

## Thinking Different: Critical Reflection on a School Child as a Constructor of Knowledge

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**Abstract:** This paper provides evidences of the dilemma which exists between the cultural demands of societies and the best interests of the child addressed in reviewed legal forums and policies in African nations and Tanzania in particular. Children's learning venture, their skills and abilities are required in the today modern economies. However, although children are required to inherit good traditions and customs, their schooling behaviours are affected by varying multiple traditions and norms practiced by their communities. The contradiction rests on who needs to define the best interests of the child in learning. Observations are on the sources of learners' meaningful construction of knowledge. Currently society needs and expectations are weighed against achievement and fulfillment of learners' interests. Notably, too, school children's guidance and counseling are affected by parents/guardians' daily life needs and wants. Notwithstanding, vital society experiences are overwhelmed by drastic life demands and styles and the new world look towards child's free-learning classroom and school. It is important that effective experiential learning of children is revered by commitment and associative relationships among parents/ guardians and other educational stakeholders. Children's laws and policies should continue bridging their interests and the expected society best experiences and goals for holistic development of the child.

**Key words:** Child best interests · Child rights · Experiential learning · Schooling child · Norms and customs · Society experiences

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### INTRODUCTION

The current paradigm shift on learning gives attention to the building of enabling competences to learners. The focus is on making children learners capable of mastering and using their environment meaningfully and progressively for their own and other people's betterment. They are expected to yield positive outcomes at the end of their education journey.

Such children's learning undertakings do not leave the role of parents, society and government unwelcome. Additionally, effective and meaningful learning need to adapt and construct people's ways of life by transforming their experiences into knowledge (see Passarelli & Kolb, n.d.). Many school children fail to ape and live the life of their societies after graduation. Parents/guardians, for example, are required to participate in opening up rooms for children to freely learn and develop their academic venture. Nevertheless, such welcome does not guarantee full support to parents, teachers and the society of what need to be directed for a learner to learn and acquire significant betterment for individual humans, communities and governments. The participation of each learner lacks a core part in children's day to day learning. In Tanzania the scenario is also evident as stated here below.

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*A hurried and materialistic lifestyle has also led to parents failing to instill good morals to their offspring as they may lack time to be close to their offspring to communicate to them especially verbally. Globalization has caused the sprouting and flourishing of foreign cultures through modern technologies such as the television and the internet. Such gadgets provoke the youth and young people to ape and imitate negative foreign lifestyles which seep into our country without proper control, thus deviating the children from having good moral standards. Such children are the future hope of the nation [1].*

There is much restriction for parents and other educational stakeholders to ensure that learners are brought and educated in a way that they fulfill their interests. The basic question to ask here is: what are the learners' interests? Whose benefits are learners' personal interests and wishes in the learning endeavor? Who has to justify for the meaningful learning of pupils which is mainly learner centered? What about society's needs and so, the content demand? Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, when emphasizing on the importance and significant contribution of education in Tanzania once said, "... But most important of all is that our primary school graduates should be able to fit into and to serve, the communities from which they come" [2]. When taking Mwalimu Nyerere's philosophy towards the essence of educated children to Tanzania was attaching education to solving people's needs, the practices currently do not address this. Society needs are not the determinant of the kind of needed education.

**Child, Teacher and Society De-Linked in Child's Learning Process:** A learning child is of great concern that every person is well prepared and required to make him get his needs and rights and protect him from hard environments and unfriendly school activities that may require extra use of physic. Learners are guided by various laws and regulations that they do not abide with [3].

In Tanzania, the Child Policy of 1996 requires all stakeholders involved in child care to provide clear direction to children to enable them become good citizens. They are required to plan, coordinate and implement children's programs without risking the latter's interests. In marriages (families), it is a responsibility of both parents to care for and bring up children to successful and admirable individuals in their society. Children are required to inherit good traditions and customs. However, the behaviours of school children are not good because of multiple traditions and norms exercised by different communities. "Due to this daunting situation, there is no one uniform behavioral characteristic or directive for child care or upbringing except every parent and guardian has to rear his/her offspring based on the foundations which the community agree upon" [1].

Moreover, despite the fact that children are required to obey and respect their parents, guardians and the community as whole, this is not the actual experience. Parents, guardians, teachers and the community have left their role of directing what learners should do [3, 4, 5]. The causal effects are on life demands for parents and guardians to cater for the daily life needs. Astonishingly, some children do not even engage in family production activities because they are thought to be children not to be molested. Laws insist, among others, on learners' right to play. Still on punishment, teachers and parents/guardians are required not to use difficult kinds of punishment like frog jumping, farming, etc. The contradiction rests on who needs to define the learning of a child. This gives a clue that children hardly engage in production activities and helping their parents and guardians as required by laws particularly when the latter are more akin to their own undertakings.

