The Intersection of Traditional African Education with School Learning

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- explain the nature and process of traditional African education
- describe how traditional African education fits with the concept of 'the school of life'
- specify the role of the family, especially that of the parents and older siblings, in participatory learning and school learning
- identify at least three areas of possible conflict or tension between traditional African education and formal education, and two strengths and weaknesses of each system of education
- identify at least three psychological principles embedded in traditional African education and demonstrate how each could apply in school learning in an African society
- justify why it is necessary to make education culturally relevant in African countries.

Nosipho's parents had believed strongly in the value of education. They had helped her with her school work and encouraged her to apply for university. 'A university education will let you do anything you want to do', they always told her. She knew that her parents regretted that they hadn't had the opportunity to go to university themselves. Her grandparents on both sides had been poor and apartheid had made it difficult for her parents to actualise their educational aspirations. But thinking about different kinds of education and what African education could offer made Nosipho suddenly question whether in fact her parents had missed out on so much. While they hadn't had her opportunities in formal education, they had had other important kinds of education growing up in tight-knit communities in the rural areas of South Africa.

Nosipho's father would often sit with the family and nostalgically recall what life had been like when he was a child. He attended the local village school where he did well, but the best times for him were accompanying his own father when he went around to the nearby villages to sell the produce they had grown on their small farm. Nosipho's father always said he had learned so much about people, about marketing and even about economics as he helped out on these trips. He worked as a salesman now and he often said, only half joking, that he had had the best training of any of the employees at the company he worked for. As she thought about it, Nosipho wondered whether in fact her own schooling and university education taught people as well as her father had been taught. Learning in classrooms and from books taught a particular kind of thinking – but sometimes it was hard see how it fitted with real life. Perhaps there were many different ways of learning effectively.

Introduction

In Africa today, both traditional African and foreign ways of thinking and educating children are available and useful, though they sometimes produce conflict situations. In this way, present-day Africa has elements of several cultures co-existing in what Mazrui (1986) has called a 'triple heritage'. It is a triple inheritance because it comes from three sources, namely Arabic-Islamic influences, Western-Christian legacies or Westernisation and deep-seated African educational traditions (Nsamenang, 2003). The main objective of this chapter is to sketch the current state of traditional or indigenous African education and to briefly describe how it coexists with other world systems of education, particularly schooling. In doing so, the chapter attempts to identify some principles of learning and teaching relevant to African settings. It is hoped that the chapter can serve as a challenge to African learners and scholars to rethink their educational and other heritages and how they can inspire appropriate, innovative curricular reforms in education in their countries.

An overview of systems of education

Education is a specific form of enculturation and socialisation, and is partly provided through formal schooling (Nsamenang, 2002) or instructed learning (Tomasello et al, 1993). Formal, formalised or institutional education is in contrast, but also complementary to participatory or societal learning. In other words, teaching and learning are not restricted to schools; they occur in and outside the school (Desforges, 1995; Chapter 28, this volume). Thus, 'schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways' (Bruner, 1996:ix).

Educational reform as adjustment t change and need

Education is a process that seeks to prepare child for the responsibilities of life or a call to a spec duty. At the same time, it must prepare citizen: cope with local and global change. In fact, all edu. tional systems must cope with, and adjust to char. The need to make education relevant leads to on ing revisions of educational curricula. According Cookson et al (1992), educational reform is an on. ing process that really has no end. It is a char. process, and change is an important aspect human life. Africa has made attempts to reform systems of education it inherited from Europe colonisers. Unfortunately, the reforms have tend. to be incomplete, so that some inconsistency w African cultures and economic and ecological re. ties prevails

History and structure of systems of education

Human beings in all cultures throughout the wo seek to pass on what they learn and have inheri: to their younger generations. This is meant to ensu. that their offspring and culture survive and do r become extinct (Reagan, 2000). As previously not: the history of African education that is being taug today focuses almost entirely on Western educati in Africa rather than African education. It negle other educational traditions that inform the Afric worldview, like those of Asia and the local Afric traditions.

