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The multiple agenda of schooling

1 Three different agendas

Three ambitious programmes of social action have invested heavily in the concept of schooling. The process of education, institutionalised in schools of various sorts around the world, has come to be regarded as essential for each of the following areas of human endeavour: the promotion of economic progress, the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, and the cultivation of children’s intellectual and moral development. I shall refer to these three visionary rationales as the economic, cultural and pedagogic ‘agendas’ of schooling.\(^1\) In theory, education might aspire to address all three agendas together in a harmoniously coordinated manner. Children would be assisted to grow intellectually and morally by expanding their knowledge and understanding of their cultural heritage. And this personal growth through expansion would empower the younger generation to build upon that heritage, discovering improved ways of managing the environment and generating greater wealth for society. In practice, however, educational programmes have consistently fallen short of such an ideal synthesis. In contemporary African societies – as in many other parts of the Third World, and also in disadvantaged minority communities within the rich, industrialised countries – the economic and cultural agendas of schooling often come into conflict.

The pedagogic agenda of schooling, cultivation of children’s intellectual and moral development, presupposes a certain degree of social consensus on what constitute appropriate ways of preparing children for the responsibilities of later life. During the early years of childhood the human individual receives his or her\(^2\) initial orientation to the nature of communication, social organisation and technology from a set of primary caregivers. Responsibility for the care and upbringing of the child is generally first entrusted to her mother and then gradually extended to a widening circle of people who make up the family and the community. These caregivers share both a physical environment and a cultural system of meanings, practices and institutions. The

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child’s development is thus embedded in an eco-cultural niche which sets the standards by which her adaptation will be judged. When institutionalised schooling is added as a component of this niche, the relationship between its cultural characteristics and those of other socialisation practices in the children’s family and community environment becomes an issue of considerable complexity.

One model of this relationship which appeals to many contemporary educators is that a population of primary caregivers should agree on the need to organise some parts of their children’s socialisation on a collective basis, building on and extending developmental processes initiated at home. Historically, however, this kind of cultural attunement, which allows for continuity in the child’s socialisation, seems to have been a rather late and incidental arrival among the various defining characteristics of formal education. Schools as institutions arose initially as mechanisms for transmitting specialised bodies of knowledge to learners of various ages.

Culture, whether we understand it as a pattern of behaviour or as a system of meanings, is the product of a historically defined social group. When a school curriculum is designed in a manner which is alien to the cultural assumptions informing other socialisation practices to which its students have been exposed, discrepancies are liable to arise between the goals of that curriculum and the cultural goals of the social group. Religion and language are perhaps the most conspicuous domains in which such estrangement can arise. But many other dimensions of socialisation can pose analogous problems, which have been explored in fictional literature. How, for instance, can the social and emotional orientation of an individual as a woman in her earlier socialisation be harmonised with the developmental trajectory envisaged by a programme of schooling designed exclusively by and for men? Or how can the indigenous citizen of a colonial dependency reconcile the values cultivated by his schooling in the metropolitan state with the demands of allegiance to a traditional home culture which that state has sought to suppress (cf. Achebe 1960)? In general, the greater the degree of alienation between the culture of a child’s socialisation at home and the culture of schooling, the greater the resulting discrepancy between their goals.

But discrepancy is only part of the story: economic power attracts social prestige, with the result that the cultural practices of economically powerful groups often become a target of emulation by less powerful groups. In situations where economic power is controlled by a social group which differs systematically in culture from the group of which a child is raised as a member, the project of acquiring economically empowering cultural understanding at school easily becomes associated in the minds and practices of both teacher and student with
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devaluing the alternative culture of the child’s family and home community (Roberts and Akinsaya 1976; Ogbu 1978; Howard and Scott 1981).

