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RETHINKING WORKERS' EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The employment patterns and trends as well as technological changes have been the most important factors in broadening the need to rethink workers' education in Africa. Workers' education more than before, now has a particularly critical role to play in the various Africa rapidly changing societies by providing knowledge and information that the working class people need in order to cope with the changing conditions. Obviously, the role of workers' education in Africa assumes greater and greater importance. Wide ranges of capabilities are required nowadays to deal with emerging technological challenges.

This shift of emphasis involved in looking at 'wider education' or 'development education' for increased socio-political and economic roles rather than 'education for industry' or 'technical utilitarian education', immediately makes it clear that the task is vast and challenging, requiring a new perspective.

It is on this basis, that this paper therefore attempts the possibility of rethinking workers' education as constituting the most important form of human capital formation in African countries. Thus a rejuvenated, complicated, comprehensive and highly integrated facet of workers' education is seen as a key factor in creating an African labour force that will be able to play an effective role in the development of the various African nations.

Introduction

African countries are experiencing a series of technological revolutions, which is changing our economies as well as the societies as a whole. The changing nature of life and work is so much generating a growing demand for new skills and competencies to ensure continual relevance of every individual. More and More jobs are becoming technical - for which the educational prerequisites are rising. This is because the process of globalisation and liberalisation are brining about institutional transformations and changes.

The application of knowledge to solving human problems in African nations is now been responsible solely for the creation of new resources and new wealth. We need to also understand the fact that in the 21st century Africa, bulk of the labour force has shifted from farm operatives to machine operators as well as to information operatives.. It is therefore apt to say that it is no longer enough for any individual in most African countries to continue to rely on the same living and working skills that he/she acquired some ten or twenty years ago (Quane, 2001).

Indeed, it is very essential for the working class citizen in all African countries to become more proactive and more autonomous as well as prepared to review their knowledge continually and to respond also constructively to changing socio-cultural, political and economic environment. It is against this background that Kester (2002: 556) opines that:

The education system in most developing countries today (particularly in Africa) does not yet address fully the needs of the working class; who have special education requirements due to the fact that the system(s) are not fully developed to deal with them.

Perhaps, given the contemporary time, there is the need to belief that workers are not mere machine tools to be manipulated by the capitalists. But rather, there is a need to create a world (particularly in Africa) in which the workers would have their just rewards, contentment and security; and in this process replace the existing state of misery and uncertainty. We cannot ignore the fact that at this stage in Africa, an effective programme of education for the working class will no doubt make a positive contribution to the success story of most nations' experiment with industrialisation and modernisation. It is therefore crucial that we must understand that

workers' education, coupled with research and development, constitutes the most important form of human capital formation our nations can make. Thus a rejuvenated workers' education should be seen as a key factor in creating an African labour force that will be able to play an effective role in the socio-economic and political lives of our various nations.

Towards Rethinking Workers' Education in Africa

Rethinking workers' education in Africa is more directly related to a broader notion of increasing the opportunities for the working class in African nations to participate in a wider range of socio-economic and political activities affecting them. The shift of emphasis involved in looking at 'wider education' for increased socio-political and economic roles rather than 'education for industry', immediately makes it clear that the task is vast and challenging, requiring a new perspective.

Hitherto, in the 19th century, as a result of the evolution of machinery which called for a higher grade of workers, workers' education is seen as a mere technical utilitarian education where instruction is given to the member of the working class in the principles of arts they practised and in the various branches of services and useful knowledge. (Todoror, 1976; Sonubi, 1981; Omolewa 1981; Adedeji 1982 and Omole 1987). However, at the very beginning, the education of the working class was seen as a liberal education for social emancipation and political agitation.

Today, given the technological changes and the employment trends, no matter the perception nor orientation of an educational programme for the working class in Africa, such programmes must be conceptualised and interactably connected with the struggle for the reduction of illiteracy, poverty, misery, job insecurity and uncertainty to the barest minimum. As well as serving as a key dimension of strategies for social and economic development in all countries of Africa.

Workers' education more than before, now has a particularly critical role to play in Africa rapidly changing societies by providing knowledge and information that the working class people need in order to cope with the changing conditions. Obviously, the role of workers' education in our nations and throughout the world assumes greater and greater importance. This is because limited training, education attainment and exposure seem to restrict our nations'

capacity to expand their productive efficiencies. For most adult workers limited training and education becomes a handicap in securing 'decent' employment, assuming greater responsibilities and advancing in status.

Thus, a rejuvenated and repackage workers' education in Africa is to ensure that the generality of the African working class citizen at various levels understand their position and their rights as well as the various problems facing them, their organisations, and their different environments within and outside the workplace. It should be an educational activity that gradually transforms the individual worker, who at the same time learns and enriches his or her personality. Thus, making such an individual to be able to effectively and efficiently undertake his/her new responsibilities, challenges and roles in this hyper-dynamic African world of ours.