*In spite of the participation of children in their development being emphasized in different conventions, regulations and laws, still the children never get the right as appropriately. The community as a whole believes that children lack the ability and awareness to contribute in different decisions in the familial level... For example, a child may be forced against his / her wish to pursue vocational skills training. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge in the participation of children is to tally the level of involving a child in participation, the age and the capacity of the concerned child [1].*

In international forums outside Africa, even the developed nations are reported to have neglect and abuse of children [6, 3]. In US and Western Europe, there is no evidence that long-term changes in the outcome of children's rights have been achieved [7]. In America the schooling system is not as such organized to creating justice to societies. Classrooms are authoritarian, undemocratic and hierarchical with the knowledge that is disconnected from learners' lives [8]. This education is used as a silencing mode against resistance to the bureaucratic machineries and such people's relationships have developed normalcy. Such phenomenon may hardly attract wonder because the US has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to become a member [9]. It may likely be that, little attention is paid to creating equality among social groups. Learning is authority-based, fragmented and encourage rote learning (Rosenberg, n.d.). It clear that the role of education is neither integrative, developmental nor egalitarian<sup>1</sup>.

Education is taking much meritocratic approach by focusing on individuals' technical skills and abilities determined by the modern economies with high hierarchical workplace. Learners with more skills and higher cognitive abilities direct the national production [8]. This is the essence of our schooling systems in most of the developing countries. It is the efforts and performance of a learner which will enable him to a higher level of educational achievement with specialized cognitive abilities. It is the progress of the learner that is tracked and rewarded accordingly [8].

In liberal societies which look at schooling as a mechanism of creating people's social equality and civilization, learning of social relations is more paramount than the cognitive work (Bowles and Gintis cited in Rosenberg, n.d. [8]). The more rooms created by our present educational systems guided by the children's laws which perpetuate to the best interests of the child, while paying little attention to the society demands and realities, may find celebrating on the creation of meritocratic learners and societies without addressing the their holistic demands and needs [8, 2]. In Tanzania, for example, there is much cry on ethical misconducts among school children, teachers and in the society. The possible reason is that teachings on ethics and patriotism among learners have not been given much attention in our curricula. It is because of this that the Ministry responsible for education has introduced a subject of civics and ethics in primary schools. It is given a clear goal to further levels of education and in work places in order to instill moral and ethical behaviours among individuals. However, it can still be plausible to ask that, since the society is not as such close to the progresses of learners in schools and homes and because moral teachings entail both areas of destination, it is clear that collaborative efforts are needed among parents/guardians, educational officials and non-governmental organizations to help children learn and acquire their nations expectations.

We cannot look at our societies as being symmetry ordered, have unity and cohesiveness guided by regulations and that they do not require change. Indeed, the societies need to be interpretive to hold human affairs together by their regulations [10, 11]. It is the sociology that sees the world a product of the individual's consciousness and subjective experiences through people's networking interactions. What one interacts with and guides his conducts means more to the understanding of the world and the activities that influence his life. Or to look at the society being tied up with series of radical changes caused by conflicts and domination in which people need to be released from dominant and exploitative relationships [10]. Our current educational systems and learning are not in concomitant revelations of the society needs which are expected to be demonstrated by learners through their people's life experiences. Moreso, experience shows that, few children are in contact with their communities because of the life demands where most of the learners find their times occupied by school activities mostly in boarding schools. Even those children in day schooling, they have much of their time in school tasks than the curricula activities in their homes<sup>2</sup>. In so doing, majority of our schooling children fail to

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<sup>1</sup>Seth Rosenberg tried to assess the classroom practices in America and concluded that the education system is authoritarian and undemocratic. It centers more on supporting, stabilizing and reproducing fundamentally hierarchical and undemocratic social relationships that American workplaces. These differences are more proclaimed from the segregative and capitalist education given among learners.

<sup>2</sup>Researcher's own experience in primary and secondary schools in Tanzania shows that pupils are required by demanding circumstances to attend to school works in much of their time rather than the home and other curricula activities. The practice clearly shows that pupils have more classroom related activities and assignments which make them miss time for extra-curricular involvement. In so doing, experiential learning from day to day life is limited.

involve in and demonstrate their society expectations and activities because of being 'terminated' in the day to day life activities of their communities. In fact, schooling is excluding learners from knowing how their people in their surrounding community live and what they want from their children's education.

