that has been taken by education policy, especially in the light of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The government has been in a position to access a great deal more financial resources, and has pledged that education will be one of the key priorities.

Resources should be channeled to build a strong public education system, which provides quality education at all levels. This is the only way to ensure equity and justice for all Tanzanians. A commitment is needed on the part of government and donors, as well as the private sector and civil society organizations, to channel funds, trained teachers and other resources to the public sector. A strong high performing public school system will be able to compete with the private sector, as in the past, and reduce the demand for an alternative education system. Stronger measures are needed to counteract discrimination in the schools on grounds of gender, disability, income differences or culture.

School governance needs to be democratized along the lines of the PEDP Institutional Arrangements Annex (PO-RALG 2001) and made more transparent and accountable to parents, students and the community, in the context of local government reform. The government’s programme of school mapping can contribute to this process, by carefully chosen indicators that involve different sectors of the community in a participatory process. This would contribute to a broader process of democratization in education and the schools.

The objectives of creativity, critical thinking, self-confidence and cooperation need to be prioritised anew, with support given to innovative teachers and school administrators, and the promotion of learner-centered pedagogy at all levels. To ensure these objectives, teachers need access to adequate equipment and training materials, with fewer children in the classroom, and better incentives for their invaluable work.
In connection with the above, special steps are needed to abolish corporal punishment, and caning in particular, at all levels of education, beginning with preschool. Teachers and administrators should be given support and incentives to adopt alternative disciplinary approaches. Comparable efforts need to be made in the wider community, so as to discourage caning and other forms of corporal punishment in the home and family.

Finally, stronger measures are needed to counteract discrimination in the schools on grounds of disability, gender and income differences.

All Tanzanian children deserve an education that, as Mwalimu Nyerere would put it, is liberating and transformational. It is not good enough to consign the poor to third class schooling that is not worth its name. But this transformation will require hard work, citizen engagement and a renewal of solidarity. Particular responsibility lies with those of us fortunate enough to have benefited from education. As Mwalimu Nyerere himself reminded us in 1998:

“Not all of us will have the same concept of community, but all of us have a need to belong. However socially insensitive we may be, we have a need to belong to a community of fellow human beings. No human being can make it alone. Nobody is asking us to love others more than we love ourselves; but those of us who have been lucky enough to receive a good education have a duty also to help to improve the well being of the community to which we belong; is part of loving ourselves!” (Julius K. Nyerere, Open University, 5 March, 1998)
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