An Appropriate Epistemology in African Education

by

Thomas Musankuleni Kaputa
Zimbabwe Open University
P.O. Box MP1119
Mt Pleasant
Harare
Zimbabwe
Email: kaputat@yahoo.com
Contact: +26377393305

Abstract

This study focuses on African Education which has been guided by an inappropriate epistemology. Educationists’ concern has been on the suitability of this epistemology in African Education. The epistemology in African Education should reflect the African society’s good aspects which should be incorporated into the educational system to foster the types of knowledge Africans would consider to be appropriate. This study used a qualitative design which used a semi structured interview to investigate this phenomenon. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the three prominent educationists who were a former teacher educator who has a doctorate in education and was a senior lecturer at a university; a teacher educator who holds a doctorate in education and was also a Professor; an educationist, a scientist and a Professor. As this study traced the history of African knowledge systems it posed the following questions to educationists; where does the knowledge being taught in schools come from? What philosophy guides it? Who determines what should be taught? The educationists expostulate that the development of an appropriate epistemology in African education is the only course of action to take. It must thus acknowledge totally that an African is a human being second to none.

Keywords: Epistemology; African education; types of knowledge

Introduction

The issue of an appropriate epistemology in African Education has taken centre stage throughout the African Continent (Higgs, 2010). Epistemology, according to Wong (2008), means the branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge and the processes we use to acquire and value it. The word “appropriate” means something, which is right or suitable even fitting to be used for certain activities. The use of this word in the title implies that there is an epistemology already in place in African Education; a knowledge system, which is guiding how things are done in terms of teaching and learning. African Education is the exercise of absorbing the necessary knowledge which may be in the form of specific facts, data, theories, methods, attitudes, and formulae in order to pass examinations. Educationists’ concerns are on the suitability of this epistemology in African Education. Elsewhere research has shown that this type of education is not producing competent thinkers and problem solvers (Wong, 2008).

It is obvious that African Education has been guided by inappropriate knowledge systems for too long and proceeds to proffer what it terms, a suitable or appropriate epistemology in African Education. But what really is its definition? What is its philosophical basis and how can the whole argument be put in an African perspective? Can the historical background of Africa be analysed revealing the “inappropriate” philosophies at play then and now; what African traditional philosophies should the debate focus on with the aim of selecting appropriate epistemologies, which can be used in African Education. The above are the issues which should concern our debate as we search for what could be an appropriate epistemology in African Education. These are the concerns which are relevant to this study whereby an appropriate epistemology would help in the search for a suitable education for children in Zimbabwe and the rest of Africa.

Background

This study focused on the need to develop an appropriate epistemology in African Education in order to address the needs of their communities. Failure to do this may condemn indigenous people to perpetual domination by foreign cultures resulting in indigenous cultural dissonance producing psychological trauma to both the children and the adults. This happened during the colonial era and still continues today in the new dispensation of the so-called global village. If we take the example of Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, education was available to African children in urban areas, which down graded the indigenous epistemology as primitive and not worth any consideration. Elite education modelled on European epistemologies was offered to the white, coloured and Asian children (Appiah, 1998). The bulk of African children who were in townships or rural areas were mainly given a basic education which was felt to be adequate for them. The provision of such an elitist education demanded both human and material resources.
Human resources, in the form of specialised teachers who were able to teach these children and material in the form of tests, specialised books, apparatus and games were to be used during the interventions. These resources could only be supplied to the whites, coloured and Asian education sectors (Dube, 1980). The African sector was so large and mainly affected by the war, teachers were not specialised and funding was minimal (Smith, 1978). The focus of the education was mainly on preparing the bulk of the Africans for manual work with a minority being for teaching, nursing and police work to be carried out among their African population. Dube (1980) in a study entitled “Educational System in Colonial Zimbabwe” equates the education system then to South Africa’s apartheid. Thus, African education at both primary and secondary level was linked to the development of semi-skilled personnel which was to be supplied to the industries of that category of labour. African education was poorly funded, lacked teachers and had bottle necks which made it difficult for children to progress to tertiary education. This education, with its inappropriate epistemology, rendered these children useless in their communities since they were unable to be self-employed.

