Education: The Key to Africa's Future

Heather Bixby

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Education is the Key to the Future

The future of any society depends on the way it teaches its children…if Christians are going to be "salt," if we are going to restore order and justice throughout the culture, we must restore high-quality education. (Chuck Colson, 1984, p.340

Education is the valuable process of acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reason and judgment, and preparing oneself intellectually for a mature, successful, and lucrative life. "The Mirror," a Ghana state-owned paper, declares "The future of Africa lies in the hands of her sons and daughters and we must do everything in our power to save our continent" (Ayittey, 1999, p. 79). The present issues of racial segregation, mismanaged leaders and the affects of HIV/AIDS are encouraging African children to withdraw from their schooling. Although Africa has suffered under the fatigue of Western foreign aid, the West can help restore Africa by promoting educational programs that place value on the African "way of life" and give African children a sense of hope in Christ.

Literature Review

Educational Barriers against Children in Africa

Initially, Africa was largely populated by Africans (blacks), and housed a very small number of colonial settlers. Although Africa had a significant black majority, the white minority took control over the continent's people, politics, social life, and economy. According to Patrick Furlong (1996), a specialist and professor of World History, an "apartheid system" was implemented and enforced by the white minority governments in Africa in 1948 (as cited in Gordon A. & Gordon D., 1996). Until 1991, the apartheid system segregated the population into four main racial groups: Africans (black), whites, coloreds, and Asians ("South Africa," 1999, p. 1). This African law placed their educational system in a state of uncertainty; schools were segregated, and the quantity and quality of education varied significantly across racial groups. Trysha Dancy, a missionary from South Africa, states "The educational system is completely divided between the white Africans and the black Africans. The white educational system is satisfactory, but the black educational system is pretty much nonexistent" (personal communication, October 15, 2006). Restructuring the country's educational system will be an extensive and strenuous process to complete. The challenge is to create an unbiased, nonracial system that offers the same standards of education to all people.

In reality, however, most African states do not have the financial means necessary to fund a public school system. School systems are deteriorating, and only a small amount of money is available for school construction and teacher salaries. As the

state diminishes and the population increases, even the most essential government tasks, such as collecting taxes, has become problematic. As a result, the cost of education has become solely dependent on the child's caregiver (Andrews, Skinner, & Zuma, 2006). The majority of African families do not possess the funds to pay for their child's educational expenses, and many may also believe their money could be better utilized elsewhere; therefore, African parents are constantly withdrawing their children from school.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic also acts as a significant barrier hindering African children from receiving an education. "The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa has already orphaned a generation of children, and it is predicted that by 2010, eighteen million African children under the age of eighteen are likely to be orphans from this single cause" (Andrews, et al., 2006, p. 269). When a parent becomes ill or dies due to HIV, there is a dramatic decrease in the household income, a rise in the cost of medical bills, and a reduction in their ability to care for their children. As a result, children are dropping out of school to take charge of the household; caring for their parent, sibling, etc. It is also estimated that extended family members are currently assuming the responsibility for more than 90% of orphaned children (Andrews, et al., 2006). This system contributes to the extreme case of poverty because a household with orphans means that an income of fewer individuals is supporting more dependents.

Need for Improvement: African Education Reaps Trivial Returns

Not only the issue of poverty suppresses African children, but when the European colonists renounced their claim on the continent of Africa, they left their recently developed nations with the humiliation of illiteracy and an unproductive European educational system as well. The thought of modifying the European educational system, by adding courses on the instruction of farming or trade skills, was not received well by the tentative new leaders; "only the best in Britain – the Oxbridge model – was good enough for Africa; no longer should one be fobbed off with colleges giving inferior qualification with the argument that these were more suited to Africa's needs" (Lloyd, 1964, p.23). The African leaders believe that if they

possessed the schooling that the leading European power possesses, they too would reap substantial benefits and acquire Western affluence.

In the 1970s, about 23 percent of the African government expenditures went towards the cost of education (Ayittey, 1999). Although Africa continues to spend a large percentage of its financial budget on education; the continent continues to acquire trivial returns because the educational system focuses on producing more graduates in the arts, such as law, history, and sociology, than in the sciences and technical trades. For example, "during the 1973-1974 academic year, enrollment in the various levels of Ghana's education system totaled 1,599, 789, of which 1,014,964 were in primary, 440,065 in middle, 72,036 in secondary, 12,800 in technical, 14,229 in teacher training institutions, and 5,625 in the universities. From these statistics, it can be stated that only 0.029 percent of the students in middle school continued with technical education" (Bernard, Fordjor, Kotoh, Kmah, Kwanefio, Mulins, & Owusu, 2003, p.184). Lawyers, historians, sociologists, and artists are needed, but too many of them are being produced.