Just why this kind of conflict is so widespread has been interpreted in two broadly divergent ways. On the one hand, the resistance of some sections of the world’s population to the package of Western schooling has been construed as a reflection of ignorance and/or narrow-minded conservatism. Originally pioneered by advocates of a unilinear, progressivist ideology of modernisation (McClelland 1961; Inkeles and Smith 1974), this point of view continues to be expressed in attenuated form by writers with a less global, but no less profound, commitment to the universality of certain values and practices intrinsic, albeit not exclusively, to Western civilisation (Goody 1977; Olson 1977). On this supposition, the traditional cultures of disempowered social groups may be held partially responsible for their disempowerment. For instance, the home culture may be held to give too much credit for compliance and not enough for autonomy, high levels of aspiration, analytical thinking, etc., to allow its bearers to compete effectively in the modern marketplace. Even if this strategy of ‘blaming the victim’ is eschewed, proponents of this perspective generally hold that the traditional cultures are incapable of providing the ingredients required for economic progress in the modern world.

On the other hand, the same package of Western schooling has sometimes been construed as a vehicle for repressive political domination of marginalised communities. This view has been articulated mainly by proponents of radical political change in the macrosocietal arena, and is often phrased as part of an ideological critique of capitalism and imperialism (Freire 1972; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carby 1982). From this perspective the promise of technical power is construed as a fiction, deliberately designed to mystify, domesticate and coopt the recipients of schooling as participants in a culture which legitimates the continued dominance of the group or class in power.

Each of these contrasting theoretical interpretations has been the target of persuasive criticism by advocates of the other. Analyses in terms of imperialism appear to suffer from a somewhat paranoid tendency to impute a ‘conspiratorial’ coherence to the mutually parasitic interdependence of capitalist imperialism with Christian evangelism and other branches of Western civilisation (e.g. Rodney 1972). Moreover, their exclusive focus on relations of social power fails to acknowledge the technological impact on quality of life which has been exercised by some applied branches of Western science such as agronomy, engineering and medicine (Habermas 1984). On the other hand, the widening gap in standards of living between the centre and the periphery, both within Third World countries and on the global
stage, does seem to be causally linked to a continuing cultural and economic domination by the former metropolitan powers over their nominally liberated colonies. Not only has the expansion of formal educational provision failed to deliver the promised fruits of economic growth and autonomy for African nations, but it seems in some respects to have facilitated their economic decline and increased dependency, by promoting the emergence of a national elite class whose externally orientated style of consumption drains the national economy of much of its productive energy.

Thus it seems important to acknowledge on the one hand that the Western package of schooling is more than a mere instrument of political repression, and on the other hand to allow the possibility that resistance to it by disempowered communities has a deeper rationale than ignorant conservatism. I believe that a valid resolution of this controversy requires a more direct focus on the pedagogic agenda of schooling: the cultivation of children’s intellectual and moral development. If schooling is to be a source of empowering enlightenment rather than an instrument of domesticating indoctrination, its intellectual content must recruit the creative imagination of the growing child. And if the consequences for the local community are to be cultural enrichment and socio-economic progress rather than debilitating social conflict, cultural demoralisation and economic stagnation, an active dialogue is required among the varied perspectives of its multiple interest groups.

2 A case study in rural Zambia

In the chapters that follow, I shall develop this argument through several stages. My analysis will be centred around a case study conducted in a rural area of Zambia over the period 1974–88. The focus of the study has been on the anticipated and actual outcomes of various amounts of schooling (ranging from none to a full secondary and tertiary programme) among a cohort of some fifty boys and girls born into a Chewa community whose economy has traditionally depended primarily on subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. The location of this cluster of villages, known as Kondwelani, is shown in Fig. 1.1. At the beginning of the project, members of the study cohort were aged between 6 and 14 years, and were assessed by adult residents of the same villages in terms of endogenously valued dimensions of intellectual and social ability and disposition. In addition their performance was measured on a set of locally developed tests of verbal and non-verbal intellectual skills, designed to tap dimensions of ability which receive support within this particular eco-cultural niche for development.
Fig. 1.1 This map shows the distribution of Chi-Chewa-speaking peoples and the location of the Katete District community in which the author’s community study originated. The border of the Chi-Chewa-speaking region is somewhat speculatively reconstructed from a number of different sources: Mitchell, Fortune and Buchanan 1964; Ntara 1973; NELIMO 1988.
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Over the ensuing years, records of school attainment were collected for those who entered school, and family discussions were held around broad questions of how parents construed the respective socialisation responsibilities of school and home, as well as specific considerations impinging on the decision whether a given child should be enrolled in school and if so how long she or he should continue to attend before withdrawing from the programme. At a later stage, members of the cohort were interviewed in person about their recollections of how these enrolment and withdrawal decisions were reached, about their present evaluation of those decisions, and in the case of those who went to school about what they believe they derived from that experience. Their current level of functional literacy and numeracy was informally assessed, and they were also asked about their life-goals and careers and about their views on schooling for their own children in the next generation.