The advent of independence in 1980 brought in an influx of many students who had been affected by the war into the education system. The amalgamation of the education system resulted in the need to balance resources between educating all the children and rebuilding the infrastructures which had been damaged during the war. Automatic promotion from grade to grade became the order of the day due to the large numbers. The African schools were under resourced, classes were large and a lot of teachers were untrained. Failure at the grade seven tests was very high. The knowledge being taught needed to be checked to ascertain its suitability to African children. This was the same scenario throughout the African continent.

Statement of the Problem
How can we develop an appropriate epistemology in African Education in the current dispensation of the so called global village?

Research Questions
This study was guided by the following questions:
• Where does the knowledge being taught in schools come from?
• What philosophy guides it?
• Who determines what should be taught?

Literature Review
An analysis of the term Philosophy shows that it is an attempt to discover and clarify the underlying principles and values upon which man bases his life and the meanings he/she derives from encounter with his/her environment (Langford, 1975; Barker, 1999). In African philosophy, Bakari (1997) says emphasis is on ethics and morality, spirituality, symbolic imagery, self-awareness and tradition. As can be seen from the above, human beings are involved in varied activities, which they describe in their subjective ways, be it in the form of talking or signing. These views make up what may loosely be termed, one’s philosophy of life. Akinpela (1995) points out that philosophy, which comes from two Greek words meaning love of wisdom or knowledge, is an embodiment of one’s attitude or observed worldview. This results in beliefs, attitudes or predicts.

Akinpela (1995) further points out that there are two ways philosophy can be looked at. In a broad sense it means how people view the world, for example, in the African realm we have the *bantu* philosophy. This philosophy is the embodiment of the profound sayings of the elders which are both witty and pregnant with meanings which are used to teach many ways of doing things in the community be it labour or social. Secondly, it is philosophy, which is concerned with academic discipline that is logical, consistent and systematic thinking, which results in conclusions.

Philosophy, then we can deduce, is made up primarily of way of analysing what we do and the meanings we attach to them as alluded to before. In this regard one can say the knowledge system we have is the one, which then determines how we view the world and describe it. The words I use will reveal the type of knowledge I have if this is shared by everybody then it becomes a shared concept, for example, ‘a ball’. Everyone who has seen, touched and played with a ball will know what I am saying. The knowing is then called epistemology. Epistemology as a branch of philosophy is concerned with the theory of knowledge. Knowing is a prelude to knowledge. The act of knowing can only be achieved by rational beings, which leads to the claim that all those who know have rational beliefs (Langford, 1975; Mogobe, 1999). Knowledge which naturally is derived from knowing would then, be made up of concepts and criteria of truth peculiar to those who hold that knowledge. It would be naive of us to claim that we know everything and that what we know is the truth. In the last decade alone ‘new’ knowledge has been revealed and a lot of ‘truth’ found to be untrue.

Schools are therefore in the business of imparting knowledge to their students. In developed subjects there are many facts, though in principle not beyond challenge, which are well established and generally accepted. Epistemology or theory of knowledge looks at classroom teaching, and learning of various types of knowledge, its origin, development and ways of establishing that we know. Peresuh (1999) points out that indigenous education concentrated on the acquisition and transmission of behaviour patterns, beliefs, practices, norms and values, rituals and survival skills. This essentialism was fundamental for the survival of the community.
The Philosophy of education generally deals with personal views of what the school should be doing and attitudes to the education system. For example, you may hear someone saying the schools nowadays are not teaching students to be self-reliant. Maybe they may have observed that gardening is not being done in schools. From a professional technical sense, epistemology would analyse and reflect upon what the school is doing and come up with an alternate system (Akinpelu, 1995; Barker, 1998 and Mogobe, 1999). This appropriate epistemology in Education would reflect what the society would have naturally brought into their educational system to foster the types of knowledge it considers as appropriate. Where then does the knowledge come from? Who determines what should be taught?

