

Is the Kenyan education system ready for change? A pilot study

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Accepted 24 April, 2019

ABSTRACT

Kenya has traditionally adopted a teacher-centred teaching methodology and is now aiming to make improvements by replacing this approach with an education system that is more child focused. The purpose of this study is to examine the Kenyan teaching system. It is an exploratory pilot study, which tries to establish whether governmental directions match the real experience of teachers and students and discusses whether student perceptions of teaching practices match those of the teachers. Personal experience raised a need to answer the research questions and the study does not pretend to be a thorough examination of the topic, rather, given the lack of previous studies, it seeks to establish a basis for future in depth research. The study used a non-experimental approach, based on the perceptions of students and teachers obtained through a structured questionnaire. The data for this study was obtained from: 10 students, 5 males and 5 females, aged between 11 and 13 years in classes 7 and 8 attending a boarding school in Kiambu on the outskirts of Nairobi. Three teachers responsible for teaching at the school attended by the student participants: two male teachers responsible for upper primary students aged 12-13, and a female teacher responsible for lower primary students aged 7-10. The questionnaires used in this study were created for both students and teachers and were designed to elicit their opinions regarding the methods of teaching and learning. They were validated before being provided to the participants.

Keywords: Education, Kenya, school curriculum, qualitative study, student-centres' education, teaching methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

Kenya has been working to improve its education standards by benchmarking with global standards and targets. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, adopted in July 1990 at the 6th ordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, was signed and ratified by Kenya in 2000 (Sifuna and Otiende, 1994). In a continued effort to improve education standards, during the World Education Forum held in Dakar (Senegal) in 2000, Kenya adopted, along with 160 other countries, the Dakar Framework for Action

– re-affirming the commitment to achieve education for all by the year 2015 and identifying six key measurable education goals to meet the learning needs of all children, youths and adults. In 2001 the Kenyan Parliament enacted the Children Act, which provides that every child is entitled to education, and that the responsibility for that education lies with the government and with parents. Subsequently and significantly, Kenya introduced free primary education in 2003.

Despite these efforts, it is clear that there appear to be serious barriers preventing the achievement of the

education goals set out in the Dakar Framework for Action. In particular, the quality of education has emerged as a problem area (UNESCO, 2011). UNICEF presented a meta-analysis of the research literature relating to the quality of education during the World Education Forum (UNICEF, 2000). This analysis demonstrated that quality education requires the involvement of different actors: learners, content, processes, environments and outcomes. In this report, emphasis is placed on the importance of the teaching process or the teaching methodology that a trained teacher chooses to deliver lesson content, specifically, in relation to the continuing support for student-centred learning, which is relevant not only to a student's life, but also to the instructional methods used.

Kenya assesses its progress in meeting its education goals with the use of independent and continuous assessment of the quality of education received in schools. Uwezo, meaning 'capability' in Kiswahili, is an initiative that started in 2009, in which the competencies of school-aged children in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) are measured in order to obtain information which, once the results have been analysed, helps to support the reshaping of educational policy and practice (Uwezo, 2012). This initiative was founded by a group of educators, researchers and leaders from East Africa, who realised that despite the increasing public investment in education and the major reforms in the sector, children in the region continued to demonstrate low levels of literacy and numeracy (Uwezo Report, 2012). These Uwezo assessments, conducted across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda have been highlighting the learning crisis since 2010.

Kenya has traditionally adopted a teacher-centred teaching methodology and is now aiming to make improvements by replacing this approach with an education system that is more child focused. According to Sawamura and Sifuna (2008), whilst Kenya has invested in a universal primary education system since its independence, budgetary constraints and a high student/teacher ratio undermine quality with the result that education in the country is unsatisfactory. King'ahi et al. (2012) recognise the need to take teaching methods into account when trying to improve the education system, since this is a process which shapes the image of the teacher and the student and builds the relationship between them.

The purpose of this study is to examine the Kenyan teaching system. It is an exploratory pilot study, which tries to establish whether governmental directions match the real experience of teachers and students and discusses whether student perceptions of teaching practices match those of the teachers. Personal experience raised a need to answer the research questions and the study does not pretend to be a thorough examination of the topic, rather, given the lack of previous studies, it seeks to establish a basis for future

in depth research.