In general terms, we can fit the existing systems education into two basic models of teaching ar learning (Nsamenang, 2003). One model is t: didactic or instructional framework, and the other the participatory model. In Western societies educ tion is organised so that children can learn fr. adults, especially teachers. Teachers instruct learne
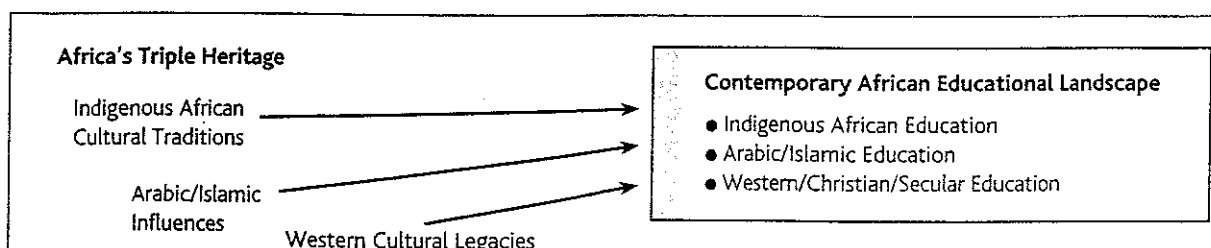

Figure 1 Africa's triple heritage

Figure 2 Tradition and science

and stimulate their cognition in well-organised institutions such as schools. Cognition here refers to mental activities like reasoning and thinking, among many others. Schools, for example, provide instruction to learners under controlled conditions (with teacher, subject matter and objectives). However, with traditional Africa education, children are encouraged to observe and learn from their involvement in the life of the family and the cultural and economic activities going on around them. This is often done without formal instruction but with the encouragement and support of parents and peers (Nsamenang, 2002).

The instructional and participatory models carry implications for the process of teaching and learning, and more importantly, for the generation or creation and control of knowledge. With the instructional or didactic model, teachers tend to control or 'own' knowledge. In the participatory model, learners actively co-create and co-control knowledge with their teachers. Knowledge is rarely an object nor 'property' which one person (e.g., the teacher or parent) possesses (Freire, 1970). It exists to be discovered. As regards the developing individual or child, he or she produces knowledge from interaction with other people, objects (e.g., the task that has

to be learned) and the environment. The participatory model sees learners not as 'empty vessels', but as agents or partners who are active in the process of learning. They actively acquire, interact and generate and share knowledge (Nsamenang, 2002, 2003).

25.1 HOW DO WE APPROPRIATELY DEFINE EDUCATION?

Education, as deliberate teaching or preparation of the young, is a specific form of enculturation and socialisation, widely referred to as schooling. It has been characterised as instructed learning (Tomasello et al., 1993), school learning, formalised or institutional education that is often contrasted with participatory learning, home learning, and societal or non-formalised education. Teaching and learning are not the monopoly of schools; they occur in and out of school throughout life. In some cultures, learning is organised primarily through didactic instruction in schools, with considerable cognitive stimulation. In African family traditions, children are guided and encouraged to observe and participate in ongoing cultural and economic activities that emphasise socially distributed norms (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). African schools tend to give the impression that African homes are culturally deficient dungeons to be escaped from or obstacles to overcome (Serpell, 1993). Thus, the role of the school is to help Africans overcome their 'backwardness'. This deficit model fails to realise that the education so far imparted in Africa generally has had limited to no relevance to the life paths of Africans (Nsamenang, 2002:85).

Indigenous African education

Education, culture and stages of human development

Education in African traditions is part and parcel of the culture. It is built on the daily routines and activities of the family and community. Like education everywhere, it is organised in conformity to the stages of life (Moumouni, 1968). Traditional African education does not divide domains of knowledge, such as agriculture, economics, arts, science, etc. Instead, it integrates knowledge about all aspects of life into a single curriculum. The curriculum is arranged in sequence to fit into different milestones
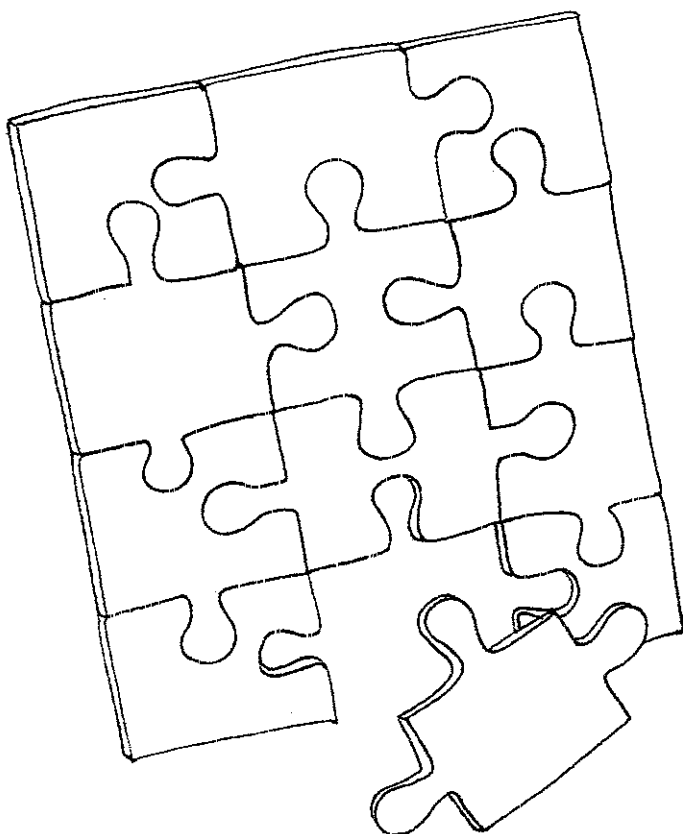
Figure 3 The whole made up of parts: Education may be like a puzzle