As Gwarinda (1985) points out, philosophy helps us to understand the nature of our educational aims and objectives so as to make it purposeful. We need to look at the type of knowledge systems we are allowing into our schools and what they aim to achieve. It is clear that the historical background of a country has a large impact on the educational aims and objectives and the curriculum which is then imparted to their children. Before we arrive at the appropriate epistemology let us go back in history and examine the fundamental epistemology, which has been guiding our education systems in Africa. The Western philosophies have mainly been divided into two, idealism and realism or materialism (Gwarinda, 1985 and Barker, 1999). Gwarinda (ibid) explains that idealism refers to those philosophies which rely upon the idea of a supreme force. Although idealism has variations it claims that knowledge can be discovered by revelation and rational analysis not science alone. It stresses permanence, authority, tradition, conservation and spiritual dedication. According to idealism, Education should therefore stress spiritual dedication rather than empirical enquiry. On the other hand, Realism or materialism, which is a philosophy of socialism, says that whatever knowledge we receive through the senses is a true, if incomplete, reflection of what exists and this can be discovered by direct scientific theory. These two philosophies are diametrically opposed to each other and when we trace the historical background of our African continent you will observe how each came to mould what was placed in our education system by colonial governments.

African philosophy views a person as a spiritual being who is linked to his or her ancestors and those who are around him/her. Higgs (2010) points out that this communal entity is what determines what one does in society. Thus, in an African epistemology, the community determines what should be taught and also assesses what has been taught through real life tests. This has been changed to a large extent.

Sub-Saharan Africa was colonised by basically three world powers then, namely Britain, France and Portugal (Craig, Graham, Kagan, Ozment and Turner, 1986). Each of these three countries brought in their philosophies to our countries whose effects are still felt up to date. Their Western philosophy was predominantly based on idealism. As Mogobe (1999) emotively says, Western philosophers believed that the basis of being human is the ability to reason. To be human is to be rationale. Their views of an African were one who could not reason and therefore, was not rationale.

Racism became a concrete manifestation of the struggle for reason. Locke was the philosopher who made colour the reason for the subjugation of Africans. Colonisation implanted racism in the colonies, and this is traceable to the Western philosophies by Locke, Kant, Hume and Hegel (Mogobe, 1999).

Appiah (1998) pointed out that the colonial systems were different and can be divided into three systems. These were the Anglophone (English) Francophone (French) and the Portugese. Of these three, the Portuguese education system was the least developed. Every African culture, which was colonised, experienced a displacement of their knowledge systems and possessions, which is still resonating up to date. The colonised countries experienced segregation in Education.

Thus a separate education system for blacks, coloureds was practiced (Dube, 1980). A different epistemology in education was followed in each system. The Francophone and the Portuguese had an education system, which was more like a rite of entry into the white social class. Thus colonialism ruthlessly uprooted and threw away African belief systems and languages branding them as savage and without any useful elements to be adopted or adapted for use. Instead, they forced their own ideologies and epistemologies on to the African. No wonder why, Mogobe (1999:24) lamented thus:

"Why is it that in the bottomless depth of learning and the limitless horizons of knowledge, the African appears at best, only as an after thought: a foot note with no significant relevance to the main body of the text?"

Despite this, it is well acknowledged that African philosophy or ubuntu (being whole) contains rich reflections based on culture and experiences of the African people.

Historically and even up to date most traditional societies in Africa have been organised around the principle of sharing in a community. There are positive things in the African epistemology, which Africans can be proud of. For instance, Ikuenobe (2008) point out that the African view to communalism is not a one way but a two way process between the individual and the society. In African society the individual has a right to be heard and contribute to the development of his/her society in spite of whatever position he/she holds. The community only circumscribes the context. Colonisation disregarded all these resulting in the
injury and humiliation of the Africans and naturally the liberation struggles were not only an act of self-defence but also a response to African philosophy, which contains an ineliminable liberation dimension. Thus even African philosophers have taken a liberation stand in the search for an appropriate epistemology in Education (Dube, 1980).

It is beyond the scope of this study to give narrations of the experiences of the different African countries but Zimbabwe will suffice. Dube (1980) gives an account of the educational system in colonial Zimbabwe. Dube points out that the regime’s policy was an instrument for the maintenance of a bi-racial society and a system of privilege sustained by an unequal distribution of resources between the races. It used the education system as its source for cheap labour resulting in an unequal participation by Africans in both the economic and the political life of the country. He concludes by pointing out that the liberation of Zimbabwe was also a struggle to liberate the country’s education institutions. This was the trend in all the colonised countries. Despite acquiring political freedom, Africa still lags behind all continents. Kabanda (2010) found out that Africa contributes 0.3 percent to the total world knowledge. This is an indication of an inappropriate epistemology which has translated Africa into a continent of importers of everything including knowledge.