3 The modern state of Zambia

Before I embark on the details of the enquiry, the socio-political context of my focus requires a few words of explanation. Zambia is a complex society caught up in a process of dramatic historical change, and its distinctive characteristics include an exceptionally high level of urbanisation relative to other nations in Afrique noire. As a nation-state it is also distinctive on the continent in having experienced no military coups. At a certain level of abstraction, Zambia is often therefore plausibly characterised as a relatively modern, industrialised and stable nation-state. Conspicuous symbols of this modernity include:

- high-rise office blocks in the centre of Lusaka, the capital city
- high-technology copper-mining on a scale such as to make Zambia one of the world’s three largest producers of copper, alongside the USA and Chile
- a state-of-the-art mass media complex which beams satellite news pictures from Beijing, Delhi, Berlin, London, Moscow, Paris, Washington, etc., to thousands of homes in Lusaka and the Copperbelt cities, as well as to several provincial towns as far as 500 miles away from the capital, reporting on the same day’s current events around the world
- indigenous airline pilots trained in Zambia, who fly the national airline’s Boeing 747 and other jet aircraft around the world.

Some other, less conspicuous, but to some Western audiences more significant, symbolic indicators of Zambia’s modernity are the following:

- the University of Zambia, founded in 1965, which now boasts eight different Schools including Engineering, Law and Medicine, an
annual output of about 500 graduates and a body of more than 400 academic staff which includes many indigenous scholars in the humanities, social and natural sciences.

the University Teaching Hospital where high-technology diagnostic and therapeutic techniques are in place for a number of conditions, largely operated by indigenous personnel.

the National Archives where government documents dating back sixty or more years are accessible for study.

the National Council for Scientific Research which sponsors applied research in such fields as ecology and food processing technology.

the Central Statistical Office which analyses by computer monthly economic returns from government ministries and private industries, a periodic national census of population, and various other more frequent surveys of prices, employment, etc.

On the other hand, it remains true to say that more than 50 per cent of the population live in rural areas without electricity or piped water, that preventable and/or treatable diseases such as diarrhoea, measles and malaria combine to claim hundreds of children’s lives every year, and that newspapers, books and radios are increasingly rare commodities in those rural areas. Moreover, the formal-sector labour force which has never exceeded 25 per cent of the adult working population has been shrinking steadily in both relative and absolute numbers since 1971. The government’s development planning rhetoric has shifted in the twenty-five years since independence (following fifty years of colonial occupation by Britain), from an emphasis on the expansion of free public education, health services and infrastructural resources such as tarred, all-weather roads, towards a much more modest set of basic needs and community self-reliance goals. ‘Back to the land’ is a common slogan in this era. And this means a return to rural areas such as the one on which this study is focussed.

In regions such as the Kondwelani area of Katete District, the people live in small villages composed mainly of clusters of extended families. They feed themselves from the crops they plant and the livestock they rear. And they speak the dialect of their tribe. Much of the technology on which their subsistence economy is based has changed only in modest ways since the eighteenth century (cf. Fig. 1.2). Yet it is quite adequate under normal circumstances to the demands of the prosperous survival of a human population within this ecosystem. Max Marwick, who conducted anthropological fieldwork in an adjacent area of Katete District between 1946 and 1953, observed that:

In general, the A-Chewa have a remarkably full knowledge of their bountiful environment and a technology that is adequate for tapping its resources. Though occasional droughts threaten their subsistence, their main source of insecurity lies in the fact that, in common with other non-Western peoples
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Fig. 1.2 This photograph depicts pounding maize, a key stage in the traditional process for making the staple food of the A-Chewa, unga. As in many other rural African communities, this activity is reserved exclusively for women and is often accompanied by song. (Photo by the author)
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living in the tropics, they do not have the technological resources for countering the diseases that are rife in their country.¹⁰

Western, or what is more properly now called cosmopolitan, medicine has made great strides in reducing the vulnerability of the A-Chewa to disease over the forty years since Marwick’s research was conducted. Poliomyelitis, for instance, has been nearly eradicated through mass immunisation. Malaria and measles, however, continue to take a heavy toll, especially among young children.

