

PART II

School Reforms in Kenya: “enough to be workers, but not enough to be free human beings”

An Interview with Wandia Njoya¹

Tell us about the ongoing school curriculum reform in Kenya: who decided on it, when will it be effective, and what does it entail?

The government seeks to replace the current system, in which children spend 8 years in primary school, 4 years in secondary school, and 4 years in university, with a new system in which children spend 6 years in primary school, 3 years in junior secondary, 3 years in senior secondary and 3 years at university. So the government is misleading people by calling this a curriculum reform, when it is a much bigger and more radical change going on.

It is not clear when the system replacement was decided. In 2012, a task force was set up with the purpose of aligning the education system with the newly passed constitution. The report released by that task force, known as the Odhiambo report, is the first one that talks of the new system. However, the report is problematic because it does not make a direct link between the content of the curriculum and changing the number of years one spends at each stage of education. In other words, it does not clearly show how changing the number of years spent at each level of the system necessarily brings about the improvements that the report claims are needed. In fact, on reading the report, one gets the impression that the task force was set up to rubber stamp the system change.

The contradiction also stems from the fact that the interest was not in aligning the education system with the constitution, but with Kenya’s Vision 2030, the country’s strategic plan that favors the business interests which are tied to the capitalist, and largely Kikuyu elite, hegemony. The interest of Vision 2030 is to create workers, not to educate citizens.

The Odhiambo report was rejected by stakeholders, including the teachers unions, academics, and even the Minister of Education at the time. It is not clear what his disagreement was.

Also, Kenya was then in a coalition government, and it was not uncommon to see both sides of the coalition openly disagree with each other.

Fast forward to last year, the president of Kenya decided to make education reform part of his “legacy” last term (hopefully) in office. As such, there was political pressure to ignore the stakeholders and go ahead with the implementation. Under the then abrasive Minister of Education, Fred Matiang’i, the government announced a pilot in May 2017, then postponed it to August 2017, and promised to roll out the new system in January 2018. But by January 2018, the teachers had not been sufficiently walked through the new curriculum, the materials were not ready, and worst of all, the government was remaining tight-lipped on the actual nature of the reforms.

In response to the public outcry, the government said that it was not rolling out the new curriculum, but conducting a national pilot. For all intents and purposes, the new system started being implemented in January 2018.

Another two major features of the new system is its “competency-based” orientation, which seeks to prepare children for market needs, and the pathways in junior secondary school, which will require students to choose a track between sciences, humanities and social sciences, and the “talent and sport.” But the devil is in the details. Competency-based education trains for specific tasks and is usually for post-secondary education, so when it is introduced at primary school, we are essentially swopping broad-based skills like reading, communication, creativity, and thinking, for employable skills. Not surprisingly, the government is denying that the education system is being dumbed down, and is in fact saying that they want children to be “competent” at reading, communication, creativity, and imagination.

Similarly, the pathways run the risk of entrenching inequality in the education. The same government saying it wants children to pursue their “talents” in school has also been saying that the arts are a waste of revenue, because the arts do not contribute to development. That means that we have a shortage of arts teachers for schools. So children in the “talents” pathway will essentially be receiving no education.

Another, more insidious, argument made by the government is that the “talent” pathway is for children who are not good in

academics. But it is not clear who decides that a child is not “good” in academics, or on what criteria they will decide. Essentially, we are looking at a situation where students from poor backgrounds will not do well in school because they do not have sufficient resources, and will then be condemned to a “talent” pathway with no teachers.

In short, the government decided on this new system in an anti-democratic and unprofessional manner, and it is the country that will have to mop up the mess for decades to come.

Do you believe Kenyan politics and political interests shaped the designing and implementation of the curricular reform? If so, how?

I believe that there are three key political interests in the implementation of the curriculum. First is to fulfill Kenya’s Vision 2030, which is an undemocratic plan that was drawn up by the Kibaki government, and that essentially reduces Kenya to a business. The corporatization of Kenya is the country’s fundamental flaw to which everything else is pegged, from ethnic animosity to a mechanical and broken education system, to corruption and poverty.