Many African populations also believe the degree is what ultimately matters; how it was obtained or what courses were taken is irrelevant. Therefore, African schools are producing functionally illiterate students; graduates who are incapable of independent thought or reason. They are likely to lack inventiveness, and can not apply their knowledge to practical problems. Reverend S.J. Esu (2005), a Nigerian pastor, reported that most educated Africans, who are good copycats of foreign behavioral patterns, are likely to flaunt their Euro-American amoral (and in fact immoral) tendencies in our face. The educated possess a degree, diploma, or military title, but they do not understand its importance or the meaning of things (Ayittey, 2005). They spend more time arguing about the causes of Africa's problems rather than on how to fix them.

The universal type of education following postcolonial Africa, known as the 'consumption variety,' is also affecting Africa's nonexistent substantial returns. 'Consumption variety' refers to how the current educational system is providing students with foreign knowledge about foreign

facts, events, and experiences. At first glance, this may appear to be beneficial; however, African students are solely learning how to consume foreign goods without being taught how to produce these items. According to Gordon A. & Gordon D. (1996), since colonialism, African cash crops, minerals, and fuels are being continually transported overseas, while Western manufactured goods, technology, financial capital, and Western lifestyles are imported to Africa (p.30). Education has become a mere consumption as opposed to a practical asset in improving one's life.

America Can Help Ease the Burden

The West, acknowledging that they had a substantial share in developing the current chaos in Africa, is continuously trying to revive itself by offering various forms of aid, organizing multiple programs, funding numerous causes, and contributing to other types of assistance. The United States and a number of African governments, such as South Africa, have collaborated to develop programs that are committed to achieving economic freedom by investing in the education and development of its people. President Bush addressed the African Growth and Opportunity Act Forum by stating, "Africa's future depends, as well, on good teachers and schools, and a chance for every child to study and learn. So America is devoting an additional $200 million over five years to improve basic education and teacher training in Africa" ("President Addresses," 2003). Programs such as USAID (United States Aid), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), UNDP (United Nation Development Program), and a number of missionary schools are being employed throughout Africa. The USAID program, for example, "focuses on education, economic growth and employment, HIV/AIDS and health, democracy and governance, and housing and municipal services" ([USAID], 2006). "Under the President's Africa Education Initiative, USAID is training math and science teachers and helping to develop learning materials in 10 languages. USAID assistance has increased the third grade student pass rates in literacy and numeracy in targeted schools by 8 percent since 2001" (USAID). Like USAID, many national programs support the idea of transforming public school systems into one that offers quality learning

conditions and programs through activities that develop specific skills and address institutional change.

Several organizations, such as UNICEF (The United Nation's Children Fund), World Bank, and children's rights groups, are encouraging countries to provide free education to keep a countless amount of children in school. In a campaign promise in 2003, Kenya announced that all its primary schools would now be free of charge. "In just a few months, primary school enrollment increased from about 6 million to 7.2 million" (Hanes, 2006). This placed a tremendous amount of strain on Kenya's educational system; however, it also proves that schools fees are at least one factor keeping children out of school. "Besides Kenya, a handful of countries in eastern and southern Africa have done away with primary school fees, including Tanzania, Malawi, and Uganda. The efforts are bolstered in part by populist politics, group which supports the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite, and in part by money donated from wealthy countries such as the United States. Yet South Africa, the richest nation in the region, still allows schools to charge" (Hanes, 2006). With the help of Western donors, Africa is on its way to easing the burden of paying school fees.

However, not every Western donor experiences success in regards to their aid, assistance, and time. Many Western donors are becoming fatigued and frustrated with their lack of progress in the African community. Johns (1996) demands that "Washington should end all foreign aid to Africa that does not contribute to positive economic and political change. Many times, U.S. foreign aid is used by aristocratic African regimes merely to strengthen their own political standing; it is especially urgent that this sort of assistance be ended immediately" (p.174). Among many issues, African leaders and dictators have used foreign aid for the salaries of government workers, to buy military weapons, and for the purchase of unnecessary items. The fraudulent African elites and dictators misuse foreign aid and do not allow reform to take place.