**Laws, Regulations and Acts on a Schooling Child:** Tanzania is a member of various international forums on the rights of the child and has ratified many conventions for the same purpose like the CRC, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACRWC), ILO, etc [12, 13]. The nation has further mainstreamed various national policy documents and strategies like the Employment and Labour Relations Act (2004), the Child Development Policy (2004) and MKUKUTA to harness mobilized efforts from both local and international efforts against child labour [13, 14, 15].

Although Tanzania's laws stipulate the duty and responsibility of the child like to work for the cohesion of the family, respect his parents, guardians, superiors and elders at all times and provide them assistance, serve his community and nation using his physical and intellectual abilities depending on his age and ability and preserve and strengthen the positive cultural values of his community and nation, amongst others [14, 15], there is a restricted implementation of the same because what a learner is expected by international and national laws is to perform his duties and responsibilities which are best to his interests. In many cases, community and national interests, norms and traditions are vaguely belittled by the formulated laws [14].

Practical experiences leave African nations in a trajectory debate on what and how a learner has to be educated and reared. South Africa's Constitution avails that in any decision, the child's interests are "...the paramount concern in all matters affecting the child" [16]. In Ghana, child's rights have been clearly stipulated in various laws. For example, in accordance to the rights of the child and parental duty, the states, amongst other things, that, "The best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration by any court, person, institution or other body in any matter concerned with a child" and that, "No correction of a child is justifiable which is unreasonable in kind or in degree according to the age, physical and mental condition of the child and no correction is justifiable if the child by reason of tender age or otherwise is incapable of understanding the purpose of the correction" (ILO NATLEX Database, n.d. [17]). In critical assessment learners are likely to find themselves exterminated by failing to resolve the conflict that befalls between the perceived to be good society norms and customs [18, 3].

All African nations have ratified the UN CRC except Morocco which is also not a member state of African Union [12, 9]. Regarding the role of education in African nations, Article 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, amongst others, poses the obligations among the member states to;

*...respect the liberty of parents and guardians to establish and choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions; and*

*...ensure that all educational programmes are of a high quality and appropriate to the needs of society. Education must equip learners with the requisite skills and values to participate in and contribute to national and international development and employment opportunities. Education and training must be targeted at development based on African realities and particularly towards the development of science and technology. School curricula should be linked to the labour market and society's demands for technology and self-reliance, whilst taking into consideration the self development of the child [9].*

However, the success of the child laws in many of the African states is not significant. There are several challenges which affect the smooth ratification and implementation of the child's legally directed rights and demands such as cultural conflicts, limited political will and opposing school acts. For example in Ghana, although the Child and Family Welfare Policy has established and cherished consultative and participatory cohesion and coordination resulting from positive social

and behavioural changes by all educational stakeholders [19], child protection system has been not culturally appropriate and financially viable and sustainable [19] and have not provided the type and quality of the services for which they were established [6]. As a result, the laws create conflicts with traditional values and practices and socio-cultural, political and economic environment thwarts the success of the child laws since they are seen as creating new values [6, 18, 3]. Learners fail to act and reflect on their communities' experiences and abstracts to make them successful and helpful individuals to their people.

Similarly, despite the fact that the child's laws in Kenya puts the best interests of the child as paramount in all decisions affecting him, the Education Act of 2012 provides a parent to have decision on the religious teachings he desires for his child and for the wishes of the community which are served by a school (National Council for Law Reporting, 2012). In South Africa, though the schools and parents are required to ensure all learning conducts must care for the best interests of the learner, still the interests of all parties and members of the school governing bodies involved in disciplinary proceedings are contained by the School Act of 2011. The school governing body is required to "... promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school" [16]. This means that, there is no direct congruence and agreement between the child's laws and the act governing school conducts. The latter embeds the presence of all members and treats them fairly equally. This further implies that, child's best interests may in no mean inflict the schools' educational conducts and missions for broader society benefits.

There is lack of clear goal because everyone who enters in misses a clear focus. There is a great challenge of defining the best interests of the learner because of lack of coordination. At the end many people and other organizations become children rights' activists [3]. "A person below the age of eighteen years shall be known as a child" [14,1 5] and "The best interest of a child shall be the primary consideration in all actions concerning a child whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts or administrative bodies" [14].

**Where Is Experiential Learning of the Child?:** The education provided to Tanzanian pupils must serve the purposes of Tanzania. They need to know that they are an integral part of the nation with responsibility of their greater services to people. This is not the role of school and educational stakeholders and activists alone. But rather, "This is not only a matter of school organization and curriculum. Social values are formed by family, school and society—by the total environment in which a child develops..." [2]. Collaboration between parents/guardians, schools and society are important in the success of a schooling child.

