

Introduction of Political Education for the Propagation of Democracy in Africa: The Perspective of an African Academic

by

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Abstract

Political aspects of governance and decision making within education systems and institutions, and political activities related to education in general are present in all education systems worldwide. As an academic discipline the study of politics in education has two main roots. The first root is based on theories from political science while the second root is in organizational theory. Political science attempts to explain how societies and social organizations use power to establish regulations and allocate resources. Organizational theory uses scientific theories of management to develop deeper understandings regarding the function of organizations. Researchers have drawn a distinction between two types of politics in education in general. The term micro-politics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. Cooperative and conflictive processes are integral components of micro-politics. Macro-politics refers to how power is used and decision making is conducted at district, state, and federal levels. Macro-politics is generally considered to exist outside of education systems, but researchers have noted that micro- and macro-politics exist at any level of education systems worldwide depending on circumstance.

This paper argues that political education is very crucial if democracy is to mature in African countries and contribute towards achieving democracy and credible free and fair electoral process that would change African politics dramatically. To achieve this important aim, the author believes that all categories of teachers at all levels of African institutions should be provided with both fundamental and advanced political education during their studies in higher institutions of learning to be able to propagate the niceties of political education to advance and make democracy successfully implemented in African countries.

Introduction

The challenges facing African education systems, their underlying links with politics and possible ways to address them, need attention of all higher institutions of learning. For this reason, politics should be compulsorily taught in institutions of higher learning, especially those engaged in the training of teachers. It should be made compulsory in all institutions of higher learning to remove political ignorance among Africans. Politics and education policy influence each other through a continuous process which has failed the education sector in Africa, particularly in the last few decades because of non-provision of systematic political education to students in higher institutions of learning. Understanding the role of politics in African national education systems is something whose significance has been left to ferment among institutions of higher learning. It is high time this is changed.

Politics takes actual visible form and plays major roles in educational systems worldwide and in Africa in particular. Through policy formulations, education systems in Africa are the work of governments, approved and supervised by them. No African educational system can escape from the political community in which it operates and seeks to serve. The education system must reflect what the political community wants it to do. The system can set formally to change the community only if the community includes change of this kind among its aims of education provision. African educational systems contain some germ of true political education and is therefore likely to influence its provision either expected or unexpected and whether welcome by its sponsors or otherwise. To this end, it can be indicated that in Africa politics impacts on education systems. What good has emanated from the supposed symbiotic relationship between education and politics need critical appraisal for introspection, circumspection and retrospection. What harm has politics unleashed on African education is another issue that needs critical appraisal. This should include steps that need to be taken to straighten and strengthen the major bridges along the political highways so that there is smooth transition from student politics to mainstream politics.

In the new millennium, African governments cannot leave political education to chance because such action will be detrimental to the successful survival of generations to come in terms of political education and maturity for the enhancement of democracy. For this reason, there should be protracted effort to provide viable political education in African institutions of higher learning especially, our teachers colleges and faculties of education of universities to be able to build stronger bridges across the major rivers crossing the political highways of African countries.

Higher Institutions: Where Political Education Can Be Planted and Nurtured

Higher institutions worldwide are known to be where political ideologies are formed and implanted in the minds of student prior to their graduation. They also serve as instruments of motivating students to get involved in active politics even before their graduation. Tertiary education, in particular, is fundamental to the construction of knowledge and knowledge itself has become a vital factor for political education. Students worldwide should be taught to be politically educated, active and have in no small measure influenced policies within their universities and in their nations as a whole. The role of teachers, in this instance, is more paramount and for this reason, teachers of all categories should be politically skilful and knowledgeable. Institutions of higher learning should produce political activists who should, on completion of their studies enter the political landscape and operate professionally. These activists must have developed their political ideologies and activism while in the institutions of higher learning. The major objective of this book is to determine whether in reality higher institutions of learning play a role in political education of students and provide direction for sustainable political education provision for now and in the future.