of development that the culture perceives or recognises. In other words, what is taught or what children are made to learn fits their abilities and successive stages of development. This implies that a child may be 'mature' in chronological age but immature in some abilities (Nsamenang, 1992). In psychology, such children are called late developers because the emergence of their abilities fails to match, or lags behind their chronological age and the social expectations for that age.

The gradual, stage-like nature of African educational thought and practices follows from the principle that since we cannot teach or learn everything at once, the tasks and activities to be taught and learned have to be arranged in sequential order within the curriculum as well as across the stages of development. This permits teaching and learning to be systematic. Another principle is that children are born with a disposition to become competent, to learn to relate to other human beings, and to regulate their behaviour and activities. Guided by these two principles, among others, the aim of African education is to progressively connect children to their cultural heritage, ways of life and the continuation of their family and community.

Africans tend to think of child development in

terms of a garden metaphor, a *seed*. Just as the seed germinates and grows into a mature plant, the individual matures in a progressive manner and gradually acquires knowledge (growing in wisdom) and a sense of personal identity (or self-identity). Whereas a seed is nursed or cultivated into maturity in an African garden of mixed crops, the child is reared in a dense social network in which several members share roles in childcare and family duties (Nsamenang, 2002). Erny (1968) described this view of child development in Africa as a 'becoming'. In this sense, becoming an adult is a gradual process. The assessment of how well a child is maturing or 'becoming' an adult is based on how he or she is fulfilling the social roles expected of him or her. It equally depends on the extent to which the child is integrated into his or her family and community. Mead (1972:154) captured how the child progressively establishes his or her self-identity in the following words: 'The self has a character, which is different from the physiological organism. The self is something, which has a development; it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity.'

At each successive stage of life, the child faces and must achieve developmental tasks. Each task is defined by the culture according to important points in growing up and patterns of participating in the life of the people at those points. This perhaps explains why education is organised to gradually introduce children to different roles and responsibilities at various stages of development. The education guides and directs children to participate in useful cultural and economic activities at designated or

Figure 4 Nurturing and growing

recognised stages. We may regard such education as 'cultivation' into and through 'pivot' roles that mark different 'stations' of an individual's social development (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995).

Through such participation, children master their language and the rules of their culture. They do so by practicing with proverbs, mental arithmetic, dilemma tales, legends, etc. By the end of adolescence, a normally developing boy or girl is expected to complete his or her social, intellectual, moral and practical training. Although such a young person or emerging adult may begin to assume responsibility in the world of adults, he or she does not automatically attain adult status. A full adult status is synonymous with being married and becoming a parent (Nsamenang, 1992).

25.2 SOCIAL CLASS, FAMILY VALUES AND PEER INFLUENCE

Ali is a twelve-year-old Abakwa boy. Abakwa is a residential area in Bamenda, Cameroon, where lower-class families live. Suh is an eleven-year-old boy who lives at Bamenda Upstation, a residential quarter for the middle- and upper-class families in Bamenda. Ali treks daily to and from school, but Suh is chauffeur-driven to and from school. Unknown to their parents, Ali and Suh are good friends; they have been planning to attend the same secondary school and had to figure out how each would convince his parents. While Suh's parents disqualified his intended school as cheap and of low quality, Ali's parents discouraged him from it because they could not afford to pay for his education in it. Both families became furious when each discovered the influence of the other family's child over their son.

