Towards an Enhanced Status for Teachers in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

For sometime now there has been a tremendous increase in the demand for formal education in Africa. As a result of this development, individuals, organizations, communities and the government have invested huge sum of money in educational expansion. However, noble as this trend is, the quality of teachers remains one of the major factors that could mar or improve the overall educational results.

It follows therefore that if the entire education enterprise in Africa will not be grounded in the distant or nearest future, it is imperative to ensure that teachers are appropriately positioned to play the cardinal roles that belong to them in the educational enterprise. In order to ensure that teachers in Africa are appropriately positioned for this cardinal role that can only be played by them, one of the cardinal issues that need to be addressed is the diminished status of teachers in Africa. With this background, attempt is made in this paper to closely examine the status of teachers in Africa, the need to enhance it and the modalities of doing so.

THE CONCEPT OF STATUS

According to Kendall (1996) a status is a socially defined position in a group or society characterized by certain expectations, rights and duties. Status exist independently of the specific people occupying them (Linton 1936); the status of professional athlete, musician, professor, college student, and homeless persons all exist exclusive of the specific individuals who occupy these social positions. For example, although new students arrive on campus each year to occupy the status of first year student, the status of college student and the expectations attached to that position have remained relatively unchanged.

The term status, Kendall (1996) maintains is used to refer to all socially defined positions; high and low rank. For example, both the position of director of the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington DC and that of a homeless person who is paid about five dollars a week to clean up the dinning room at a homeless shelter are social statuses (Snow and Anderson 1993). Statuses are distinguished by the manner in which they are acquired. An ascribed status is a social position conferred at birth or received involuntarily later in life, based on attributes over which the individual has little or no control. On the other hand, an achieved status is a social position a person assumes voluntarily as a result of personal choice, merit or direct effort. Achieved statuses (such as occupation, education and income) are thought to be gained as a result of personal ability or successful competition (Kendall 1996). Most occupational positions including teaching in modern societies are achieved statuses. When people are proud of a particular social status they occupy, they often choose to use visible means to let others know about their position. Status symbols are material signs that inform others of a person’s specific status. For example physicians wear long white coats, lawyer also have their regalia. In daily lives, status symbols announce one’s status and facilitate one’s interaction
with others.

THE STATUS OF TEACHERS IN AFRICA.

In this paper, the status of teachers is seen as the position of teachers within the social system, the regard which teachers are held and their relative place in a hierarchy of position or value in the society.

To a large extent, the status of teachers in Africa is a reflection of the origin of teacher education in the African continent.

For example, the first phase of teacher education in Africa was the period often referred to as that of teacher evangelist. During this period, pupils were trained specifically for religious propagation and the training programme centered on reading, writing and the mastery of the Holy Books. This was applicable both to the Koranic schools established by Moslem Missionaries and the Mission schools established by Christian Missionaries.

These Missionaries made it known to the Africans that their mission was not commercial and they kept to this principle all through. They worked tirelessly and expressed the belief in eternal reward by God for the services rendered. Ever since, this principle has continued to influence in no small way, the perception of most Africans about teaching and teachers in Africa. Somehow teachers in Africa are seen by most people as those who work on earth only to be fully rewarded by God when they meet Him in heaven or in the world beyond some day.

The Missionaries and the first crop of teachers that were produced in Africa were highly respected by all and sundry. However the respect that was accorded them was not because of what they possessed materially but for who they were as custodian of knowledge and the non-commercial values that characterized their occupation. They worked passionately; they were satisfied not only with their remuneration but also with the job itself.

In the colonial days teachers were the most educated and sophisticated people around and this further heightened their monopoly of a relatively high status. This however is no longer the case in post-colonial era because over the years there has been a rapid and massive development in education. The presence of specialist in diverse field of knowledge after the colonial era actually put an end to the age-long monopoly enjoyed by teachers and this not only affected the status of teachers adversely, sending it on a decline but also has since kept it perpetually under pressure brought about by increasing competition from other professions that emerged and are growing rapidly.