A number of factors, such as, curriculum, media, peer influence and lecturers (educators) influence will be used to determine the agents of political socialization of students in higher institutions of learning. Furthermore, this book will highlight the agents who have the greatest impact on students' political education within higher institutions of learning. Students must be politically influenced while in higher institutions of learning. The curriculum is the major agent for political education through students union and lecturers. Teachers worldwide are the major instruments who can be used for positive social change in terms of democratic political ideology and for this reason their professional education should consist of substantial political education.

Urgent Need for African Higher Institutions to Embark on Political Education

There is urgent need in Africa to embark on political education in institutions of learning – from primary through secondary to tertiary - that would re-orientate all citizens towards a positive political outing where they could make positive contribution to the development of democracy. To appreciate the fact that elections should be conducted correctly, the entire public would expect the results of all elections to be correct and not rigged. If conscientious political education is not provided, it would be comparable with the poisoning of our minds that elections are going to be rigged, and some of the electorate will believe that their votes would not count. We need to provide citizens enlightened political education to be able to do things politically well. As elaborated in figure 1, political education hinges on five processes, namely politics, policy, programme, process and product. A brief explanation about this figure is required to provide the connection in the discussion.

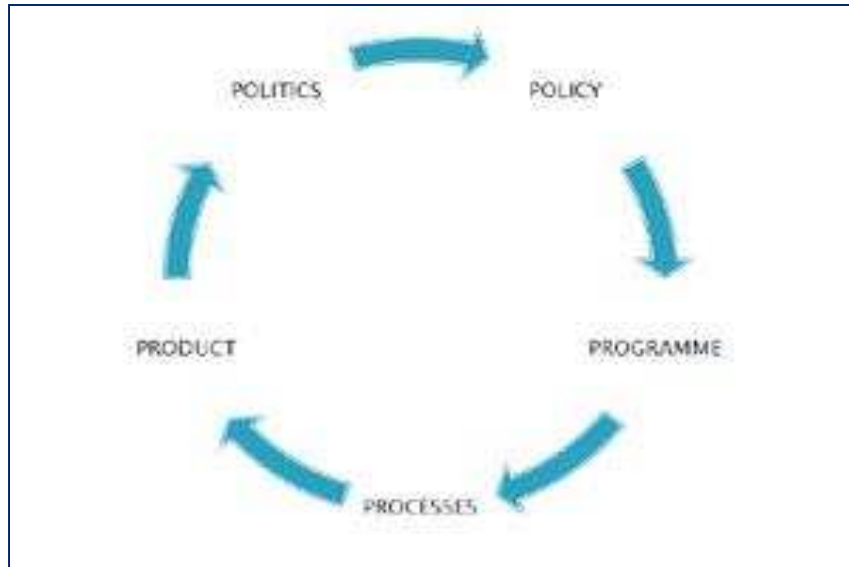


Figure 1: Professor Pai Obanya's diagram showing the circular relationship between the 5 Ps, including politics and policy. [Source: Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE)]

Politics: Higher institutions of learning are known to be where political ideologies are formed and developed. They also serve as instruments of motivating students to engage and involve themselves in the main stream political game. Tertiary education institutions in particular are fundamental to the construction of knowledge and skills which become a vital factor for political education. In some countries worldwide, students are politically active and have, in no small measure, influenced in the formulation of policies within their universities and in the nation as a whole. Higher institutions of learning have produced a lot of activists who are presently influencing the political landscape in their respective countries. These activists have been known to have developed their political ideologies and activism while in their institutions of learning.

Nation building that may lead to self-reliance is a daunting task and effective positive political education plays a major role in instigating citizens to engage in main stream politics. Very often, many people think that nation building is the responsibility of the politicians of a country. This is ignorance in its extreme which needs to be eradicated through protracted political education. In reality, nation building is the collective responsibility of all the people who reside in a country and not a clique of political heavyweights. To enhance citizen participation in national, provincial and local government politics in Africa requires protracted political education provision to make all citizens aware of the significance of participation in nation building through their involvement in the main stream political game.