What then can be done? It is clear that an appropriate epistemology cannot ignore and exclude the experience of being an African in Africa. It must thus acknowledge totally that an African is a human being second to none. Such reflections must be based on the culture and experiences of African people. The liberation struggles have resulted in the creation of African sovereign states, which have been and are being led by African philosophers and intellectuals. Appiah (1998) cites Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere as important thinkers leading this change. Gwarinda (1985) and Barker (1999) add Robert Mugabe to the line of these Pan Africanists. African Socialism or Reconstructionism has been the main driving force in education in Africa. Barker (1999) defines it as an inherently African philosophy, which seeks to ensure that all have a right to schooling. Julius Nyerere in Tanzania had a humanitarian philosophy grounded in African values called Ujama. This has had an effect on the development of knowledge and learning systems. Ujama insisted that primary education be free and that the educational curriculum should involve working on the land and value traditional knowledge. The school was encouraged to develop a self-reliant person who contributes to national development. The mother tongue was taught to all including the history and also values and structure of the nation. Nyerere believed in education as liberation of the self who could then contribute to the development of mankind.

All African philosophers believe that an appropriate epistemology in Education should incorporate teaching of skills, translating theory into practice, creating a bridge between school and community this would make education relevant to life, dignify manual labour and encourage a spirit of self-reliance. Mandaza (1980) in a study called “Education in Zimbabwe, The Colonial Framework and the Response of the National Liberation Movement,” gives the new education system for Zimbabwe as having a curricula which enhances the child’s knowledge of the environment, socialist goals, spirit of community and family, creativity, self-reliance and initiative and to be a productive member of the community. Zvobgo (1995) points out that a socialist epistemology should guide the new teacher. Such a teacher would teach values, attitudes and ideas which are in line with socialist aspirations. Gundhlanga (2005) says colonial policy on the teaching of African languages has not changed but steps are being taken to change this. Both government and universities are putting emphasis on indigenous languages. Mavhunga (2006) talks of Africanising the school curriculum in Zimbabwe at all levels to break the cycle of peddling values and knowledge systems of former colonisers which are largely irrelevant to the African cause.

The argument thus far seems to point to a socialist oriented epistemology in Education as appropriate. Kapfunde (1999) and Zvobgo (1995) point out that after independence new problems have cropped up in the form of:

- Challenges of geographical, racial, gender, tribal and linguistic and other types of socio-economic disparities, which need to be addressed
- Unemployment
- Underemployment of the educated
- Rise of migration from rural to urban
- A growing financial squeeze experienced by many developed countries

The above need addressing. Can a socialist oriented epistemology provide the solutions?

Akinpelu (1995) points out that an appropriate epistemology in education should allow both ordinary people and the professionals to have continuous debate on what constitutes knowing in our schools and how the schools’ educational activities can be made relevant to the evolving life the human being leads. Higgs (2007) citing South African education writes of cultural and intellectual hegemony being traditionally critical foci in education debates. He proposes a Renaissance in education, which acknowledges and includes indigenous knowledge systems in the South African education system and through generalisation of Africa as a whole.

Mogobe (1999) calls for a radical overhaul of the Western epistemological paradigm underlying the current education system. This would usher in constructivist and reconstructivist epistemologies. Lisle de Peter (1997) calls for a constructivist
epistemology. This, as he cites Goober and Stegman (1995) would:
- Be flexible, straddling a life time of learning
- Replace the classroom using other methods of access to the super highway (computers)
- Ensure that learning and work are closely related
- Ensure that the teacher becomes a facilitator guiding in the skills of accessing, organising and analysing information
- Use technology intensively using software which is developed for educational needs rooted in epistemology consistent with the community’s aims

This constructivist epistemology has already taken root in British science classroom (Watts and Bentley, 1987) and in Zimbabwe (Chinhunhure, 1995).