Describe a friendship you know that transverses social or cultural boundaries. What qualities make for a good friendship in your community? How can we make the effect of such influence positive and constructive? How typical or unusual are these experiences among African teenagers? Discuss them in the light of your own knowledge or experiences.

The family: The foundation of education

The composition and function of the normal family varies throughout Africa. The most common type of African family is the extended family. But the num-

ber of single-parent families and other forms of family is increasing. The family, the child and the family environment interact and influence each other. The family context or atmosphere determines what is normal and what facilitates or impairs child development. This is a particularly important point because the foundation of child development is laid in the family long before the child is born. In addition, the family unit sets the pace and sustains children's learning of their culture (Tomasello et al, 1993), as well as prepares them for entry into school. It is the family that prepares children to acquire skills in interpersonal processes, communication and mental abilities. It is equally through the family that children expand their horizons and growing sense of identity and life purpose.

In other words, children's search for understanding, competence and 'the right ways' of the world begin in the family with their parents, long before they meet non-family members in the neighbourhood and/or at school. The family constitutes a secure base on which children build the confidence needed to relate to others and the world beyond the family. It is within the family that children learn the social, linguistic cognitive and other prerequisites for cultural living (Nsamenang, 1992).

As the first educators of children, parents are therefore the source of primary knowledge and values for children's head start (or take-off) in life, espe-

Figure 5 The 'active' family: Parents and children working together

cially their transition into and adjustment at school. A firm foundation for school learning is laid in the security of the home, long before the child enters school. Parents can play a crucial role in orienting their child to life in general and the motive to achieve in particular. Different parents and families possess different capacities to prepare their children adequately for school and to motivate them to achieve at school and in life (Serpell, 1993).

The role of parents in fostering children's development is three-fold (Nsamenang, 2001):
- to guide children to understand and accept the appropriate adult identity and models toward which they are being socialised;
- to communicate standards of valued behaviour and virtue; and
- to prime or sensitise children to acceptable values, rules and standards of the family and society, and to ensure their acquisition.

Parents have differing capacities to perform these roles.

25.3 PARTICIPATORY LEARNING IN A KENYAN ETHNIC CULTURE

From a very early age, Kikuyu children are taught their cultural history and values through lullabies and stories. Apart from this, learning occurs by means of observation and modelling, and children engage in numerous activities such as wrestling, fighting, herding animals and household chores. During adolescence both boys and girls are initiated by circumcision, which is considered a very important step in the development of a Kikuyu child. A Kikuyu who is not initiated experiences difficulty adjusting to his or her environment, since he or she is looked down on and is not allowed to marry or to own property (Mwamwenda, 1990).

Socialisation of responsible intelligence

In African societies, children are socialised according to values and norms that foster support for one another from an early age (Weisner, 1997). This is a highly cherished moral quality that is relatively ignored in the curricula of most schools in Africa (Serpell, 1993). Africans tend to use social competence to assess how responsible or 'intelligent' a child is (see Mundy-Castle, 1975). In fact, African

parents use evidence that a child has the ability give and receive social support, and notice a attend to the needs of others as markers of me and general development (Weisner, 1997). In c formity to this principle, Serpell (1993:64) clarif that:

> Adults presumably keep some mental tally of the proportion of errands that a given child performs adequately, and this serves as an index of how 'tumikila' (responsible) the child is. In the short term this attribute is used to choose which child to send on another such errand; in the longer term it feeds into an assessment of that child's expertise and responsibility

In order to train children in responsibility, pare and caregivers allocate chores and send them errands (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). Such erran include, but are not limited to, cleaning duties, fe ing objects, purchasing items and delivering m sages to neighbours. Child work inculcates p social values and the acquisition of cognitive, soc economic and other competencies and product skills. Above all, it promotes social integration moral lessons and skills children have to learn not separate, but are part and parcel of social int actions, cultural life and economic activities a daily routines (Nsamenang, 1992, 2002). Child are not instructed but discover these values a skills in the process of participation

Figure 6 Child as caregiver and domestic helper

Yula, a 10-year-old schoolgirl in Grade 4, attends school in Kimbo, Cameroon, with two younger brothers in Grades 2 and 1. Her unmarried mother runs a roadside eating-house. After dismissal from school the three kids join their mother at the food kiosk. After having had something to eat, Yula helps her mother in the marketplace, while the young ones play around, but sometimes help, whenever necessary and appropriate, depending on what task has to be accomplished. Yula helps her mother to bring items home and to prepare the food to sell the next day. It is only from about 9 pm that Yula studies or completes her assign-

ments; yet, she is one of the high achievers in her class.