Discussion

With only a glimpse into the lives of the children of Africa, their hopelessness for the future cannot be ignored as their substandard educational system and issues of educational barriers persist. Education provides a human being with the freedom to think and communicate, explore the world, embrace new perspectives, learn from past mistakes, and experience the world from all different angles. Education is training the human mind to think, and creating one's own conscious decisions. Through the attainment of education, a human is enabled to receive information from the external world, and receive all necessary information regarding the past and present. The current educational barriers that prevent African children from learning are actually preventing them from experiencing freedom.

The present issues of racial segregation, affects of HIV/AIDS, and mismanaging leaders are encouraging African children to withdraw from their schooling. The unequal distribution of quality education among diverse racial groups has communicated a message to the African students, who received the lowest level of education, that they are incompetent, insufficient, and "inferior" to the Western population. Christians must acknowledge and portray to each and every child that they are built in the image of God, and should be treated as so. "Children are not merely biological organisms adapting to the environment; they are created in the image of God and bear all the dignity of beings capable of recognizing truth, goodness, and beauty" (Colson, 1999, p.337). Each child should be allotted an education where their souls can be supplied with the direct presentation of these intended ideals and experience academic, social, self, and spiritual growth. I believe if higher standards for students, teachers, and schools were implemented, it would give the students something to strive for and be proud of. Over time, these practices would offer the population of Africa a sense of pride, dignity, and enhance one's self-esteem.

Even though a strong support network is beneficial, the major issue of poverty must be addressed among its people. One of the leading causes of students dropping out of school is due simply to the fact that their families can not afford the prices of educational expenses. Leviticus 23:22 states, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God" (NIV). God commands His people not to be selfish and greedy, nor to ignore the poor, or discriminate against them. "In essence, a man's material welfare is a major concern of God and therefore it must always be a major concern of God's people" (Sproul, 1986, P.150). Christians should be concerned with the suffering of God's people, and help enrich their lives by not only providing material possessions, but my exposing their hearts to the riches of God's kingdom through their acts of compassion.

The African government claims they do not have the financial means to support education; however, they wastefully use their money on political and racial rivalry: civil wars. The first step is persuading the African government to accept the importance of education, and how knowledge will expand its children's ability to experience an array of future life prospects, and enhance the continent's process towards success. Then the African government must then acknowledge and develop a system of vocational education. A large number of various trades could be taught; ranging from woodworking, fishing, manufacturing, and mechanics. This will teach students practical skills on how to perform a trade that they can apply in the real world. As a result, instead of relying on the government to provide them with education and employment, they will become self-sufficient and independent. Not only will this contribute to the quality and efficiency of academic growth, but will also led to the development of a questioning mind; one that will challenge the purpose of tradition and the meaning of one's worldview.

Missionaries and educated teachers, who learn the local languages of Africa, can help teach these various trades and skills. Although the elites do not share the same academic vision, maybe through Western promotion, their eyes will be open to the fact that education does not just encompass being literate in English and attaining a degree. Africa must educate their children as to why they are learning certain information, and how they will use it in their everyday lives. This will assist in solving the problem of African's tentative leaders, who are unable to create independent thought or create solutions to their country's problems.

The African schooling systems can no longer produce students who only know how to mimic others. Although Europe is one of the world's leading powers, this does not mean that they do everything "right." Africa needs to start focusing on their own heritage and put their efforts into building on their own traditional institutions, rather than trying to facilitate the Western model within their society. The federal government structure and other institutions established by the European colonists have been mishaps; however, Africa's traditional form of local government continues to survive. The most frustrating part of discussing African reform is the fact that the very solutions required to save the continent are in Africa itself. All Africans need to do is return to its ancestry and modernize its own original institutions. Through the use of education, Western educators can implement the idea that African institutions are not only adequate, but are far superior to the impetuous introductory systems of the West.