Generally, ignorance of all kinds is the outcome of the limitations of our intellect or the obscurity of ignorance itself. Several types of ignorance can be alluded to. Two of them, which relate to citizen participation in international, national, provincial and local governance which are politically significant, are invincible ignorance and evincible ignorance. Ignorance is said to be invincible when people are unable to rid themselves of it. Ignorance is said to be vincible if it can be dispelled by the use of moral diligence by way of awareness and education. The area covered by human ignorance is a vast one and these include ignorance of the law, ignorance of the fact, and ignorance of penalty to mention but a few. In this article, tentative strategies for political education of Africans to take part in all sorts of politics for the enhancement of the activities of governments are discussed. It is important to introduce students (especially those training to become professional teachers) to the basic conceptual issues in politics and educational management. The influence of politics should be considered to enable students to appreciate the fact that politics characterize the decision making process in education management. Contemporary political issues such as funding and equality of educational opportunities must be taught to inform students of the need to keep abreast with issues (local, provincial, national and international) in educational management, to be able to build on this foundation as they pursue their political career as teachers of political education management programmes.

Programme: The programmes for political education, especially for teacher trainees should be systematically planned and implemented with care to incorporate democratic political ideology for understanding and spread of democracy in African countries.

Process: The process should be specific taking into account local, provincial and national political development needs first before the introduction to international political systems. Once the basic foundation is laid, issues can be advanced to include international politics.

Product: This should be considered in terms of the production of politically informed students who have been equipped with both the required basic and advanced political knowledge and skills for getting involved in main stream politics in the future after their graduation.

Significance of Political Education for African Youth

Political education as used in this discussion is the process in which political attitudes and behaviours are germinated, formed and grounded in institutions of higher learning (Hamad et al. (2001). However, it does not limit politics to party politics such as voting and election and campaigning. The best definition for the purpose of this discussion is political socialization (Entwistle, 1971). Education, if well-grounded and provided becomes ingrained in the minds of students. This grounding of political education seeds of knowledge and skills continue to germinate as they develop from primary school to higher institutions of learning.

Students in African institutions of higher learning should play significant role in the transformation of the political systems of their respective countries (Coleman 1963; McClintock and Turner, 1963). Political education is a crucial agent of socialization. The higher institutions of learning exert influence on the individual as well as on the society and political system from which the individual resides. Institutions of higher learning are the major agents of students' political education and political activism.

This view is supported by Almond and Verba (1963) in their five nations' study; they concluded that among all the variables they considered, education is regarded as the greatest variable of political reform in any country. Undoubtedly, many agents of political education influence university students. Schooling itself has been known to function as an ideological vehicle. This is done for political socialization but the more extensive an individual's education is, the more likely the individual is to have more political knowledge and information to possess. In this way a wide range of opinions on political matters, to engage in political discussion and to have a greater ability to influence political affairs can be assured introspectively.

Several literature sources have argued that individual political behaviour and thoughts are consequences of the environment (Mezey 1975). African institutions of higher learning must be the dominant model and central instrument of political education. This is the view of sociologists and political scientists who have continually looked for reasons why people participate in politics. Therefore, one can conclude that university students' socialization involves all kinds of learning which they are exposed to while in the institutions.

By any criterion, political education should be one of the most successful provisions in African educational institutions of the modern era. The institutions should formulate strategic plans to guide in the development of political education of students. Boisot (1995: 36) has shown that "...strategic intention describes a process of coping with turbulence through a direct, intuitive understanding of what is occurring in an effort to guide the work of an institution. A turbulent environment cannot be tamed by rational analysis alone so that conventional strategic planning is deemed to be of little use. Yet it does not follow that an institution's response must be left to a random distribution of lone individuals acting opportunistically and often in isolation. Strategic intention relies on an intuitively formed pattern or *gestalt* – some would call it a vision – to give it unity and coherence".