In a graphic illustration of the plight of teachers in Africa, Moon (2008) has this to say: Bilkisu is a teacher near Kaduna in northern Nigeria. She typifies ‘per excellence the benefit of open learning. After her ninth child was born, she decided to become a teacher, working unqualified whilst obtaining her National Certificate of Education at the National Teachers Institute. Teresa works in a rural school in Ghana. She is also taking an upgrading course, as is Sumiya from Sudan, one of the 130,000 teachers studying with Sudan Open University. All of these teachers, including Mrs. Mene from the Eastern Cape, are part of an international research programme. But Bilkisu has few resources. Apart from the world around her she has one, her blackboard. Ninety children are on the roll of her class. They have no books, no writing materials, few desks. There is nothing atypical about Bilkisu or the other teachers. Across Sub-Saharan Africa many teachers have a pretty tough
Moon (2008:1) asserts that the social status of teachers has dwindled over the years dramatically and it has continues on a downward trend. He observes further that this is a phenomenon across Africa.

The status of an occupation, relative to other occupations is determine among other things by the following: the level of remuneration, general working conditions, qualification and experience necessary for the performance of the job, the importance attached to the occupation measured by the amount of money the state spends on it and the social influence exerted by the occupation as an organized group.

Compared to most professions in Africa, the remuneration of teachers in Africa at various levels is low. For teachers in most African countries, the remuneration that the job attracts is not commensurate with the inputs that teachers are expected to make and the conditions of service for teachers in Africa are not geared towards status building. The salaries and status of teachers in many countries in Africa is in freefall (Colclough et al., 2003). Household surveys show that primary school teachers’ salaries usually cannot compete with salaries received by professionals such as engineers and not even with those received by bank clerks or bus drivers (UBS, 2006). As a great issue of concern, in African countries, the Pole de Dakar (2009) finds that teacher salaries have been in constant decline over the past thirty years. This being the case, the status of teachers has also been on constant decline over the years. For example, the salaries of teachers in Malawi have been extremely low and irregular even by sub-Saharan standards (Fozzard and Simwaka 2002: Chirwa et al 2000:47). In Liberia, almost all the teachers interviewed stated that they felt teaching as a profession is not respected in Liberia overall (International Rescue Committee-Child and Youth Protection and Development Unit 2007). The teachers interviewed made linkage between low salary and professional support and the abuse and exploitation of female students by teachers. Examples were given of teachers exchanging "sex for grades". One of the teachers’ states for example "the low salary cannot make you feel like an educator. The reason is beyond control that teachers can be encouraged to take money from students or make love with female students" (International Rescue Committee –Child and Youth Protection and Development Unit 2007). The cost of maintaining well qualified and high caliber teachers in the context of mass secondary and primary schools makes it difficult for government in many African countries to reward the large numbers of teachers on the same level as doctors and other professionals. However this should not be the case since the very many teachers are still individuals who carry out well defined schedule.

One of the major problems facing the teaching industry and which has also affected the status of teacher negatively is the very rapid rate of expansion of the industry itself. Both the scale and the rapidity of expansion have meant that there has been an almost continuous shortage of qualified personnel to man the institutions at all times, therefore the teaching industry has had to do with large numbers of unqualified personnel. For example, across the African region, half of all the primary teachers are unqualified, in some countries this run to three —quarters (Commission for Africa Report, 2005).. According to Bennel (2004) teachers in Africa are often only slightly better educated than their students. Bennel cited Madagascar and Malawi as examples of countries where most teachers have only two years of secondary education. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the qualifications of teachers leave a lot to be desired. While 80% of teachers at the primary level are qualified in all the provinces, a scant 32% of teachers in secondary schools across the country are qualified to the required level for their post and teaching quality is further compromised by extremely low salaries which are irregularly paid. (AfriMAP and the open Society Initiative for Southern Africa 2009). In Chad, 61% of
the teachers are contract teachers and this category of teachers is not required to complete pre-service training (Bonnet 2007). Similarly according to Bonnet, in Lesotho, more than 50% of the teachers have only primary school qualification, while in Guinea and Niger, most teachers have a year or more of training. Mali, Mauritania and Togo all have a significant part of all teachers who received a very short training: 1 to 3 months. Despite the existence of that very short training, more than half of the teachers in Togo have no professional training at all (Bonnet 2007). According to Education for All National Action Plan for Liberia (2004), about 65% of children in primary schools in Liberia are taught by unqualified teachers and about 41% of teachers have not completed high school (UNICEF, RALS Report 2004 in UNDP 2006). Qualified teachers believe that their work is diminished in the eyes of the public by the employment of unqualified people who are also termed teachers (Halliday 1999:19). This has never been the case in other professions like law, medicine in Africa.