The education system in Kenya

Kenya gained independence from the British government (the colonial administrators) in 1963. Before the 19th century, missionary education in the country was linked to the conversion of Africans to Christianity with minimal establishment of formal schools. This situation lasted until the beginning of the 20th century, when the colonial administration took over the control of African education from the missionaries. The colonial administration trained Africans in the elementary practical skills of agriculture, carpentry, masonry and other allied crafts, with the aim of providing cheap labour for the colonial government and the European settler community. The goal of the British Education system was to impart basic literacy in order to produce a semi-educated labour force, at higher levels it aimed to train lower-cadre administrators and clerical officers, and among indigenous people, it aimed to provide chiefs and headmen to assist in the administration.

Initially, the colonial administration promoted vocational and rural-based education. This created resentment and resistance among Africans who wanted an academic education. After the Second World War, African Independent schools were established and for the first time, indigenous people were able to access the British Education System, which had been established for the European settler community in Kenya. The ages at which students entered at each level of the system was not standardized due to the poor health and the lack of access to education opportunities and facilities among the majority of the indigenous population and qualification to each level was based merely on the passing of exams.

The first indigenous government (established in 1963) wanted to design an education system capable of helping Kenyan people to achieve an appropriate level of education and needed expertise to help break with the "old" system of education, and to bring in new strategies to help teachers, school directors, policy makers, etc. In short, the aim was to synchronise education objectives with national goals in order to achieve the desired political, economic and social outcomes. It was for this purpose that the Governmental Commissions were created. These commissions were advisory bodies with the responsibility for proposing the type of curriculum design and making recommendations to the government as to how this design might be implemented effectively. Two of the most important commissions (for their social impact), were The Ominde Commission Report (1964) and the Mackay Report of Education (1982) as, over the last 50 years, these have had the most impact on Kenyan education.

Immediately after the independence in 1963, the Minister for Education, Hon. J. Otiende appointed the

Kenya Education Commission. The commission (lately known as The Ominde Commission) was chaired by Prof. Ominde, a renowned Kenyan scholar. In its term of reference, the commission was to survey the existing educational resources of Kenya and serve as an advisory board to the government in the formulation and implementation of national policies for education. In its recommendation, the Ominde commission proposed a unified education system and embraced the notion of “*harambee*” (self-help) schools which were to be built by pulling together the different small communities in which they were located. The commission report also endorsed free primary education as an important objective for educational development and recommended that the government be involved in creating education provision for all Kenyans.

The expansion of education in the 1970's and 1980's was motivated by both internal and external factors. Internally, the Ominde Commission recommended a system of education that would foster national unity and develop human resources for economic development and the Government accepted lengthening the period of primary school education creating a Ministry of Basic Education to steer the implementation of a nine-year basic education programme.

Despite these efforts, approximately 20 years after Independence, a report by the Kenyan Government found that graduates of Kenyan schools lacked practical skills arguing that their education was too theoretical and very little time was devoted to practice. This need for a practical-orientated curriculum was subsequently recognised in research conducted by Sifuna and Otiende (1994).

In 1982, in order to design a more balanced curriculum, the Government appointed a commission chaired by Professor Mackay (Eshiwani, 1993), known as The Mackay Commission. According to Kitainge (2004), the aim of this commission was to create an education system with a curriculum at each level that included both theoretical and practical skills and which would produce self-reliant individuals who would fit into self-employment or formal employment or who would proceed into further training. To achieve this, the commission recommended a change from the previous Ominde Commission system of 7-4-2-3 years to an 8-4-4 education system: 8 years in Primary Level; 4 years in Secondary Level and 4 years at University. This division of years still exists in the current Kenyan education system.

However, minimal emphasis had been put on the methods of teaching the recommended subjects/disciplines. The current education system in Kenya, largely relies on the traditional approach to teaching, in which the learner is considered a passive recipient in the learning process, that is: student participation in class is limited to listening to a teacher delivering content, with minimal opportunity to interact with and practice the information they have been taught.