If one agrees with Milbrath (1971) that the surest single predictor of political involvement is the number of years of formal education, one can safely arrive at the conclusion that the institutions of higher learning certainly widens the scope of students' acquaintance and motivates their political knowledge and involvement. All institutions of higher learning worldwide are integrally linked to other parts of the education system namely: primary and secondary.

As a result of this linkage the character of students flows from one level of the system to another depending on the extent of education provided. Introspectively, all institutions of higher learning are key arenas for ideological knowledge planning, designing and production for advanced political socialization. Institutions of higher learning can therefore be conceptualised as straddling all domains in the social spectrum - constituencies and set of interests. Education, because it is capable of developing scarce skills and raising levels of individual's consciousness, holds out particular promise for countries in relation to their needs to control society and the economy as a whole. At the same time, education poses a threat to prevailing relations of authority, since education is also capable of stimulating independent thoughts which, in many instances, challenge the status quo.

By their training, students in higher institutions have access to information and ideas and can logically and systematically articulate rightly or wrongly, the various policies and measure rhetoric against reality (Olugbade, 1990).

Students' political values change, especially with the length of stay in the institutions of higher learning (Jacobsen, 2001). This author has found that students' political development and values change in the beginning of their study and after several years of study develop their own political perspectives which may influence their political orientation. This is a hint that students tend to become more politically alike as they live together thus indicating that higher education has a slight homogenising effect on political values.

Literature has supported the fact that the family is the primary agent of socialization (Boaduo et al 2011). The family has been known to play a role in the formation of attitudes and values of their children. For a child, it is easy for the family to be the agent of political education through indoctrination. The family also provides an environment which is conducive to the acquisition of certain knowledge, values and attitudes which are commonly held by that family (Rush and Althoff, 1971). Evidences from literature sources have also supported the fact that in addition to formal education processes, students are very much influenced by on-campus peer and friends group (Almond and Verba, 1963; Hamad et al., 2001). This is to say that affiliations to public interest and advocacy groups by students in higher institutions of learning have been found to have a great impact on their political socialization. Closely connected with the peer group, is political education through campus societies, clubs and most importantly, students affiliation with the civil society and advocacy groups outside the campus. For instance, observations have shown that students always have strong affiliation with advocacy groups such as the Black Consciousness in South Africa during their liberation struggle. And they have shared the centre stage of struggles with these advocacy groups and the South African labour congresses. This is in line with the findings of Hamad et al. (2004), and Budirdiaradjo (1998) who found that political socialization can step from affiliation with public interest and advocacy groups which have fought for the public interest.

Political agents outside institutions of higher learning often influence political thinking and allegiance of students. For instance, outside the campuses students often form a large part of the constituency of many political parties. This is because political parties often target the students' social stratum for political socialization activities, woo and involve them in their campaigns. This occurs either directly through involvement with party political institutions or indirectly through social or interest groups established by and connected to a political party (Hamad et al. 2001). As a result governments in general, have tended to use students and their unions as progressive support enclaves in pursuit of both legitimacy and popular appeal.

Most political parties and their leaders strive to establish student wings to capture the progressive sentiments which are usually quite vocal in various matters. Students should have their own local news carriers in the form of what is referred to as 'campus journalism'. Students often place a great reliance on the campus media as channels of information. The mass media is important because according to Rush and Althoff (1971) not only are more people involved in the communication system but they are reached by the same channels and so the information likely to reach them will be more uniform. For instance, according to Hamad et al. (2001) students and the mass media have been instrumental in bringing about political reforms in countries like Indonesia in 1990 and recently in Tunisia and Egypt.

Political education, as advocated in this book could be shaped by what is transmitted through the official curriculum. This may be true especially in primary and secondary schools where civics or government is taught as a subject. There is however a dearth of literature to support the fact that the curriculum can be a source of political education for all students in higher institutions of learning. However, observations have shown that political education in the university is largely defined by hidden curriculum, values and attitudes, beliefs that are informally transmitted through the everyday practice of teachers. This is one pertinent reason why teacher trainees should be provided with in-depth political education during their training in institutions of higher learning to be able to articulate their political participation in main stream politics.