This appropriate epistemology in education is also called African Reconstructionism crafted by Nkrumah, Nyerere and Kaunda. Barker (1998) proposes this as a way of keeping the discourse going in order to find a lasting solution to the problems cited by Kapundu (1989). The curriculum would consist of:
- A move away from a purely academic bias
- Room for flexibility, incorporate diversity in education to cater for children’s interests and needs
- Affective learning to ensure that education integrates knowledge, behaviour and feelings
- Enhancing critical thinking
- Education for virtue to instil a personal framework of values (munhu, unhu, ubuntu)

The literature review shows that despite African countries gaining their political freedoms they have been unable to free themselves from Western epistemological hegemony. This incubus still haunts African education systems as it did our African philosophers who must be turning in their graves as they see the breakdown in African morals and ethics. Attempts have been proffered by educationists like Mavhunga (2006) and Gudhlanga (2005) on how the school curriculum can be Africanised. Language is crucial because it is the vehicle which transports the state of being African between peoples. By using indigenous languages we promote the development and exportation of our knowledge systems. This study, therefore, is an attempt to open discourse among educationists and others on how an appropriate epistemology in African Education can be in calculated in our schools.

Methodology
There is no ‘cook book’ for doing qualitative research as Maxwell (2005) points out since decisions about the research methods depend on the specific context and issues one is studying. In this study the phenomena I was studying required that personal accounts be solicited from the participants.

This is particularly important since I was using interviews to collect data. This study used a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative research paradigm is based on a philosophical view point that reality is subjective, thus the world exists but different people construct it in very different ways. By discovering how different people interpret the world in which they live, we are able to construct a more realistic picture of what is occurring and what is driving it to exist that way.

This is contrary to a positivistic viewpoint which views the world as guided by laws or law like generalisations. In this aspect, positivism is less successful when it comes to the study of human behaviour where the complexity of their nature and the elusive and impalpable quality of social events contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world (Cohen and Marion, 1989). For this study, this is more apparent in the area of learning at the classroom level where the problems of learning and human interaction provide the positivistic researcher with major challenges. I found an anti-positivistic approach specifically, a phenomenological paradigm, more appropriate for the study of epistemology at the school level. This is because phenomenology advocates for the study of direct experience, taken at face value, behaviour being determined by the phenomena of experience.

In our search for the truth, we are concerned with our environment and how it presents phenomenon to our senses that is through our experiences, reason and research (Cohen and Marion, 1989). It is clear that these three are complementary and overlapping. Three views explain social reality in Social Sciences; first the ontological view or paradigm which views it as having an independent existence; the epistemological view which is concerned with knowledge; the relationship between human beings and their environment. This study is based on the last two. It is also guided by an antipositivist approach which sees the world as a softer, personal and man created kind. This idiographic approach looks at how reality is presented for purposes of comparison.

This study used a qualitative design which employed a semi-structured interview. As McMillan and Schumacher (1989) point out, the purpose was to understand the phenomena as it occurs naturally in non-contrived situations where there is no manipulation of conditions or experience. The advantage of this design was that it enabled the development of descriptions of an appropriate epistemology in African Education.

Purposeful sampling was used in this design (Oliver, 2006) to identify the three prominent educationists. Purposeful sampling was selected because it enabled the researcher to identify, knowledgeable people from the community. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was assured. Participation was voluntary and the decision to take part was on the basis of informed consent.
The analysis was done concurrently with the data collection process. Themes were identified and described. In the next section the results are presented and discussed.

Results and Discussion

Participants

The presentation shows clear trends on how the educationists answer the posed questions. Depending on their specialism, they focused on certain questions which they thought were crucial in developing an appropriate epistemology for African Education. Participant 1 was a former teacher educator with a doctorate in education and was a senior lecturer at a university. Participant 2 was a teacher educator with a doctorate in education and was also a professor at a university. Participant 3 was an educationist, a scientist and a professor at a university. All the three had vast knowledge and experience in various sections of education, local and international, straddling more than thirty years individually. In this presentation I shall call participant 1 (P1), participant 2 (P2) or participant 3 (P3). The results are presented in the order of the research questions.

Where does the knowledge being taught in schools come from?

All three participants agreed that the knowledge being taught in schools is difficult to establish its source since it is failing to meet the needs of the African communities. This is what Mavhunga (2006) alluded to when he wrote about the irrelevant values and knowledge systems being taught in African schools.

