



MWAMBUTSYA NDEBESA > SCHOOLS

Education: The Irony of better performing schools in Uganda

It is 20 years since Universal Primary Education (UPE) started in Uganda. It is also 10 years since Universal Secondary Education (USE) was introduced. In fact, UPE has become synonymous with the whole national education policy regardless of whether students are in private or government schools or whether it is a programme or a policy. Twenty years is long enough for a public policy or programme to be evaluated. There are mainly three criteria that can be used to evaluate such a programme. These are the purpose, the quality and quantity. Quite often, the evaluators have tended to concentrate on the latter two at the expense of purpose.

There is no unanimity about the performance of UPE programme in Uganda. Various actors have used different criterion to measure the success or otherwise of this programme. Government has largely used the quantity, arguing that enrolment to schools has had phenomenal growth. Many classrooms have been built and many schools and universities have come up and, therefore, there is education success in Uganda. On the other hand, critics of the UPE and USE such as NGOs use the quality measure and conclude that the education programme in the last 20 years or so has largely underperformed. They argue that the products of this programme have not acquired the necessary knowledge, values and skills and in some respects, quality has deteriorated. They are

also concerned about dropout rates. For many parents, education is judged simply by grades attained. When students get high grades that enable them go to another elite school, then that is success. The public, especially the media, has been giving out the names of the best performing schools. This has been determined by how the school performs in terms of high grades scored in a particular school and the number of students the school has managed to send to the next level like the public university. And the public as well as the government seem to be happy with this performance and achievement and think that such performance should be a model worth celebrating and emulating in the country. Herein lies the Irony of good performing Schools.

However, if one had to use a measure of the real purpose of education, you may find that some of the so-called best performing schools in Uganda are ironically the worst performing schools. What then should ideally be the best measure or indicator of a successful education policy or programme?

As mentioned earlier, purpose, quality and quantity can all be used as a measure of success. However, the most important measure for a successful education policy is purpose. This is because it measures the goal or outcome for which education is undertaken in any society or country. We should also observe that education is both a private and public good. Therefore, a successful educa-

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tion policy should be measured by how it balances serving both the private and public good. In fact, because education is both a public and private good, the cost of educating a child should be borne by both the parents and the State.

There are many purposes of education which can be used to evaluate education in a country. These purposes are preparing the learners for the job market, living in the next decade or generation, living in the global world, collaborating living, and living in an orderly society. The other purposes are cultivating a sense of active citizenship in the learner, giving the learner education for voice, living peaceful and harmonious life in the community and socialising the learner into positive culture. Others are developing physical and critical thinking skills of the learner, and developing creative, innovating and independent-minded persons.

In summary, the purpose of education is to benefit the individual and society. Let us point out some examples in the education system today to demonstrate the irony of

good performing schools on account of good grades, which may score the poorest on some indicators of a successful education. Most of the 'best' performing schools simply coach pupils how to answer questions, but not how to think. What takes place in most of the so-called good schools is rote learning, which means memorisation of information based on repetition. Most schools no longer go for sports or co-curricular activities. They no longer have holidays or even time to socialise. A product of such teaching has neither an independent mind nor social skills. They are more less a biological robot.

Another great if not the greatest purpose of education is to teach the learner how to learn. The young ones are living in a fast changing world. It is impossible for a teacher to give a learner all the knowledge and skills for all the time. What is required of the teacher is to teach the student how to learn so that the learner will be able to continue learning, adapting and be able to apply the knowledge so acquired to real life situations.

But what is happening in our education system today? The best school is not measured by how many and relevant books there are in the library, but by the hotel-like buildings. Even inspectors and parents do not bother to go and see whether there are books in the library. This, rote learning educationists will tell you, is not a reliable indicator of intelligence or learning. Learning should be continuous and therefore the role of the teacher should not be spoon feeding the learner. A student who is given learning skills can always be adaptable. A student with critical thinking skills can always transfer their knowledge from one subject to another profession. For example, a graduate of history with critical thinking skills, can easily become a good journalist.

We have also pointed out that education is also a public good. Are these good performing schools educating for active citizenship? Are they graduating citizens with a national outlook? The challenge of our education system today is to churn out masses with no clear sense of nationhood.

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