It is evidently clear that education plays a prominent role in political education and socialization of students in higher institutions of learning. According to Almond and Verba (1963) education determines political attitude and that the more extensive an individual political education is structured the more likely the individual is able to become aware of the impact of government, to follow politics, to have more political information and to engage in political discussion with a wider range of people. If a person has received higher level of education (college degree or higher) then that person will most likely to be more aware of political and social issues and will also realise the importance of political participation and feel compelled to become involved (Thomas, 1995).

Generally, students' political orientation education changes as soon as they receive in-depth political education because institutions of higher learning are training grounds for cross fertilization of ideas and knowledge development whereby the three domains of education such as cognitive, psychomotor and affective are developed. Certainly, institutions of higher learning autonomy have given students opportunity to develop their political potentials and offer them better opportunities for main stream political engagement.

The Curriculum and the Shaping of the African Political World

The school curriculum is important in shaping students' understanding of the political world. In a country with a strong ideology, textbooks are used to indoctrinate students; they are often selective and contain biases. However, in the institutions of higher learning, especially in democratic countries, it is difficult to control what, and how teachers interpret textbooks to inform students about their political orientation. Campus socialization provides political knowledge to students but is also often very much influenced by on-campus peer and friendship groups. It can be confirmed that political education could be shaped by what is transmitted through the official curriculum. The curriculum dictates the knowledge system of each student. It can also widen the cognitive experiences of students. Closely connected with the curriculum is the role of lecturers and their interpretation of the curriculum. In other words, political education can be largely defined by hidden curriculum, values, attitudes, and beliefs that are informally transmitted through the everyday practice of the higher institutions lecturers.

There is evidence that classroom teachers often corrupt curriculum by hijacking it to promote their ideologies since most teachers who are politically orientated have their own view of the political ideology that they support.

In countries where teachers are political orientated, they are noted to be highly political and have been known to constantly interact with students even during lectures. It is possible that no major course or courses in the institutions of higher learning can escape the plight of political interference. Another identified agent of political education of students is the Students Union. The students union is saddled with the responsibility of managing the affairs of students. Unions exist to represent the interests of students. Students' unionism arises out of the recognition that students should be given some protection and prevented from being exploited unduly either by government or by the institution. It also sets out to improve the ability of its members to influence decisions, share in decision making and exchange views and ideas with the institution's management.

A student union government is like a typical government as it has the Senate and also observes legislative procedures. The student union is always the first platform where students practice political roles. For instance, in South Africa students' unions like SASCO and its affiliated unions are highly politicised bodies and often serve as a training ground for indoctrination, activism and for aspiring politicians. Steve Biko is one of such union leaders who rose to prominence in the 1970s when he proposed the Black Consciousness political ideology.

In line with the Oklahoma Students' Civic Engagement Declaration of 2003, this study calls for a profound civic commitment and a call for institutions of higher education to do a better job educating students for democracy. Thus, there is call for students in institutions of higher learning to be educated in the area of politics and policy. Can African institutions of higher learning not do the same thing? Perhaps, courses like civics and government could be introduced with the general studies being taught. This will help students to have a direct knowledge of politics rather than pick from the hidden curriculum and the dictates of the small group of people who constitute the executives of the students union. In conclusion, there is a strong indication that higher institutions of learning environment provides a separate and different learning environment from earlier education and that different agents exert influence on students significantly. This book, therefore, posits that civic education should be intensified in institutions of higher learning especially in the faculties of education where teacher trainees are trained to become future political leaders.

Conclusion

Africa has face myriads of political upheavals since the colonialists packed out of their colonies. However, what they left is political confusion because African countries have not come out with political system which can be used to solve African problems. What is advocated in this paper is that Africa should start to grow politics through its institutions of higher learning and make this subject compulsory so that generations to come will be politically educated, matured and capable of taking the political platform and govern African countries successfully and curtail the numerous upheavals that have engulfed Africa since the latter part of the 20th century. This is our time to make African politics work through the provision of political education for the youth of African.

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