

Culture and Educational Policy in Uganda

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Abstract

Cultural beliefs have a significant influence on the values of a society. Policy makers cannot ignore culture while planning for educational reforms. In a country like Uganda that is multi-cultured, the task of addressing all cultural needs becomes a little tricky. In this paper the author has tried to analyse the body of existing literature on the subject and been able to identify some cultural issues affecting educational policy such as misconceptions, cultural conservatism, multi-culturalism, early-marriages, multiple languages, gender parity among others. Various conclusions and recommendations are made and they include but not limited to; affirmative action, intercultural dialogue, decentralisation of educational policies, promotion of globalisation and human rights.

Keywords: culture, decentralisation, globalisation, Islamic knowledge, language, multi-culture, policy

The education system in Uganda used to be informal and characterised by oral tradition where values would be transmitted from one generation to another. Additionally, Matambo (2018) alluded that informal education in sub-Saharan Africa was transmitted through mythologies, legends, folklore, music, rituals, dance and drama. This was mainly conducted by the elders and specific individuals identified by the society to impart knowledge, skills and values to the younger generation (Matambo 2018). Furthermore, during those times, learning would be conducted anywhere for instance around the cooking area, hunting grounds, gardens, grazing fields and homes. The advent of colonial influence in Africa did not spare Uganda because the formal educational policy was to be determined by colonial masters emphasising their values and interests in the system of teaching and learning.

Uganda is an East African country with diverse tribes, cultures and traditions with more than 50 different indigenous languages spoken in the country. The country's cultural practices have been greatly influenced by Abrahamic faiths specifically Islam and Christianity. Therefore, there are multiple cultural practices, values and norms with both mild and significant variations as well as similarities.

Culture are shared beliefs and values of a particular group of people (Idang, 2015). Whereas policy is the course of action: a program of actions adopted by a person, group, or government, or the set of principles on which they are based (Torjman, 2005); Educational policy is a series of statements both verbal and written, expressed or implied, formal or informal, could be both

ancient or modern or even post-modern prescribing and describing the course of action for educational activities (Miller, 1981). This involves the philosophy and vision of education, various levels, requirements and duration of educational programs, among other features. In addition, the philosophy of education and the educational policy in general may be influenced by the political and cultural forces of a particular country.

A school is a miniature of a society (Kaur, 2021). The total activities and programs of a school are organized according to the cultural ideals and values of the society which establish and systemise the school. Hence, school is the center of promoting, moulding, reforming, and developing the cultural pattern of the society (Offorma, 2016).

The curriculum is prepared according to the culture of society (Azubuike, 2013). Implying that the educational policy often should reflect and rhyme with the culture of the society for which it is intended. Additionally, the system of education tries to realize the cultural needs of society through curriculum which conditions and determines most of the educational activities and programs (Woodrow, 2001). Therefore, the context of the educational policy is key and the cultural aspect within the policies is vital.

Cultural norms and values can be used in the designing of the educational policy to guide on the issues such as integrity, discipline and social cohesion. Cultural values influence the concept of discipline (Preez & Roux, 2010). In addition, the present cultural patterns of thinking and living are directly linked to our concept of discipline where democratic values are accepted all over the world (Högström, 2011). Moreover, an individual learner's culture, family background, and socioeconomic level affect his/her learning process (Li & Qiu, 2018). The context in which someone grows and develops has an important impact on learning, therefore the policy makers cannot ignore the aspect of culture in the process of formulation and development of educational policies (Mantiri, 2013). It is therefore imperative that the educational policy makers study the cultural backgrounds of learners before determining what they need to learn or how they should be taught.

Namukasa and Buye (2007) indicated that the educational policy in Uganda was decentralised, however, the decentralisation was more administrative as opposed to curriculum decentralisation, therefore this kind of educational decentralisation may not directly address cultural diversity issues. The government should instead allow a certain level of flexibility of the curriculum in which various societies across the country can determine their educational needs under the guidance of the government and educational experts.