Because Vision 2030 is based on the idea of industrialization as the key to progress (which is really driven by 19th century thinking), the business elites in charge of the country imagine that we need workers who, the comedian George Carlin said, are clever enough to operate the machines, but not clever enough to ask questions about their nation’s economic direction or their working conditions. So the new curriculum is designed to train workers without broad-based thinking and creative skills, despite government officials claiming the contrary.

There is widespread privatization of social services, the most prominent being healthcare, and of the country’s natural resources, such as oil and minerals. These areas are being sold over to foreign capital, which will definitely need workers, but not citizens who ask critical questions about their nation’s sovereignty in the use of resources. So the government wants to put in place an education system that suppresses intellectual growth of the Kenyan people.

The second political interest is the desire of the current president to leave a legacy. He promised education reform in his manifesto, and that is what he is delivering. It does not matter that

the reform is at the expense of future generations. All he wants is to be seen to “act.”

With the kind of mind-blowing corruption that afflicts Kenya, it is also possible that politicians are eyeing certain large tenders for books and equipment that might be tied to replacing the education system countrywide.

But it is important to not only understand the interests, but the methods in which the government furthers them. For decades, the government has imposed problematic policies using a “fait accompli” tactic. Many times, the government officials know that certain key measures it wants to implement lack grounding or benefit to the citizens, and that if citizens are informed beforehand, it is likely that the problems will be pointed out and the public will oppose the measure.

But the government officials want to implement it anyway, both to fulfill some warped sense of efficiency, and to profit from tenders and donor aid that may accrue. So, in order to avoid public discussion, the officials say little about the project, but closer to the date of the launch, they present Kenyans with a done deal, and Kenyans are forced to make the best of a bad situation. They then follow this done deal with propaganda that derides critics for empty talk that makes no contribution to development.

So the same has happened with education. A system was hurriedly formulated, with no professional or public input, and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), which is in charge of the reforms, seems to have decided that they will impose the changes anyway. It then presents teachers and parents with a fait accompli, and forces the parents and teachers to make a bad situation work.

At the time the government talked of the new curriculum, the Education minister and the Teachers’ Service Commission which employs government teachers, threatened “errant” teachers, and transferred some to different schools, essentially destabilizing the teachers and making them pariahs in the public. That way, teachers who raised questions about the education reform would appear as perennial complainers who only cared for their salaries, and not for the children they taught.

Towards the end of 2017, when it was becoming clear to the public that KICD had little idea of what it was doing, KICD pleaded that “we cannot talk forever, we must act,” and that “we

can't have a perfect system; we must learn as we go along." But the truth is, KICD never let the public really discuss the curriculum, and even the officials were unable to answer basic questions about what it was doing. So the public never talked long enough for KICD to say that talking must end at some point.

But this contempt for public discussion, in the name of discussions delaying action, is part of the neoliberal, anti-African contempt for African involvement in African decisions. As Issa Shivji has reminded us, Western donors have been engaged in an ideological onslaught against African reflection for decades, in the name of Africans being so desperate, that dialogue is a luxury. That ideology has been used by the Kenyan state to silence public discussions and public dissent. Any time citizens raise questions, there is a backlash in the form of "you are questioning but doing nothing concrete," or on social media, we are called "keyboard warriors," and asked what our solution is. This response has become so common, that now people talk of the "what's-your-solutionists." So part of the challenge in raising questions about the education reform is defying and responding to the ideology that talk is cheap, and even that Africans are too desperately poor to afford it.

In Africa and around the world, many are fighting to decolonize knowledge and education. Referencing the Frazer Report of 1909, you have written that the current educational reform carried a colonial legacy.² Can you tell us more?

The colonial legacy of education in Kenya, from the Frazer report till today, is the idea that some people are genetically suited to handle certain subjects. The Frazer report openly used racial categories to say that Africans did not need subjects training in complex thinking, whether they be in the sciences or the arts, and that Africans needed only technical education to train them to work, and religious education to teach them to be subservient.

This thinking about education came around the time when racist theories claimed that African brains stopped developing at teenage, and that Africans had no arts or history to speak of, and could only learn European ones. Other versions of the argument on the arts said that humanistic education would give Africans unnecessary ideas, like ideas about freedom.