What does this vignette contain about the educational circumstances of schoolchildren among low-income Africans? One theme that this vignette invokes is 'motivated achievement'. Discuss the different dimensions of this theme and how each play out in the life of a young person you know well. Is the African child, like Yula, who may be 'usefully' socialised through participatory learning:
• Socially responsible?
• Responsibly intelligent?
• Participating in child labour?

The role of the peer group and children's creative spirit

From toddlerhood, typical African children begin to distance themselves from their parents, and they increasingly come under the influence of the peer group. During peer group activities children often act as *father* and *mother*. Elder peers or siblings rather than the parents or other adults readily correct, supervise and mentor them. As children rehearse and enact the roles of adult models, they use the peer culture to re-address and resolve the confusions and uncertainties that arise in their interactions with parents (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). The free spirit of the peer culture challenges children to address and resolve conflicts, take others' perspec-

tives into account and notice the needs of others They also learn how to plan and organise activities and collaborate. In so doing, children integrate adult models into their own worlds. When their contributions are accepted they see themselves as significant social partners. Thus, children do not passively accommodate adult worlds. They are active and creative social producers of new forms of knowledge and modes of functioning. In the process of such creativity and functioning, children become emotionally mature, gain leadership skills, learn how to handle crises and gain social and mental competence (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). The motivation inherent in the peer culture may be more acceptable and stimulating to children than the opportunities prepared for them by parents.

A primary goal of this chapter is to develop the stance that people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities — which also change.

To date, the study of human development has been based largely on research and theory coming from upper-income communities in Europe and North America. Such research and theory often have been assumed to generalise to all people. Indeed, many researchers make conclusions from work done

in a single group in overly general terms, claiming that 'the child does such-and-so' rather than 'these children did such-and-such'.

For example, a great deal of research has attempted to determine at what age we should expect 'the child' to be capable of certain skills. For the most part, the claims have been generic regarding the age at which children enter a stage or should be capable of a certain skill.

A cultural approach notes that different communities may expect children to engage in activities at vastly different times in childhood, and may regard

Due to the lack of commercial toys, African children are usually encouraged to create their own playthings using local materials (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995) Such creations express remarkable ingenuity, and their recognition as 'products' enhances self-esteem and fosters children's cognitive and creative abilities. It also teaches abstract and spatial thinking and how to plan and organise work, measure objects and co-ordinate materials (Segall *et al.*, 1999) In actual fact, the rich traditions of African arts evolved through participatory learning.

Figure 7 Peer group activity

The mismatch between school and some aspects of African educational traditions

Generally, education in sub-Saharan Africa does not really take into consideration the 'subject matter: the theories and concepts through which the owners of the culture see their cultural world' (Anyawu, 1975:149). That is, the education of African children does not incorporate traditional African mentalities and wisdom. The school instead gives the impression that African cultures are backward and obstacles to learning and modernity (Serpell, 1993) Accordingly, the school should help Africa to overcome its backwardness The view that traditional African education is backward is a deficit model of education and misrepresents African values (Serpell, 1993). Although many African children attend school, the average African school rarely teaches the economic activities of farming that most Africans value. Thus, it is doubtful just how well 'modern' schools train the average African child to function in his or her community.

The school promotes values of individual achievement, personal ambition and competition (Oyserman, 1993). This is contrary to those of traditional African education, which reinforce family, co-operation and sharing, among others (see Nsamenang, 1992, 2002). As a result, graduates from most African schools experience difficulty partici-

...ing in the application of local knowledge. In fact, highly educated Africans or those with graduate degrees from colleges and universities may be poor-informed about their communities and countries

25.6 TENSION BETWEEN THE SCHOOL AND INDIGENOUS REALITIES

Fanla's father, Mr Nkeng, cooks for a local college. Every day he sets out to work in the early hours of the morning. Mr Nkeng frequently alerts his son of his impoverished life circumstances, which he wants his son to escape. Consequently, his primary goal was to inculcate the spirit of hard work and the achievement motive as insurance against failure. To ascertain success at the entrance examination into the secondary school, he organised additional coaching for his son. Unfortunately, Fanla was a truant. Thus, Mr Nkeng received the news of his son having gone fishing a few days prior to the entrance exam instead of preparing for it at school with utter disbelief. Mr Nkeng was exasperated when his son, who is quite intelligent, mustered the courage to question the wisdom of education when his struggles through school might not fetch him a job. Fanla further infuriated his father by intimating that he was more serviceable to the family than his elder brother, Tomla, an unemployed university graduate and liability to the family. Fanla felt a sense of responsibility and achievement in feeding the family and earning some income for it from fishing, while Tomla increasingly dips into frustration.