The United States of America is one of the most multifaceted countries all over the world in terms of culture rooted from the rich history and origin of the country (Zimmermann & McKelvie, 2021). The diversity in culture is coupled with the huge influx of immigrants both legal and illegal who have to share the same educational curriculum without diluting any respective individual culture, values and tradition (Hamer, et al., 2020). Thus, the American core values of

republicanism, capitalism, Protestantism, human rights, individualism among others are highly reflected in their educational policy (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). This implies that there is no favour of one culture over the rest. Besides, self-centred pedagogy is highly advocated for, right from the early stages of education. In this approach learners have to be guided to be self-motivated and reliant at an individual level and keeping their identities intact (O'Toole, 2015).

Additionally, in order to promote culture, China uses educational policies to promote Chinese cultural sentiments and values especially in urban canter and this possibility is achievable because of the flexibility of the educational policies of China (Song, 2009). Moreover, Confucian ideas and values of moral uprightness, devotion to family, cosmic harmony, humility etcetera are still revered in many parts of China and still influence majority of the Chinese population and systems. Parents in China feel the need to revamp these beliefs so much that even while sending their children to academic institutions across the borders, they need assurance of such values being upheld and reflected in the educational aims of those respective institutions or countries although the youth do not uphold seriously such beliefs (Bodycott & Lai, 2012).

Furthermore, Russia is one of the multicultural societies in the world, and the country allows citizens to choose their own cultural orientation and identity in terms of language and ethnicity, and the values of multicultural diversity are passed on through education (Sinyagina & Rayfschnaydera, 2016).

Problem Statement

The educational policies tend to focus on the general national aims, goals, mission and vision such as patriotism as a whole (Westheimer, 2006). Some regions and provinces however, might harbour uniqueness and peculiarities in terms of educational needs and policy. So many cultures are hinged on very old traditions, customs, norms and value systems some of which are good whereas others may not be compatible with the contemporary educational policies (Chowdhury, 2016). In this paper, some selected cultural beliefs and practices have been analysed vis-à-vis their interaction with modern educational policies and needs.

Methodology

The paper is purely library research where analysis of available literature about educational policies and the influence of culture upon them is made. A multitude of empirical studies as well as policy documents and reports have been reviewed to enrich the understanding of the topic from the Ugandan context. This has been blended with integration of Islamic knowledge and perspective.

Multiculturalism and Religious Diversity in Uganda

Uganda is culturally a diverse nation with 65 indigenous different tribal communities (MGLSD, 2019). These tribes may have similar values such as *Ubuntu* (humanity) and co-existence but they are not without differences such as in ways of social interactions for instance conducting marriages, initiation ceremonies for example circumcision and many more. Hence the educational

policies may have to address certain peculiarities and uniqueness in some tribes but still remain holding tight on the national values all-together. The Ugandan culture has significantly been influenced by the two Abrahamic religions, that is Christianity and Islam.

From the Islamic perspective, Allah does not discriminate people on account of their cultures, tribes and nationalities as He says in the Holy Qur'an:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَىٰ
 إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

“O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” Hujurat 49:13.

From the Christian sources in the English Standard Version of the Bible:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”
 Revelations 7: 9-10, ESV Bible.

From the above verses of the two holy books, it is evident that the relevance of diversity in culture is clearly highlighted and emphasised. This implies that it is engraved with in nature and that whatever strategy, design, proposal or idea being planned, and it affects or involves humans, this cultural diversity fact cannot be ignored.

Islamically, the cultural values which are consistent with the teachings of Islam can be maintained whereas those that contradict Islamic principals are highly discouraged and prohibited in some cases. The cultures that are in line with the teachings of Islam can thus be integrated within the educational policies in Islamic institutions of higher learning and merged with curriculum as well as other relevant policy documents. This can be achieved by encouraging and promoting an education policy engraved with ideas of cultural identity and building spirituality amongst the learners. Moreover, Gyagenda (2021) alluded that an educational policy ought to be inclusive of both spirituality and worldly affairs where religious values and cultural norms are recognised. Some cultures are exhibited in social events such as marriage ceremonies, initiation, burial, worship etcetera where some of the practices during these events may involve polytheistic (*shirk*) and superstitious tendencies which may not rhyme well with the Islamic doctrine and creed. Therefore, while addressing cultural issues in education, it is imperative to always consider the fact that Abrahamic religions especially Islam and Christianity have significantly influenced many of these cultures and the values of these religions be given priority. Furthermore, Al-Faruqi (1989) argued for minimisation of secularisation of educational policies

and strongly emphasised an education system that is objective and accommodates revealed truths and knowledge. Moreover, Al-Attas (1979) argued that the educational policy should be guided by the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