This information that has been taught must later be reproduced in examinations. The Uwezo Report in 2012 recognised that the education system has serious flaws, particularly with regard to literacy and numeracy, and made a strong recommendation regarding teaching methods arguing that they should be diversified so as to provide learners with more opportunities to participate in the learning process. In addition to this strong recommendation regarding teaching methods the report also addressed other factors, especially the creation of adequate and appropriate reading materials.

With this recognition of the inadequacies in teaching and learning a recent proposal to overhaul the current education system has been made. For Ngware et al. (2014), teaching methods influence how students learn and, if this overhaul is to be successful, there needs an assessment of those methods and how they might be modified.

Teaching methods in Kenya

The teaching methods selected and used by the teacher have a big influence on how students learn and master foreign languages (Felder and Henriques, 1995; Khandaghi and Farasat, 2011; Opendakker and Damme, 2006). As a general observation, according to Frunza (2014), no one method is better or superior to another. What is of utmost importance is the ability of the teacher to select an appropriate method for the lesson being taught and that this method will be effective for the student (Frunza, 2014).

According to Ngware et al. (2014) much of the research conducted in Kenya has focused on the importance of teaching methods rather than on the content that needs to be delivered in a developing country, adding that there is no consensus on what does constitute the best teaching style for use in a developing country such as Kenya.

Ngware et al. (2012) identifies three teaching styles commonly used by Kenyan teachers: recitation, individual set work and whole class instruction with the teachers generally taking up two thirds of the teaching time during an average lesson. The consequence of using these styles, according to Ngware et al. (2012), is that students learn to reproduce knowledge rather than produce it.

Kivuva (2002) identifies shortcomings in current education that existed in the past and have not been eliminated including, access, equity, relevance and the quality of the education provided. The fact that these issues are still rampant has affected the successful implementation of the current curriculum in Kenya. Calderhead (1991) argues that teachers are influenced by ideas they have about their teaching careers when selecting styles for use in the classroom, whereas, according to Biggs (1999), teaching styles are meant to bring out higher order thinking as advocated by Blooms

taxonomy, encouraging students to apply what they have learned in a classroom to real world situations.

A teacher has to be able to balance the varying features of a classroom with the strategies that they apply to teaching such that the students do not just memorise through rote learning (referred to as surface learning by Biggs) but rather get a 'deeper' understanding of the material that they have learned.

METHOD

Intending to build the ground for a future research, this is a pilot study conducted in a single school with a small number of subjects.

The study used a non-experimental approach, based on the perceptions of students and teachers obtained through a structured questionnaire. Perception is integral to the successful implementation of teaching methods as perception is "a mode of apprehending reality and experience through the senses thus enabling discernment of figure, form, language, behaviour and action. Individual perception influences opinion, judgement, understanding of a situation or person, meaning an experience [...]" (Given, 2008, abstract)

An advantage of qualitative research is that it can provide rich and detailed descriptions of human behaviour in the real-world context in which it occurs. Among qualitative researchers, this is often referred to as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Similarly, qualitative research conveys a sense of what it is actually like to be a member of a particular group or in a particular situation—what qualitative researchers often refer to as the "lived experience" of the research participants.

Adopting such a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for a study such as this which sought to examine, in general terms, the applicability of a student centred teaching style, and which did not seek to examine other factors, such as culture, tradition, language, teacher experience, teacher understanding of student centred teaching and learning, student and teacher expectations in learning and teaching methods, and resources.

The data for this study was obtained from: 10 students, 5 males and five females, aged between 11 and 13 years in classes 7 and 8 attending a boarding school in Kiambu on the outskirts of Nairobi. Three teachers responsible for teaching at the school attended by the student participants: two male teachers responsible for upper primary students aged 12-13, and a female teacher responsible for lower primary students aged 7-10.

The questionnaires used in this study were created for both students and teachers and were designed to elicit their opinions regarding the methods of teaching and learning. They were validated before being provided to the participants. According to Dowrick et al. (2015) a validated questionnaire is one that displays appropriate

measurement properties, that is, it displays properties which are dependent on the context and the population being studied rather than having fixed attributes. A higher number of open-ended questions were included to allow teachers and students to express themselves freely rather than restricting them to a few choices.

The questionnaires and the instructions were in English. There were two type of questionnaires: one for teachers and one for students. Both questionnaires consisted of 5 questions.

