

# EDUCATION IN AFRICA: Colonialism and the Millennium Development Goals

by Hugh McCullum

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker, can become the head of the mine, that the child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. **Nelson Mandela** Education is a universal right, a prerequisite for democracy, a path out of material and spiritual poverty. **Millennium Development Goals**

We all know how much remains to be done to place national education at the service of the new society that is being created. We all know that such an undertaking, since it is not the result of a merely mechanical act, implies a radical transformation in the system of colonial education, and without this the whole plan for a new society could be frustrated. This is a fundamental theme. **Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea Bissau*, 1978**

Some educators, Africanists and analysts could be forgiven if they heave a sigh of frustration: 'Not another diatribe blaming Africa's woes on colonialism... Not another bleak criticism of African failures... Not another impossible dream... Paulo Freire revisited with his visions of revolution and socialism.'

Yet, dear reader, it is important to question a few realities as all 53 of Africa's countries search for Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 and ask why it will likely be closer to 2050 before this target is achieved. The goal is critical not only for people to achieve the dignity and equality that Nelson Mandela so eloquently advocates and for the path away from poverty that the Millennium Goals seek to achieve, but also for the radical transformation envisaged in the New Africa.



Paulo Freire at UNESCO headquarters in 1986.

UNESCO / Michel Claude

Who can argue against UPE or even against a decade to achieve it? Africa has more than 40 million children, almost half the school-age child population, receiving no schooling. Two-thirds of these are girls. Promises have been made and, sadly, broken. The ideal of UPE has drawn an enormous influx of children into schools, but what kind of schools? There is no money for the most minimal universality. There is such a shortage of teachers that existing schools are in acute crisis. Many of those teaching in classrooms in 2005 are woefully unqualified. Curricula largely still follow the colonial model, long since discarded by the North because it alienates students and stifles critical and creative thinking. Indeed, the goals may well be causing more problems they would solve.

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Classroom at Boreko, Guinea-Bissau.

UNESCO

As Freire noted in his letters about developing education (Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, Zambia, etc.), most African countries simply adapted, at independence, the colonial system already in place, usually based on the teaching of various churches. Sadly much of African education, with far less money, material and personnel resources, is still following adaptations of this colonial mindset, as well as failing to keep up with modern pedagogy, indigenous learning and teaching resources.

Universal Primary Education, the late Brazilian educator (1921-1997) might well have said, is a great idea but what about the process, the plan, the coherence needed to achieve the goal, beginning with his or her first classroom, even if it is under a baobab tree?

Freire was widely known for his use of the term 'conscientization' in education, a process by which 'both teacher and pupils simultaneously become knowing subjects, brought together by the object they are knowing.' In his best-known work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote that grassroots literacy campaigns were essential to national education. People simply were not literate enough to deal

with English (or French or Portuguese or Afrikaans) curricula with its Eurocentricity to educate themselves for the 20th, to say nothing of the 21st, century.

Readers familiar with Freire's basic theories can identify the same insistence throughout his educational life as 'unity between theory and practice, mental and manual work, past and present experience.' He believed that education should be part of the struggle against the colonial past and its on-going legacy today, globalization and neo-colonialism, in order that people might learn to speak 'their own word.'

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Freire explored the many dimensions of critical consciousness which he believed essential for education of the masses, especially the poor who had a badly planned curricula, regardless of which system they followed, which produced only elites and alienated most people from their culture, language and knowledge. He believed in multi-cultural education with the whole world as his classroom.

He was a man of praxis, he was incredibly industrious and committed to the desperately poor, be they urban or rural. While living in exile in Geneva, because his language was Portuguese, he communicated with educators in Guinea-Bissau in a series of letters that records in a conversational tone his belief that dialogue was almost a synonym for 'education'. His work in Africa records in measured and unhurried stages, the evolution of 'a pedagogic partnership' to assist the educators of new-born nations to get beyond colonialism.

Their common purpose was to develop a literacy programme, followed by an educational process for newly liberated people. The letters and processes extend to several new nations (especially literate Tanzania) – all sharing the heritage of many centuries of European domination.