The education policy formulated has to reflect all cultural backgrounds without neglecting the economic activities and religious-socio perspectives (Burton, 2020). This policy can be used to promote desirable cultural practices and values and can also be used to eliminate undesirable cultural practices and vices. Some cultures that have unavoidable and harmless cultural practices, can be maintained whilst the dangerous cultural values and practices can be checked through education policies (Frese, 2015). For instance, undesirable cultures such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages can be addressed through the educational policy (Williams-Breault, 2018). The purpose of the education policy would therefore be to sensitise the young generation about the dangers of indulging in such cultures and indicate the benefit of abandoning them while providing sustainable alternatives and better ways of living.

Language in Education Policy

Language is an important aspect of educational policy since it is a medium of instruction and at the same time it is a basic component of culture in terms of communication and preservation of values and norms (Mokibelo, 2016). Cultural values and norms are promoted by indigenous languages.

Whereas Uganda's official language is English and the proposed national language Swahili, the language of pedagogy and specifically instruction has always been English since colonial times, at least for all non-language subjects (Muzoora, et al., 2014). However, there has always been a growing concern on what the real language of instruction should be as learners could not find it easy to grasp important concepts especially in vital science subjects (Ssentanda, 2014). Thus, the debate has been on which language to use because Uganda has more than 65 tribes and 56 languages. Moreover, there are other countries that have by policy decided to use only their indigenous languages other than English for instruction such as China, Germany among others and the success to these countries largely depending on the fact that they have a common language across the country even though they may have variations in tribes and clans.

Despite the cultural stratification in Uganda, there is an East African lingua franca which is Swahili and it is supposed to be the national language as well, but unfortunately with all the efforts employed not so many Ugandans can fluently listen, speak and write Swahili much less fully understand it. In Tanzania on the other hand, the mode of instruction is Swahili until after primary. Kenya also uses both English and Swahili for instruction (Flavia, 2012).

In 2021, the Ugandan government shifted from English based pedagogy and introduced a new policy to allow pupils to be taught in their respective mother languages at lower levels (Mukisa & Makuthi, 2021). However, there was a dilemma on quite a number of issues especially when it came to the implementation of teaching the science subjects using local languages. This

emerged because there were discussions emanating from teacher preparation to use local languages as medium of instruction, updating the curriculum, having many local languages and so on (Tumwebaze, 2017). Moreover, the was lack of unified nomenclature on the key and technical scientific words and terminologies in local languages which may have contributed to failure of implementation of the policy. In addition, there were so many schools in the urban trading centres, town councils and major cities, that have students from different tribes across the country meaning they speak different languages, and the challenges were on how the schools had to deal with such situations; attitudinal issues coupled with limited teacher-training and distribution of necessary basic logistics were also among the challenges (Tumwebaze, 2017).

Furthermore, in the new lower secondary curriculum, some examples are central-region oriented in form of cultural-tribal examples; a case in point in the senior one curriculum page 4, it indicates the use of the poem of *Matyansi butyampa* (NCDC, 2021), a typically Ganda-tribe folklore and copies of Buganda agreement articles, such examples may help Ganda learners more but learners from other regions and cultures might not relate well with such experiences. The curriculum ought to be culturally sensitive in such situations for instance the poems and plays that represent cultures must highlight folklore from all regions of the country. Moreover, in a country like Uganda, a culturally sensitive educational policy is pertinent especially in building national cohesion, spirit of patriotism, establishing reconciliation among the diverse tribes, religions, gender and cultures (Muhwezi, 2003).

Culturally Oriented Economic Activities and Educational Policy

One of the issues that cannot be ignored is that of ethnic location and culturally oriented economic activities (Yong, 2019). At the levels of policy development, curriculum design and teacher training the aspect of cultural diversity is not emphasised (Cuc, 2014). In North-Eastern Uganda, in the Karamoja region, the main economic activity is nomadic pastoralism, and the government came up with a special policy of Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) (Datzberger, 2017). Since nomadic pastoralism involves movements of settlements, the policy requires the selected facilitators to interact with various groups imparting a set of skills such as crop production, health education, livestock education, reading, writing, arithmetic, peace and security (Focas, 2000). In addition, Focas (2000) revealed that pupils including young children and interested adults participated in studying, usually conducted under trees and that the ABEK education pupils could transfer their credits to formal national education policy. However, to what extent did ABEK change the livelihood of the Karamajongs? Whereas the programme has strong connections with NGOs and government agencies, it still lacks an ideal educational responsiveness from both teachers and learners because of their nomadic lifestyle (Krätli, 2009). The culture of pastoralism dictates everything about the Karamoja lifestyle. Any policy designed for the region should be about mindset and attitude change for instance diversification of economic activities and considering

agriculture and mining since the region is rich in minerals, tourism and so on (Jacovidis, et al., 2020).