The questionnaires were issued to participants in late April 2018, before the school holidays and, as they were boarders, they answered the questions over the weekend whilst still at school with the teachers having come in to provide them with the necessary explanations. The students completed their questionnaires within a 40-minute lesson.

The teachers answered their questionnaires overnight. Answering mostly open-ended questions which allowed the researcher to gather information on how and what the teachers thought of the education systems in their respective countries the teachers spent approximately four hours completing their questionnaires.

RESULTS

In this section, in order to obtain a better understanding, a summary of the results obtained from the questionnaires are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this exploratory study was to establish whether governmental directions fulfil the learning and teaching expectations of students and teachers. According to the results, both teachers and students consider the method adopted by a teacher to be one of the most important factors affecting the learning process.

Almost all of the students thought that if teachers changed the teaching methodology, they would learn more and be more motivated. When asked why they thought this, even though a variety of reasons were given, their answers all pointed towards a change in classroom activities with answers including: "learn differently", "practical application", "present in a different way", "more enjoyable than sitting and listening to the teacher", "is boring for different reasons"...

When asked about what changes they would propose, all the teachers proposed having more technology in class; two mentioned having more modern and authentic materials and a different teaching methodology that enhances learning. One also mentioned doing field trips. Six of the students, when answering the same question, also mentioned a different and more active teaching methodology, with two referring to the use of authentic

Table 1. Teachers' questions and answers.

Questions	Answers
<p>Q1. To what extent do you think that teaching methods influence the students' learning process? (1 = no influence at all: 3= neutral: 5 = a lot of influence).</p>	66% answered number 4 and 33% answered number 2.
<p>Q2. Do you think current teaching methods can be improved? (1 = no change: 3 = neutral: 5 = a lot of change)</p>	100% answered number 5.
<p>Q3. If yes, what changes would you propose to improve the effectiveness of the teaching methods?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Incorporate more technology (make more presentations), using computers to do research, adding more modern materials". - "Incorporate some of the useful competencies like digital literacy in teaching methods to enhance learning". - "i) Enhance flexibility of the teaching approaches by the teachers to induce enthusiasm in learning e.g. Learners centred approaches.; ii) Use of broad range of teaching aid e.g. oral i.e. Radio lessons, tape recorder; iii) Incorporating modern technology through the use of PPT, projectors and laptops; iv) organising nature walks and field trips e.g. in the market, factory while teaching vocabulary".
<p>Q4: How can teaching methods be used to motivate students?</p>	<p>"Encourage more confident, creative learners. positive reinforcement encourages the students, brainstorming and allowing students to learn from each other and themselves makes the students want to contribute more".</p> <p>"Using teaching method that makes English practical. Through real, project based learning, role playing and dramatizations; making class communicative- use learner centred methods that involve the learner in the lesson by encouraging discussions and interaction; making class and lessons fun by incorporating ICT to enhance learning, ask learners to post short stories on social media ; incorporate other subjects e.g. music, singing etc.; establish a good rapport with your learners so teachers can identify problems and be able to tackle them when the need arises; give positive feedback even when criticising; encourage peer evaluation and feedback".</p> <p>"Through positive reinforcement while learning, ii) involving the learners in practical activities, iii) use of real e.g. aural, radio lessons, video recording, iv) make the learning enjoyable and interesting, v) involvement of the learners in communication".</p>
<p>Q5: How would you conduct a class if you had the chance to i.e. how differently would you teach?</p>	<p>"Incorporate the different learners in the learning process to stimulate their thinking and interest; Introduce and incorporate more technology in the classroom".</p> <p>"I would use Ss centred approach and come up with activities that involve Ss in learning e.g. group discussion, role play, and activity method. Most importantly I would use material like set English syllabus, selected and approved text books and recommended reference books to deliver".</p>

Table 1. Continues.

“ “Use more student centred activities; include learners in practical work, role playing, pronunciation, imitation and reading activities; motivate different types of learners through appropriate and relevant, suitable activities for them, use technology in learning e.g. PPT, blogs, projectors, scrabble, radio, learners to interact with object so as to improve their learning, learners to be practically involved in learning, dramatization, role play and discussion”.

Table 2. Students' questions and answers.