Through the Giroud and Phelps Stoke Commission reports, this narrative remained in some form or the other. But after independence, the openly racist framework changed to a concern about employment. The humanistic subjects were now irrelevant in Africa not because we are black, but because they will not get us employed.

In the case of the new system, children in middle secondary school will choose a pathway in the humanities, sciences and “talent” (they didn’t even try to call it the “arts”). The “talent” pathway is quite dubious. First, there will not be enough teachers, given the same government’s deriding of the arts as irrelevant to development. That means that a child who is told to follow the talent pathway will probably not get teachers or equipment, and so, the child is essentially being condemned to end her education.

Second, KICD officials have publicly explained that the pathway is for students who fail in school because they are pursuing subjects in which they are not “talented,” or because they are not “academic” or “intellectual.” There are two fallacies in this logic. One is that the obsession with examinations, which the outgoing system is faulted for, is “academic” and “intellectual.” The second fallacy is that poor performance is wholly determined by one’s genetic disposition, yet performance in school is decided mostly by factors that have little to do with the student. Poor students may be hungry or lack a conducive environment for learning, both at home and at school.

This essentially means that children from poor areas or marginalized ethnic groups will be herded to the unfunded “talent” pathway, and their abandonment by the education system will be termed as a natural result of their birth. Racism, by its very nature, also attributes consequences of social actions to the birth of the victims of those very consequences. That is why the logic of this new education system is fundamentally racist, and a carry-over from previous colonial education projects that condemned Africans as incapable of being intellectual, academic, or scientific. As I said, the running theme in the colonial project is that we should educate “enough to be workers, but not enough to be free human beings.” The same thing is happening with these reforms.

You have been a vocal and passionate critic of the #NewCurriculum and #CurriculumReformsKE: why was it so important for you to speak up?

I have spoken out for three reasons. One, is that as a lecturer, and a lecturer in the arts, I was tired of the public bashing, especially by the corporate sector and government, of university education and the arts. The business sector and government kept saying, in public, that university education was irrelevant to national development, and was unmarketable in the job market. Members of the public were beginning to thoughtlessly repeat this narrative, and I felt that they needed to hear the lecturers' side of the story. We needed to tell them that university education was important for nationhood, that the arts mattered, and that the lethargy, poor communication and creative skills of graduates were problems that started in primary schools, not universities.

Telling the educators' side of the story inevitably meant that I needed to talk about pre-tertiary education. So when the curriculum reforms showed up, I wanted to know exactly what the reforms were about, to ascertain that the claims the government was making about the changes were true. Imagine my surprise when the government stalled and would not answer my inquiries, and two, when the documents and the statements of the KICD officials did not add up. So I felt I had to tell the public that, what the government sounded like it was saying, was very different from reality, hence my use of social media.

And speaking on social media worked because it attracted the attention of mainstream media. Previously, the major news channels media traditionally shied away from discussing education in terms other than those of errant teachers and incompetent students, because they thought the public would not be interested in a discussion of education outside labor or student unrest. But once the few TV programmes I was on trended, the media saw that a discussion on education can be as exciting as a discussion on politics.

The second reason I needed to speak up was because it was becoming clear to me that the government had little idea of what it was doing, and that it cared little about the implications for our children and future generations. My sense was that in previous education reforms, there were few public queries about government pronouncements in the education sector, and so

the government had not anticipated professional voices having something to say. Under our 2010 constitution, the public must participate in key reforms, and so I was speaking up as a citizen.

Third, and most importantly, I consider education as a key pillar of democracy. An educated public makes better citizenry and a more robust democracy. Certain weaknesses in Kenya's political culture, such as a short historical memory, personalization and ethnicization of issues, and poor argumentation skills, are directly related to education. I spoke up because I want to see our country provide a better education that produces thinking citizens and robust institutions, so that we have a humane, just and democratic Kenyan nation that we can all be proud of.

Notes

¹ This interview was recorded in March 2018.

² <https://www.facebook.com/wmnjoya/posts/341812972969932>.