Although the West has caused the current chaos in Africa, the West is always conscious, if not very concerned with, the existing suffering of African people. However, the West is beginning to give up due to the lack of progress and failed outcomes. One of the reasons for the West's lack of success is that donors are not always aware of who they are providing funds for. Corrupt African leaders are continuously misusing foreign aid for themselves, instead of assisting their poverty-stricken population. In order for Western aid to be beneficial, a donor must make sure the aid is going towards the African people. Western investors should aim towards assisting groups outside of the government, such as civic groups, opposition political parties, and individuals who are looking for a way to advance African's intellectual, economic, and political autonomy. Funds also need to be invested into programs that can be used to activate the improvement of education, operations of communications and transportation, or social or health resistance. Therefore, Western investors need to fund profitable projects in Africa, which calls for providing funds to the right people and placing aid where the need is.

Western aid is not always directed towards the real issues that are causing chaos within African borders either. Many times aid is given with a focus on the outcome, rather than on the process that will activate the desired outcomes. For example, "In a 2004 survey, South Africans ranked unemployment- estimated between 27 and 41 percent – as the country's most serious problem" (USAID, 2006). After hearing this fact, many churches, organizations, and donors would automatically give money towards the relief of poverty without focusing on the process. The aid should go to where the need is: education. It is through education that Africa can reduce its unemployment and poverty rate, receive access to HIV/AIDS and health services, and succeed as an independent continent. One possible solution would be the establishment of free public school systems, which would greatly increase the amount of students participating in the educational school systems.

Currently, the United States government is beginning to focus its assistance and aid on the origin of the problem, rather than the outcome. However, as the West assists Africa through its time of need, one must realize that it is ultimately the people of Africa that must save itself. Although the West put Africa in the chaos it is in today; the West can help revive it, but must be careful not to enhance the crises in Africa. Even though education is essential for the future success of Africa, what is being taught in the schools can either improve or worsen its current situation. If the United States continues to send more Western teachers into Africa to teach irrelevant foreign concepts, skills, and various subjects, the children of Africa will continue to exist in dependency and extreme poverty. Western influences must stress the importance of vocational skills; practical skills that Africans will be able to apply in real life. This is what will lead them out of poverty, and allow individuals to attain a self-sufficient and independent way of life. Western influences must promote Africans' unique way of life because it is only through the celebration of their heritage and traditional institutions that stability and a successful future will be achieved.

In addition, teachers must have the desire to work with children, the aspiration to serve, a passion for teaching, and the drive to impact their students' lives. James 3:1 states, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more

strictly." A teacher not only educates his or her students in academics, but also acts a role model to his or her students. A teacher will be constantly examined by the society, as well as placed at a higher standard than most. As human beings, we are natural imitators, and it will not be long before our conduct is similar to our role models. Like the Apostle Paul, teachers need to live by the proclamation in Philippians 4:8, which states "whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. As teachers, we need to live our lives as we would want our students to live their lives. "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25).

Christians are called to be a light, and are meant to make His kingdom known where it is unheard of, ignored, or forgotten. "Where Christ is invisible, people perish. Where His reign is unknown or ignored, people are exploited. They are demeaned. They are enslaved. They are butchered….They are cheated in their wages. They are left to go hungry, naked, and unsheltered" (Sproul, 1986, p.19). In all of life's situations Christians are to be His witnesses, and make the reign of Jesus visible. Isaiah 61:1 states, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." As African children struggle to survive, Christians must convey the love of God and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to bring hope to the suffering, desolate, lost, poor, and brokenhearted. Therefore, as missionaries, Christians can improve the academic and spiritual growth within the educational system in Africa. Although a teacher may not be able to speak directly to their students about the existence of God; one can express God's love through their acts of compassion. The act of giving oneself to a period of servitude, in order to help another, can speak louder than words. Teachers who are sent to Africa can indirectly proclaim God's word by simply caring, helping, serving, and loving Africans as potential residents of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

The future of Africa is dependent upon their children, as well as on the hope of reaching its potential lies solely on the education of their children. The early western colonists have left Africa in absolute chaos; African children are fighting against existing educational barriers, struggling from a lack of practical education, and suffer under the wrongful use and implementation of Western foreign aid. Although the West started the current chaos in Africa, the West can help restore Africa by assisting the 'people' attain schooling that entitles practical education that will in turn led them out of poverty and into self-sufficient and independent lives. The West needs to realize that it is the Africans who ultimately bear the responsibility of saving their own countries, but we can provide a sense of assistance, aid, support, and a sense of worth, hope, and acceptance in Christ.

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