Some cultural-economic activities for example subsistence agriculture leave many African homes extremely poor to support their children's education (Ahaibwe et al., 2013). The extreme poverty also makes parents to work along with their children of school going age (Owen, 2021). The education policies formulated may have to highlight such social-cultural and economic variances. To some parents, there is a misconception that education is only for skills to enable someone to get a job yet some of these culturally oriented economic activities may not necessarily require educational skills but experience passed on from one generation to the other. Hussein (2016) indicated that Somali pastoralists communities in Kenya were not significantly responding positively with allowing their children acquiring formal education because of their frequent migrations.

Another aspect is cultural minorities and majorities where some cultures may be more influential than others. The educational policy has to be inclusive in such a way that all learners are not left behind. Furthermore, the learners need to appreciate their respective cultures and identities so as to learn other disciplines. Moreover, according to Bloom's taxonomy, learning is best conducted from the known to the unknown, from simple to complex (Forehand, 2015; Gyagenda 2023). The cultural diversities in the world, Africa and Uganda in particular make every learner's known experience different from one region to another (Ngaka et al., 2016). The educational policy that is designed to be implemented nationwide may not address certain unique and relevant cultural and regional experiences. Therefore, the major cultural trends in Uganda have to be integrated in the educational policy so that all learners are included.

Early-child Marriage

One of the cultures affecting education in the sub-Saharan Africa especially Tanzania and Uganda is early-child marriages championed by traditionalists and some Imams in remote villages of the region (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, Kahise (2013) revealed that in the East African region especially in Tanzania, girls were not only forced into marriages but also forced out of schools for the same reason. Many African cultures and traditions still consider a girl-child to be less than a boy who should only be oriented and groomed to be a good wife oriented. The cultures thus often focus on instilling social-cultural morals, values and skills informally. The cultural practitioners also hold a belief that formal education is toxic to future mothers and wives and thus prevent their daughters from attending formal education (Jarlais, 2009). This can further be explained by some of the radical groups such as *Boko-Haram* (Bertoni, et al., 2019). In Uganda the radical terrorist and rebel groups include the Lord's Resistance Army(LRA) and Allied Democratic(ADF) forces founded on the claim of fighting for Christianity and Islam respectively. This makes implementation of educational policies difficult such as education for all and affirmative action.

There is also a wide spread cultural misconception that if women are over educated, they may fail to obey their husbands or later on fail to fulfil their wife-mother duties in homes (Jordan, 1991). They would lose interest in marriage and other family values all together. Even when some families may have all the necessary resources, they may not allow their daughters to go beyond lower secondary (Owen, 2021). Moreover, the value attached to dowry is in many cases greater than that attributed to education; at a cultural level, many of the parents wish to see their daughters in the wedding gown than graduate (Ashraf; et al., 2018). However, in some circumstances the level of education may increase the amount of dowry (Soni, 2020). Which implies that there is need to sensitise some of the communities about the relevance of education in the lives of girl children especially in areas where early marriages are more prevalent.

Gender-Parity

All genders ought to have fair access to quality education, health care, job opportunities and equal treatment towards the rest of the fundamental human rights. Ideally, both girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to have access to quality education. Over the years Africa in general and Uganda in particular have faced a number of issues related to gender parity including shortage of equal access to quality education. Such issues include but not limited to gender insensitive pedagogy (Welch, 2007); Sexual harassment (Townsend & Geist, 2021); Gendered micropolitics (Morley, 2000); Limited opportunities for promotion and professional development (Knights & Richards, 2003) and Gendered curricula and subject choices (Morley, et al., 2006). Although sometimes the policies may not directly promote gender inequalities, at the level of policy implementation women tend to face challenges as some cultures believe it dangerous for women to acquire certain skills or be exposed to some values. In 1991, the Ugandan government adopted a gender-based Affirmative Action policy which was incorporated into universities and colleges admissions in the country (Odaga, 2020). According to the constitution of Uganda 1995, as amended in 2017 “Without prejudice to article 32 of this Constitution, women shall have the right to affirmative action for the purpose of redressing the imbalances created by history, tradition or custom.” (Art. 33). Onsongo (2009) alluded that as of then, affirmative action was applied but it did not enhance access and gender equity in university education.