P1 felt that the Western Education system had created a paradigm different from the African one. P1 was of the view that the knowledge should be guided by an appreciation of certain aspects of African culture to ensure development of all spheres. This would include respect for adults and respect for authority. Values like ndhlu, kunhu or ubuntu, should determine the source of the knowledge to be taught.

P1 sees challenges to these sources in the form of the lack of written materials on traditional education in the schools. P1 alludes to the traditional education mentioned by Peresuh (1999) which focuses on cultural values and survival skills. There is also no guarantee of continuity since nobody looks at the African way of life. If we want to create an appropriate epistemology for African education then Africans need reorientation toward the African way of life (Bakari, 1997).

What philosophy guides it?

All three participants agreed that Western philosophies were, to a large extent, determining what should be taught in African schools. The hegemony of the so-called first world seems to still hold its stranglehold on African states. Gundhianga (2005) agrees as she points out that colonial policy on African language teaching have not changed. She alludes that steps are being taken to change this.

P2 cited the influence of Africans, both slaves and recently in the Diasporas in pursuit of greener pastures due to economic and social problems in Africa, who have contributed immensely to the development of knowledge in their adopted countries. P2 is of the view that Africans should not focus on a specific philosophy but should research on the different strands of epistemology. This should involve all Africans including those in the Diasporas and African Americans. It is false to deny the authority of African American as African. It is narrow nationalism which insists that only indigenous Africans’ knowledge systems be considered. Bakari (1997) concurs with this idea as he writes about the African Americans.

P3 thinks that Essentialism should guide an appropriate epistemology in African education in order to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) especially on poverty reduction. This should address the current knowledge gap in Kabanda’s (2010) findings which show Africa lagging far behind other continents in its contribution to world knowledge.

Who determines what should be taught?

The prominent educationists all concur that a few have determined what should be taught according to their on selfish needs. They point out that Africans, wherever they are, should determine what should be taught in their schools.

P3 points out that this can be led by a triple helix of these determinants, of government, higher education and industry, as shown in figure 1. These work together, as shown, to provide the appropriate epistemology needed in the African Education. Higher Education has solutions to the MDGs and rapid transformation of Education.

![Figure 1: Triple Helix of Determinants](image)

This would provide an actual curriculum review; Africanise Education since everybody would have an input into it. It would also focus on research in various settings.

What aspects would this appropriate epistemology dwell on in African Education?

P1 thinks that it should focus on:

- Respect
- Values
- Herbal Systems
- Arts – fine arts, working artifacts, such as, hoes (mapadzai)
  - Music
  - Dance
- Agriculture – for example, mixed planting with benefits of nitrogen fixing

72
The teaching methods would include, among others, the dare a form of meeting place between age groups as shown in figure 2. This is similar to Baker’s (1998) proposal.

**Figure 2: Different Age Group Teaching**

P3 suggests that focus should be on human capital development especially the youth; concentrating on the universalisation of information. This means that subjects taught at higher levels should be first introduced at the preschool level. This therefore, means that the use of technology should start from the preschool right up to the post secondary level. This would inculcate innovation at the enrolment stages and onwards.

Focus should also be on social networks to improve communication and development. Such an approach is constructivist in nature as mentioned by Gooler and Stegman (1995).

**Conclusion**

The development of an appropriate epistemology in education is a process which has evolved over time fuelled by debate. The argument in the literature is characterized by words like, communalism, socialist oriented epistemology, constructivism or reconstructivism as candidates for an appropriate epistemology in African Education. The findings clearly show that there is work in progress with suggestions on how African countries can go about it. Literature warns researchers to be wary of authorities since they can be proved to be wrong in future or they can change their minds due to new evidence. However, this debate is robust and healthy and should continue, but as Higgs (2007) proposes acknowledging and including indigenous knowledge systems as a major component of an appropriate epistemology in African Education.

**Recommendation**

This study recommends that more debate and research be done on the type of appropriate epistemology that can be incorporated in African Education. This process should involve all Africans regardless of their location in the world. It also recommends further research on the specific knowledge systems that should be part of the curriculum. Such research should focus on the views of the indigenous people.