Freire was also a revolutionary in education and he restated many times that any group of 'outside educators' who had grown up and been educated in a privileged situation where teachers are educated by former European systems, curricula and processes and those elites who travel to Europe, North America and overseas to continue an elite education, are distanced from the people they might, hopefully, return home to teach. Indeed, the elitism of European class education has failed virtually everywhere in today's Africa.



Adult literacy class in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

UNESCO / Arthur Gillette

Freire was often described as a gentle, affectionate human being who believed that education was in dire need of revolution, not just reform and adjustment. He was described as being motivated by love – love of education and people. He spoke often of his close association with Tanzania and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and their refusal to accept packaged or prefabricated solutions, avoiding every kind of cultural invasion, whether open or cleverly hidden.

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School children interacting at Mazimbu, Tanzania.

UNESCO / A. Camacho Urteaga

If there was anything Freire learned it was that those who are called to teach must first learn how to continue learning when they begin to teach. In learning with students, teachers, workers, peasants, Freire and his colleagues could learn with them while they taught: 'Learning first in order to continue learning in order to teach.'

UPE does sound like the right direction. But what is the long-term approach that will enable every child to learn from the beginning of the first

day in a classroom to be a useful, creative citizen in a diverse and culturally vibrant Africa?

Primary education is just a beginning but, at the current slow rates, many will never catch up. The UN monitoring report last year found that 22 countries in sub-Saharan Africa had low enrolments, highly unequal gender ratios, widespread illiteracy and low educational quality leading to high dropouts with many pupils never completing primary school.

Thirty years ago Freire recognized that we start with literacy, we revolutionize education away from foreign systems developed by and for elites and we teach-learn and teach. Education must lie at the core of Africa's development, not just be a meagre extra in budgets swollen by arms purchases and corruption.

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Consider this:

- In South America, an average child can expect to attend 12 years of formal education; in many parts of Africa, it is four years
- In four decades of independence from colonialism, education systems in Africa are marked by inadequate teaching, lack of resources, like basic textbooks, chalkboards and curricula, and teaching methods following the old foreign curricula
- The average global spending per child on primary education is US\$629; in Africa it is US\$48
- Of the 42 million primary-aged children not in school, 62 percent are girls
- Where schools once coped with 50 students per primary school teacher, now it is more like 100 students
- Teachers are leaving their profession in droves, many of them succumbing to HIV/AIDS, others unable to live on their meagre salaries.

There is much more, but these stark facts mask an even more important fact. While governments fumble to meet the minimal goals of education in Africa and demand massive funding, the broader debate on education in Africa is stifled.

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That broader discussion must include, say educators across the continent, 10 grossly neglected areas that African leaders have to address if Universal Primary Education is ever to be achieved, let alone by the target date of 2015 set by the UN Millennium Goals.

1. **'Education is the only anti-HIV/AIDS vaccine there is,'** observes former South African Education Minister Kader Asma. So many children are forced to abandon school to care for parents, siblings or orphaned relatives. Yet AIDS advocates insist that the virus and disease actually are reduced with increased education. Less schooling means more poverty, more poverty means increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The more girls are educated, the longer they are likely to refrain from sexual activity and require their partners to practice safe sex. The continent has nearly 13 million AIDS orphans. The only way they can get education is through a wide range of government interventions. The pandemic is also reducing the number of teachers. In many countries the equivalent of two-thirds of newly trained teachers are lost every year. Governments need to provide for more testing, medical support including anti-retrovirals, prevention programmes, counseling and support groups.
2. **Africa needs to radically improve the quality and quantity of its teachers.** Africa has about 2.5 million teachers and a three percent increase will be needed in the next 10 years. This requires more and improved teachers' colleges. Under- or unqualified teachers must be either upgraded or retired, replacing them with newer and better qualified teachers. In-service and upgrading must be always available. To be effective,

teachers need the support of principals, the broader education system, parents, communities and education ministries.