Questions	Answers
Q1: To what extent does the way that a teacher teaches influences the learning process? (1 = does not influence at all; 5 = influences a lot)	70% of the students answered number 4. 30% answered number 3.
Q2: Do you think that if the teacher changes the methodology, it will improve your learning process?	100% answered 'yes' to the question.
Q3: If yes, why do you think so?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “understand if teacher has drive to make them understand”. - “learn differently” - “practical application” - “present in a different way” - “practice speaking more”. - “more enjoyable than sitting and listening to teacher”. - “is boring for different learners”. - “remember content more and +visual experience for visual learners”. - “it helps visual learners”.
Q4: What would you like to change in your English class to make it more interesting for you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “actively involve the students; e.g. plays, teach in an engaging way etc that will make pupils want to participate”. - “library lessons once a week, oral questions and answers (more discussions probably) more storytelling” - “give authentic material that is relatable to what is being taught. Give (interesting) reading on what was taught”. - “more presentations, explanation is done better, more reading to improve grammar”. - “have a library, read more storybooks, more discussion sessions”. - “more stories so that they are not bored (4 - 5 min)”. - “the teacher asks Qs on previously taught topic and if students don't understand, repeats it”. - “asks a Q and students can participate, in a lively manner - revise (probably do an exercise) and not only go over homework”. - “watch videos or documentaries, research and do their own work”.
Q5: Suggest ways a teacher can make the lesson better and interesting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “teaching all pupils and not favouring a select few in the class, encouraging all pupils to do well, more field trips”. - “more experiments and more discussions on the topic learned”. - “asking more interesting Qs that will make it more interesting for the pupils”.

Table 2. Continues.

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- “more experiments, explain in more detail”.
 - “more tongue twisters, more acting”.
 - “not in a bad mood, be more hyper and not strict with pupils”.
 - “class competitions, dividing into teams and awarding the winning team, speech writing contest, etc”
 - “songs for concepts so that they can remember”.
 - “giving Questions (5 - 10) then explain those that the Students find difficult”.
 - “bring more material to class and with these can do more research”.
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materials and interestingly, two mentioning that having a library would help them.

It is interesting to note that, when teachers and students were asked about what they would do to increase students motivation in class, their suggestions centred on giving more importance to the student by creating student-centred activities. In this sense, these findings coincide with the observation made by Ngware et al. (2014) who stated that “the teacher’s pedagogy, classroom management strategies and interactions with students at classroom level play a powerful role in determining how much is learned” (p 2).

CONCLUSION

As an exploratory pilot study, the small amount of data gathered in this study cannot be representative of the whole country, nor can it be representative of the region where the research was conducted, and a more in depth, wider study is necessary in order to extrapolate the results. Nevertheless, the importance of this study as a basis for a future research is not diminished. There remains in Kenya, a lack of research focussing on students and teachers, indeed during this research it was apparent that not one teacher nor any student had ever been asked for their opinions regarding the teaching methodology used in schools.

The Uwenzo Report (2012) proposed that a more student-centred approach should be adopted and the conclusions drawn by Sifuna and Otiende (1994) regarding the need for a practical-oriented curriculum in the schools remain pertinent. This study confirms these conclusions, showing as it does that teaching methodology is still anchored in the traditional methods (recitation, lecturing, question-answer, etc) and it is evident that teachers and students are clamouring for a change, asking for a more relaxed, friendly, open class, where computers, role plays, readings group work, group feedback and real texts are the main activities. Without such changes, schools will continue to provide a strange, and sometimes stressful experience through which all

children must pass. If teachers and students in Kenya are ready for this change it seems that the published Governmental strategy should also moves towards this goal and we should be asking what would hinder this change?

To conclude, this study proposes that further research be undertaken to tackle this question from a wider perspective involving a greater number of participants and a more profound questionnaire.

Future research

The present paper is just an exploratory pilot study. In the near future, another study will take place: the data will be sourced from different institutions and gathered online (so we can reach the maximum possible institutions and it can be representative). Different and validated instruments will be created and observation of the classrooms will be also be included.

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Citation: Ndegwa, A., and Gutiérrez-Colón, M. (2019). Is the Kenyan education system ready for change? A pilot study. *African Educational Research Journal*, 7(2): 40-47.