The juxtaposition of technological inventions of the late twentieth century alongside ancient, labour-intensive economic practices is a recurrent feature of Third World societies which tends to startle visitors from the industrialised Western world. Yet in human terms, the capacity of individuals to adapt in a coherent fashion to the demands of both environments should not surprise us any more than the capacity of a New York banker to go tracking in the mountains for a holiday. Indeed, many citizens of countries where the affluence generated by industrialisation has become commonplace have begun to cast an envious eye on life-styles which are more directly attuned to the natural environment.

Parts of my analysis are designed to demonstrate the intelligibility and adaptive value of traditional indigenous ideas and practices among the A-Chewa. But my purpose in doing so is neither sentimentally nostalgic, nor romantically idealistic. Social change will undoubtedly result in the next generation of Chewa children being raised differently. But it is far from clear that those Zambians who have adopted a city life have a viable formula worked out for the future of Chewa society, or indeed of Zambian society as a whole.

When modern African politicians and planners are asked to explain the changes in their societies, a key ingredient of their answers tends to be education: a term which they use almost interchangeably with what is learned in school. My argument in this book will be that the connections among schooling, education and social change are complex and negotiable. As an illustration of their complexity I shall begin with an account of a widespread paradox.

4 An extractive definition of success

Since political independence from Britain was declared in 1964, Zambia has experienced a momentous expansion of formal educational provision, including the near attainment of universal primary education, an increase in the number of secondary schools from less than a dozen to more than 200, and the establishment of a university as well as various other institutions of tertiary education. These facts are often
displayed with pride as some of the young nation’s finest achievements, and as sure signs of national development. Not only politicians and public relations officers have adopted this stance: it is part of a widely endorsed ideological view of what the society has been trying to achieve in the brief period of history since independence, and is proclaimed as such by many citizens of Zambia when they are travelling abroad.11

Zambia is not unique in this respect. The project of ‘universal primary education’ has captured the imagination of politicians and social planners as a major contribution to national development in many if not all the nations of the Third World in the twentieth century. Yet the project is confronted with a moral trap which lies at the heart of the present study. The trap is experienced at the level of a single school with a catchment area in which most children are born into low-income families engaged in subsistence farming. Such schools are responsible for delivering the bulk of the primary educational provision administered by governments in sub-Saharan Africa: they are the prototype on which the project of universal primary education in Africa is based – the elementary cogs on whose operation the nationwide machinery depends. Stated in its simplest form, the trap is for the school to find itself in the business of producing failures.

When we examine the profile of children going through a rural primary school over a period of years, what we see is that the vast majority of those who set foot in that institution leave school feeling that they are failures. Many of them believe that what went wrong is their own fault:

_Nzelu ndalibe . . . linanikanga sukulu._

‘I didn’t have the brains12 . . . school was too tough for me.’13

_Ndinalephela kuphasa mayetso ya Grade 4 kuti ndipite mu Grade 5. Ndayetsa kucita lipiti koma ndalaphela ndithu. Lomba ndangoti ndingoleka sukulu pakuti palibe cimene ndalikutengako. Uwelengonso sindinalikudziwa bwino._

_Cifikwa ciani?_  
_Nzelu zanga._

‘I failed to pass the exam in Grade 4 to go into Grade 5. I tried repeating but I still failed. That’s when I decided I might as well leave school since there was nothing I was getting out of it. I didn’t even know how to read properly.’

‘What was the reason?’
‘My brains.’14

Not all school leavers choose to take all of the blame, but the vast majority of children who go into a rural primary school emerge with a feeling that something went fundamentally wrong with their education. Very few of them receive the crucial certificate which testifies that they passed Grade 7, and gained entry into secondary school. Techni-