Particularly, the employment patterns and trends have been the most important singular factor in broadening the need to rethink workers' education in Africa. Besides, the technological changes which have taken place in the different economies of the African countries have also given much impetus to the arguments for retraining the different categories of the working class citizen in Africa. The 'new' workers' education in Africa must be evolved and seen as that 'axis' of education where emphasis should be based on removing all barriers to learning for all categories of workers. It should be an intensive education which focuses on the interaction between the different workers and their environments.

Benn and Chitty (1997) was of the opinion that education should serve as a social process as much as an intellectual exercise, which must promote the individual as well as his interaction in the community. Understandingly, workers' education in Africa should not only adjust to the market demand dictated by the globalisation process, but rather should also promote individual and group aspirations. Buttressing this view, Omole (1986) citing Mire (1956) opines that the goal of workers' education should be towards the improvement of the workers' individual and group competences as well as the advancement of their social, economic and cultural interests; so that in the process they can become matured, wise, dignified, respectful and responsible citizens. Workers' education in Africa despite the effects of globalisation driven by information and communication technology ought to continually achieve educational objectives of self-preservation, realisation and improved

group relations. Balogun (1976) conceived the objectives of personal and group relations of every educational activity as the kind of education that provides the individual with skill that enable him to be a good citizen, a good family person and be sensitive to and respect other people's feelings.

Perhaps, on this basis, workers' education in Africa should place much emphasis on the more complicated, comprehension and highly integrated facet of workers' education called 'Development Education'. Adapting this integrated facet of workers' education in Africa is to ensure that the individual worker are flexible enough to retain and regain employment opportunities in the face of economic recession and liberalisation policies as well as the right for personal enrichment and development.

Kester and Ogunyinka somewhere else emphasis that the idea of including 'development education' into any educational programme for the working class citizen is informed by the need to provide a type of education which does more than informing and educating but one which offer choices and encourages active individual involvement in the developmental process. In this process, such programmes have to demonstrate that action(s) by groups and/or individuals can make a difference and bring about positive changes in our societies. Apart from this, there is the need for an electronic-based workers' education; particularly the use of computer assisted learning. Although, such electronic based workers' education in Africa cannot but have some inherent problems such as lack of constant electricity to power it; but then Africa has a lot to benefit from technological - driven workers' education. For instance, a computer gives individual attention which an average teacher in a classroom situation cannot hope to give. Also computers have infinite patience and never put down a learner, and rely on positive reinforcement. Above all, they are also getting cheaper daily.

Workers' education has a unique opportunity to providing life learning experiences addressed to the crucial issues and problems confronting the working class citizens in our various nations. The intent of a rejuvenated workers' education is not to train the individual workers in Africa for specific roles but to help them gain some understanding of the meaning of their lives and to become more sensitive to the general problems of the African societies and the other people around them.

The national governments, private employers, and the trade union movements must therefore understand the new requirements for workers' education and training demanded by the rapid changes of our developing economies. Honestly, if we are to secure adequate planning for the workers' educational and training needs of our nations, we must reexamine prevailing and curricula arrangements and the need to make the education and training of the working class citizens more relevant not only for professional and vocational needs but for the human conditions as well.

Above this, all workers' education in Africa from now on, need to be gender sensitive, by incorporating a great mass of female workers, who are mostly still largely unaware of their enormous potentials as a central force in their nation's socio-economic development and progress. Indeed, if African countries are to plan for life, they need to invest in their people - their greatest assets. It is only through this, that they can ensure cost-effectiveness and adequate investment in human capital formation and empowerment.

Conclusion

The rate of acceleration in the technological- driven economies across Africa has affected the nature of life and work of most African workers. This resultant effect is such that there is a growing demand for new skills and competencies among the African working class. The African society has therefore moved from one-skilled society to a two/three - skilled society, where it is an accepted pattern or standard to have to change one's employment at will.

On the basis of the above, rather than the perennial debate on the differences between workers' education, and labour education or what constitutes workers' education, the challenge of globalisation and technological advancement now imposes a major salient question of what best form of education best prepare today's African worker(s) for an active socio-political and economic life both within and outside the workplace.

It is sure that changes in workers' education provision will not happen overnight in African countries, and that the key to such change is not surely going to come through a change on the part of the working class themselves. Obviously, African nations that accepts without questioning the right of an African child to have access to education, must also be ready now to have a similar

acceptance of that same principle for all adults regardless of the nature of their jobs or occupation.

African nations now need to ensure that the comprehensive educational opportunities now available to children are also made available to the adults. Agreed, attempt to reorganised the education of the working class citizen may throw the whole educational system into disarray. But a sensible way forward is to recognise the strengths of the present system in terms of richness of its variety and try to build on them. As well as to identify its weaknesses in terms of not paying enough attention to the analysing of the needs of the clientele - the working class - and seek to overcome them.

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