The functional aim of the education in Tanzania very soon after independence was to enable a student to practice through their community experiences and real life activities. There were schools that had agricultural bias and others were for carpentry and business and children participated in agriculture, carpentry and selling school shops. They gained direct and practical educational experiences through school life engagements. As Dewey suggests, "...education must be conceived as continuing reconstruction of experience" (1879). It is no wonder that, students after their studies could join in and fit well in their communities and participated effectively and productively in the society activities. Today, the scenario is very different. Opposed from Dewey's suggestion, the processes and goal of education are not the same [21]. The agricultural schools no longer have farms and even cattle keeping. Similarly, technical schools which had carpentry do not have the same today. This implies that, there are no places where students can practice the actual life styles of their people in their communities. Experiential and applied learning lacks [22]. When they get back after formal schooling, learners have completely become like remnants ignoring most of the community life-styles and activities. Not that the activities are archaic, but because in their schooling system, they do not manage to get through such practical experiences. Schools and communities today prepare children for future life differently.

**Philosophical Contextualization of Learning:** When in studies, I do understand the three primacies of education; the primacy of the learner, society or subject matter. In our education today, it might be difficult to directly place which

primacy is dominant in Africa. Many government policies emphasize on the provision of guidance and counseling to children in order to address problems that they encounter to the extent of affecting their schooling [23]. Nevertheless, similar policies provide that learners' interests must be paramount in every activity pertaining them. Besides, moral development of a child is critical and important in upbringing useful and responsible future citizens.

*To develop a child morally is to enable the child to build up a good interpersonal relationship with fellow children and other people living with him / her in the community. This depends upon love and guidance and counseling which a child gets from the parents, guardians, the community and the behaviour characteristics of the community as a whole. Moral development monitoring to a large extent has been left to parents and guardians as the communities have different moral standards [1].*

The moral conducts and behaviours of children in schools are not good. Respect, love and cooperation are largely missing and the society general conduct is appalled [23, 3]. Since there are conflicts among pupils, teachers, parents, governments and the general society which leave the learner at paradoxical mid-points, no one bothers on the learning betterment of the pupils [6, 23, 3]. There is high rate of moral decay caused by the influence of ICT and globalization. Children are mostly using their time surfing information in internets and parents and guardians have to protect them. "The right for being developed includes provisions for protecting children against the influence of the information communication technology and globalization, which are considered as main causes of immoral decay among the children [14]". Other children develop truancy which makes them drop out of school. "The 2007 dropout statistics shows that the main cause for dropout in basic education is truancy (76%)..." [14]. It is in this sense that, cooperative learning of children in schools may help much in instilling good morals and ethics among learners and therefore, enabling their educational continuation. If educational has its relevance positively affecting people, every individual will be responsible to monitor, guide and counsel children to progress with education. The contrast is that, when a child drops from school, you may find parents and other members in society accepting and cherishing that behaviour because of creating education-society disconnectedness.

Past experiences show that children learnt from their parents and other elders. Boys met with their fathers and grandfathers in the evening fire while girls were in the kitchen where with their mothers and grandmothers that used to give teachings through story telling or actual events. Also warnings and lessons were given and the expected adulthood life style of children. Even the stories about other communities/clans and families were given during these times.

Where are we today with our laws and educational policies? If we cherish for competence education to make learners competitive and employable in their future, what do the actual sentiments of the child rights and regulations state about involvement of children in the process of learning? Despite these noble achievements in the education sector, there are challenges to child labour prevention and response efforts which result from lack of relevance of education to the needs of local communities [14]. However, the demand for the useful and relevant education is paramount even in the laws of Tanzania. "Nevertheless, the Tanzanian community expects the Nation's children to continue to maintain peace, respect, love, unity, the zeal for self – reliance and valuing work/employment [1]". It is important that our curriculum should address community demands. "The main challenges in this respect relate to having a better curriculum that provides children attending school with capacity to solve both personal and collective development challenges" [14]. The elusive educational programmes and plans in most of African nations find children after graduating submitting themselves to challenges of employment and dependence. Few manage to apply the gained educational competences to master well their environments. The outcome of this is developing outcries of unemployed graduates who mainly fail to harness well their environment.

If for example we say that, children will not be exposed to physical torturers like farming, etc, who will likely participate in agriculture later? If other children are academically endowed to acquiring certification in agriculture, what kind of experts do we expect to get out of the farming ill-prepared children? It seems, there is a great mismatch between what

people and the government expect from children as competent learners and helpful to themselves, their people and their nations; but are being prepared as legal bodies accustomed to soft school and society tasks that are within the learners' interests. But our curricula tell us about knowing the what, who and how to be taught to pupils for when and why?

