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Prof Witness Mudzi on the History of Education in Africa

Bio:

Prof Witness Mudzi is the Director of the Centre for Graduate Support at the University of the Free State and a visiting Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. He joined the University of the Free State from the University of the Witwatersrand, where he worked for close to 14 years. Before that, he worked at the University of Zimbabwe. He was the Deputy President and President of the South African Society of Physiotherapy between 2016 and 2021. He holds a BSc Physiotherapy (Hons) degree from the University of Zimbabwe, and a master's degree and PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand. He has published more than 38 articles in peer-reviewed journals. Prof Mudzi supervised to completion more than 20 MSc students and also supervised PhD students to completion. He has experience in the higher education sector that spans over 24 years. His passion is creating an enabling environment and capacitating postgraduate students and academics with the requisite research skills needed to complete their postgraduate degrees and research projects within the permissible minimum time frames. He believes his strengths to be teamwork, strategic planning, attention to detail, and the ability to work with people from various backgrounds.

Abstract:

When we educate people, we create a better society. Education should include women, as the education of women uplifts the whole society. Education is the key to building a safe, free, and equal society. Education in Africa can still be considered as poor, and poor performance in education can be linked to history.

Education in Africa has come a long way. It can be roughly divided into pre- and post-colonial periods. Education was in existence way before colonisation, although formal education was introduced to Africa by European colonists. Education did not start with the famous Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.

Before colonisation by European powers, many groups in Africa had a tradition of oral transmission of knowledge, although there were some significant exceptions of societies that had formal educational institutions. With or without formal institutions, African traditional societies had their own mechanisms of transmitting knowledge across generations.

Pre-colonial, in Ancient Egypt (between 2500 and 500BC), men were formally taught to become scribes and administrators. Communities lived on subsistence farming. Education was largely obtained from parents and elders. This centred around farming skills, knowledge about the environment, social and cultural traditions, and survival skills. Africans understood metallurgy, weaving, beer brewing, etc.

Europeans overwrote such existing modes of education by introducing Western school systems. At the same time, the mechanism of recruiting African white-collar workers through schooling – which started during the colonial period – planted a strong hope for social advancement through gaining school certificates deeply in the minds of African people. This has created generations of people who look at education as a way of getting a good job instead of using it to create employment. Many aspects of African education were negatively affected by colonisation. Colonial values were superimposed on Africans. Education in Africa instilled the feeling of material wealth being the yardstick for human social merit and worth (the origins of inequality).

The state of education reflects not only the effects of colonialism, but instability resulting from and exacerbated by armed conflicts in many regions of Africa, as well as fallout from humanitarian crises such as famine, lack of drinking water, and outbreaks of diseases (poverty related). Although the quality of education and the quantity of well-equipped schools and teachers have steadily increased since the onset of the colonial period, there are still numerous inequalities in the existing educational systems based on region, economic status, and gender. Despite around 40% (2015) of the children being able to complete secondary school, nearly one in three children does not complete primary education. One of the problems pointed out by critics is that, regardless of the massive expansion of basic education, learning outcomes of school leavers in Africa have not improved.