Identify and critically discuss or debate the issues raised and lessons that emerge from your understanding of this vignette in the light of your country or an African country or society of your choice.

Inappropriate education and unemployment

The unemployment of school leavers and graduates is a growing problem because school learning is unsuitable for the needs of Africa's largely agrarian economies and job markets. For example, school children learn little or nothing about farming even though over 70 per cent of the people are engaged in peasant agriculture (Nsamenang, 1992). African countries thus face a cruel paradox of spending large portions of their national budgets on education, which only churns out increasing numbers of educated but unemployed graduates (or graduates who are illiterate about the values and means of the local community). These educated youth cannot even fend for themselves. This confirms Bruner's (1996:ix) view that the school may 'be at odds with a culture's other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living'. One source of the high rate of school dropouts may be the perceived value of the school. The school evokes limited interest and hope in African learners (Nsamenang, 2002). Another hypothesis is that the pressure and anxiety generated by the 'diploma syndrome' exacerbates dropout and failure rates in African education systems (Serpell, 1993). The uninteresting nature of school curricula or their lack of relevance to addressing community needs may demotivate many learners.

Social integration of children

Whereas indigenous African educational traditions endeavour to connect children to their local contexts and activities of daily life, the school tends to separate and distance them. Schooling separates children from parents and family. As such, it increases peer influence and the generation gap. It also limits children's availability and contribution to the family welfare and economy (Nsamenang, 2002). Many of the children who drop out of school are increasingly participating in street commerce in sprawling African cities.

Figure 8 The child in the community

The mismatch between what the school teaches and the daily life of most Africans poses the challenge whether African youth are acquiring the right skills and values to catch up with changing technologies. How can we incorporate and merge truly African ideas, issues and practices (Serpell, 1992) with webs of change? How can we bring the local and the global together into comprehensive curricula that can stimulate confidence, creativity and ensure progress and sustainable development in the twenty-first century?

25.7 THE PARENTAL VALUES OF THE NSO OF CAMEROON

Socialisation values vary across cultures and social classes. When cultural variation has been studied, researchers have tended to focus on two or more cultural groups, instead of exploring intracultural variation.

Study
Nsamenang and Lamb (1995) investigated variation in the values of Nso parents in Northwest Cameroon. They focused on values associated with gender, parental generation (parental or grandparental), rural versus urban residence, religion (whether indigenous African, Christianity or Islam) and educational experience.

Results
The study revealed greater agreement than disagreement in the responses of the various parental cohorts. Nevertheless, religion, generation, residence, gender, and education were significantly associated with variations in some dimensions of parental values.

Conclusion
In spite of substantial similarity, variation in Nso parental values and practices is the norm rather than the exception. This may introduce conflict situations.

Discussion
Consider the ethnotheories of parents and the implications of both similarity and variation in parental values on children and their families.

Conclusion

African educational thought and practices, along with a variety of foreign educational legacies, are available to most African children today. The challenge facing Africans is to explore, understand and channel their educational heritages to creative and useful purposes. This education is fitted into the developmental pathways and traditions African children follow as they participate in the cultural life and economic activities of the family and community. These differ from the Western traditions of education, which, through institutional schooling, are now given priority in spite of their lack of accurate fit with the participatory learning within African families and communities. As a result, 'modern education in Africa produces dilemmas and paradoxes. It equally conflicts with some aspects of the indigenous systems, especially the value placed on agriculture as the mainstay of African livelihoods. We need to study this confusing state of education in order to extract lessons and useful principles inherent in Africa's participatory model of learning. One such lesson is to derive educational content from the familiar local context, as it is an integral part of the global community and to creatively integrate learning into productive skills. The lessons can then feed into relevant curricula designed to propel Africa into the technologies and sustainable development of the Third Millennium. We should challenge every African, particularly learners and scholars, to contribute to this important, liberatory project!

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