Sometimes because of cultural misconceptions, parents may seem to have no problem with the educational policies for their children but still discourage their daughters from pursuing some courses as they are culturally believed to be masculine courses for instance engineering, construction etcetera (Wang & Degol, 2017). There is still need for massive sensitisation especially in the remote villages of Uganda about the need for availing equal educational opportunities to both girls and boys.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, culture has been given less concern in the process of designing and reviewing educational policies in Uganda. The cultural aspect added to the policy may not address the cultural needs for all the tribes in Uganda, some cultures are catered for while others neglected. Moreover, the few cultural issues addressed in the educational policies may not necessarily be the actual issues or values that should be addressed and the significant ones are left out either deliberately or because of lack of due diligence during the planning phase. This may be so because the cultural leaders are not fully involved in the process of policy formulation and review. Furthermore, the examples for instance in folklore, poetry, scenarios and cases used in the curriculum and other policy documents may not necessarily represent a significant fraction of cultures in Uganda. There is a challenge of language barrier whereby every culture uses a different language and this makes it difficult for a national curriculum to be translated and implemented in any particular cultural language. In addition, some cultural issues that are supposed to be addressed by the educational policy face a hindrance because of many languages in the country.

Recommendations

There is urgent need for intercultural dialogue on educational policy matters in an attempt to integrate all cultures in the system of education. This can be achieved by engaging cultural leaders such as tribal and clan heads in the process of curriculum design and review such that they offer advice on the values and practices as well as cultural issues that should be addressed by the curriculum. Establishing universal global values of education and allowing customisation of specifics with respective cultures and traditions. The educational policies such as the curriculum should have shared global values such as human rights, focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals, Millennium Development Goals, address national issues such as patriotism and also include the specific cultural values and norms for every region in the country.

Cultural diversity requires content integration, increasing action-based activities with the moral development, societal values and cognitive levels of learners (Lewis, 1991).

Promoting education-in-culture and culture-in education. In other words, ensuring that education is used as a tool to promote cultural values in the country. In addition, Considering globalisation by having common goals, aims, vision and mission all over the world, this will break the walls created by cultures and educational policies will be formulated with an agenda of producing global citizens (Altinyelken, 2012). Promotion and integration of human rights in the educational policies hence checking on cultural influence. Minding the final product, an all round citizen not just the profession/skills. The educational policy can largely focus the final product

Affirmative action, according the Stanford Encyclopaedia of philosophy, it means positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have

been historically excluded. More rigorous steps such as monitoring and evaluation can be ensured to effect the proficient implementation of the affirmative action policy. Decentralisation of educational policies especially curriculum decentralisation so that certain aspects of the curriculum are tailored to address specific cultural practices and values (Caldwell, 2009). Separate policy and law-enforcement on culture should be drafted to address certain obsolete and inappropriate cultural practices that hinder education such as early marriages as well as gender-parity issues. The central key values of education can be controlled at a centralized level nationally to control cultural forces interferences.

Promoting vocational education basing on regional activities for instance integration of fish-farming skills around the water bodies' areas, crafts and environmental conservation for schools in the forest and wetland areas (Gyagenda, 2023).

The government should not only focus on instruction of local languages but also focus on promoting cultural values such identity, art, mastery of the physical environment, morals, cultural anthropology, cultural values among others hence breeding a sense of patriotism. Effective use of information and communication technologies can be used to enhance teaching and learning in Uganda (Gyagenda, 2021). This can help cultures from various parts of the country to connect and interact with each other through platforms such as online education. Several aspects of culture have been discussed including economic activities, gender related issues, language and socialisation. Empirical research is needed and further studies should be conducted on this subject to further interrogate the relationship and effect of culture on educational policies.

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