### **Functional Essence of Education**

**Childhood Development: Practical Experience in Africa:** Critical experiential education that is bonded with society services requires holistic preparation of responsive learners well grown physically, intellectually, spiritually, morally and socially [18]. A child needs to be cared, directed, influenced or reared to conform to the foundational norms and customs of particular communities. In our case, we are talking about the Tanzanian community. It is difficult to have a Tanzanian who does not know his real initial foundations; his tribe, people and their characteristics and knowing that there are other people who make up Tanzanian population. In addressing this, acknowledging, the ministry of education has introduced the subject of Uraia na Maadili<sup>3</sup> (*Civics and Ethics*) which gives a school child built up elements of love, self-recognition, respect and knowing the affluence of his community cultures and that of other tribes. This involves later bringing the child closer to knowing the affluence from other nations. This is the essence of good morals to our learners.

When reading children's development laws of some African nations, there is a significant difference from how each nation looks at the child and how to prepare him to become a functional citizen in his adulthood. The Tanzanian case has given an elaborate link of what a child is expected by his people or nation [1]. Opposing, other nations cherish more for the interests of the learner to be at the center of his care and growth [16, 24, 25]. "Child development enables him/her to reach his/her physical, mental, emotional and social potentials through simultaneous continued life time interaction with the environment" [14].

Children are reported to be leaving the desirable society norms and traditions too early and quickly [1]. But what might be the cause? Parents, guardians, community and the governments have left their roles. Of significant course, are the children's problems over protective laws, policies and regulations which put the interests of the pupil at the core center? Parents and communities are urged to make children fulfill their dreamt potentials from their interests. Who defines the best interests of the child? How best are those interests to the future growth and demand of our societies?.

Of course, many parents are too busy to guide and counsel the children. Although the children have their own interests defined by themselves, parents and guardians are even busy not to understand and brainstorm on the needs or interests of the pupils. Such parents and guardians' negligence has made children even busier. My experience shows that many children are left to leverage and vulture on a crumby education. There is no problem with paying school fees. You find children aged 2-4 years are in the morning school buses early 6.00 am to school. It is no wonder that they might have waken-up before these hours. In the buses, other children slumber up to school; they keep on playing to the time of getting back home; with many assignments. The next day, the same happens throughout the week. At what time will parents get time to guide and counsel their children? It is no wonder if these children develop displacement of immoral deeds to lifestyles because schooling to them is a must. In such circumstances, learning flexibility among learners is much limited [18]. Self-esteems of children are likely to be low because with such kind of school age, children struggle with education to wrestle with knowledge acquisition. It is most competitive learning. The knowledge expected to be created from experience grasping and transformation [18], is hardly achieved and remains abstract. If they do not do well in class activities, they are likely to give up soon and their education endeavors end [1].

### **CONCLUSION**

The key aim of this writing is not to bring and archaic African education systems to our past segregative and humiliating experiences. But rather to acquaint our teachings to our core central values that are beneficial and significant to

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<sup>3</sup>The ethical and behavioural problems among pupils in schools and the older people in both workplaces and homes have led to deliberate curricula reforms in education whereby civic education and ethics are taught from primary standard three pupils. However, what is written in the curriculum and the laws demanding the rights of a school child do not match.

the growth of individuals who know, value and develop patriotic senses and morals to their communities and nations. Additionally, the education being emphasized should not leave African nations far beyond in the development from the other worlds. As Mwalimu Julius Nyerere hinted;

*The same principles of integration into the community and applicability to its needs, must also be followed at post-secondary levels, but young people who have been through such an integrated system of education as that outlined are unlikely to forget their debt to the community by an intense period of study at the end of their formal educational life.*

The essence is to make our education and life experiences more practical to Africans' daily life and realities. Nyerere says, "...Yet even at university, medical school, or other post-secondary levels, there is no reason why students should continue to have all their washing up and cleaning done for them..." The education system that Mwalimu calls for Tanzania is that which makes every person responsible to learners; and that we need to monitor what learners do and guide and remind them accordingly. Any learner who fails to properly define his education for life improvement must be blamed and his education would be disqualified because it lacks essence to human use (Nyerere, 1967). Pupils must be educated to be members and servants of the kind of a just future to which Tanzania aspires. Serious government interventions are needed in order to let a learner know that he is prepared to be the parent or guardian of tomorrow. Who will crave the good norms and traditions of our communities? But, which community is that? Or is it an international community? Does it have foundational customs or traditions? We need to seriously debate on this. Otherwise, we may remain with our written conventions, laws and regulations which in turn, will continually *exile* school children from their communities with predicaments of poor morals.

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