3. **Improving quality requires a focus on outcomes.** Recent studies conclude that about half the pupils in Africa have not achieved the minimum skill level defined by the authorities in each country. In some countries less than a third of children at the end of primary school have the skills necessary to perform at the secondary level. In some countries where teaching continued in a colonial language, three decades later three-quarters of students were functionally illiterate after seven years of schooling. Trial programmes that teach students to read first in their own language and then make a transition to the European language in three or four years dramatically improved literacy.
4. **Africa needs more graduates trained in maths, science and information and communication technology.** Primary school teachers need to make learning in these subjects interesting, relevant and fun.
5. **Corruption is rampant in many education systems.** It robs school systems of scarce funds. In some countries school principals have been accused of bribery, favouritism and direct stealing from schools. Irregular admissions, private coaching during class times for pay, collusion, impersonation and other forms of cheating during exams are commonplace in some countries.
6. **Education institutions are producing inadequate numbers of skilled personnel,** according to Nepad's draft document on education in 2004. Education must, therefore, occur in many forms: vocational training, incentives to train staff in parastatals and companies, and apprenticeships. There is a need to fund adult literacy and skills training.
7. **While primary education provides a foundation, secondary education is critical in supplying qualified teachers and job skills.** According to surveys, only 25 percent of African primary school pupils make it to high school and just 10 percent of those ever graduate. This reflects a shortage of schools and teachers at the secondary level.
8. **Teaching more than the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic** is one of the most critical areas, one that would find Freire's deep approval in the reform of curricula. Teaching by rote is still the most common form of instruction. There is little room for discussion or asking questions. Students do not learn how to be problem solvers. Culture is critical in drafting new curricula, as is learning how to learn.
9. **Teaching is among the lowest paid professions in Africa.** As has been pointed out above, Africa needs many more qualified teachers but countries are failing to attract the best people because teaching is among the lowest paid professions on the continent. Salaries vary greatly but range in Malawi, for example, from US\$27 to US\$127-a-month and in Tanzania from US\$70 to US\$97. African teachers often do not get paid for months and the profession has lost much of the status it once held in many countries. The morale is low so many graduates of secondary school refuse to consider the profession and educated young people look for challenging employment in other fields and other countries.
10. **Gross gender imbalance in schools is one of Africa's greatest injustices.** Boosting female education reduces child and maternal mortality and improves family incomes and overall economic growth. As noted above uneducated girls are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation and trafficking. While the efforts to achieve UPE are being squandered in many cases, the UN target of gender balance at the primary and secondary levels by 2005 has been seriously neglected. Only 63 percent of African school-age girls attend primary school and only 28 percent attend secondary school. A UNESCO study says that 'while governments realized girls' education is important, their policies are inadequate.'



Agriculture class at Kibaha College, Tanzania.

UNESCO / Inez Forbes

'When creating an education system you need to look at what African societies are today and what we want them to be tomorrow,' says Mamadou Ndoye, Executive Director of the Association for Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

Giving the last word to Paulo Freire, we return to the need, perhaps above all else, for Africa to find its own educational priorities.

'The deeper I get into the [Guinean] experience, the more important the problem [indigenization and language] becomes. It demands different responses in different circumstances. The fact is that language is inevitably one of the major preoccupations of a society which, liberating itself from colonialism and refusing to be drawn into neo-colonialism, searches for its own re-creation. In the struggle to re-create a society, the reconquest by the people of their own word becomes a fundamental factor.'

## Select bibliography and links:

1. **'Africa: Need to focus on secondary education'** (IRIN, 10 February 2005).
2. **Back to the Blackboard: Looking Beyond Universal Primary Education in Africa** edited by Peroshni Govender and Steven Gruzd (SAIIA, 2004).
3. **'Erasing the Future: The Tragedy of Africa's Education'** by Peroshni Govender and Peter Farlam (eAfrica, August 2004, SAIIA).
4. **Pedagogy of the Oppressed** by Paulo Freire (New York: Continuum, 1970).
5. **Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea Bissau** by Paulo Freire (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978).
6. **UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG)**.

*This editorial is the first in a series of articles on Education in Africa to appear each month in At Issue Ezine.*

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