The size of the teaching industry in African therefore is also an important factor that has affected the status of teachers negatively particularly in the extent to which it can expect high rewards for its services and also close its door to those not qualified to teach commonly referred to as "cheaters". Bennel (2004) observes that teaching is a mass occupation and this has continued to militate against "professional" exclusivity. In Uganda, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Zambia among others, Bennel (2004) observes that the teaching force has expanded rapidly. The teaching force has become "employment of the last resort". Around one half of junior (Form 4) Secondary School leavers in Malawi and Tanzania who finished school in 1990 were employed as teachers in 2001. The corresponding figure for Uganda is staggering 81% (Al-Samarrai, Bennell and CL Colclough 2003)

The fact that teachers in Africa have also not been able to exert appreciable social influence as an organized group has gone a long way to diminish their status. This is because unlike law, medicines, engineering etc that are full-fledged professions in Africa; teaching has been for many years at the ‘becoming’ stage. According to Varma (1996) the characteristics generally defined as essential to a profession are: that it performs an essential service, that its practice is founded on a distinctive body of knowledge and research, that its members therefore undergo a lengthy period of initial education and training before mastering that knowledge and in developing the skills to execute it, that the initial acquisition of knowledge and skill is complemented by continuing professional growth and development that it exercises a high degree of responsibility for the way it fulfills the objectives formed by the community of which it is a part, that its members act with integrity and conscience primarily in the interest of the client, that its members accept and are governed by a code of ethics underwritten by its organization, that it is well organized with disciplinary powers to enforce ethical practice, that careful control is exercised over entry, training, certification and standard of practice

Datta (1984) in addition to the above features, highlighted the fact that a profession is marked by public recognition and that this comes to the fore when government pass laws extending official recognition to the professional body, and its right to have a say on who can practice the profession and how they should be trained.

The fact that teaching as an occupation in Africa is yet to fulfill most of these criteria of these criteria, has made it increasingly difficult for teachers to exert an appreciable influence. This is further compounded by the need for teachers in Africa to have ownership of the teaching industry itself. They need to feel responsible and professionally accountable for the quality of service provided and to be able to protect those they teach at various levels.
Varma (1996) observed that the one most serious weakness from which other weaknesses like that of diminishing status derive is the absence of a professional governing body with authority to articulate and exercise professional standards.

In most African nations, at present some of the functions of professional council that oversees teaching activities are divided between a government department and government appointed agencies. Varma (1996) pointed out further that it is professionally unacceptable that a government department should administer decisions relating to professional competence or personal fitness to teach, without professional supervision. This applies both to the issuing of certificates entitling people to teach, without professional supervision. In no other profession are such professional matters in the hands of civil servants under political authority. Incidentally, this is the rule rather than the exemption concerning teaching in most African countries.

Moreover, there is no explicit code of ethics or understanding of the professional conduct expected of teachers in Africans countries of which such judgment can be properly exercised and this can not be without a fully representative body with the authority to develop such understanding. Since there is no competent and recognized professional body for teachers in most African countries, decisions about training and professional development of teachers are taken by government department or government appointed agency exclusively. These government department and agencies are mostly manned by people who started as teachers but “managed to escape” from the system. And since they are not directly involved, they do not see that teachers deserve more than they already have. These loopholes continue to do untold harm to the status of teachers in Africa.

The condition of service of teachers is another factor that has been having negative impact on their status. For example, Moon (2008) observed that many teachers in Africa particularly in the rural communities teach without paper, books or resources. Teachers working environment in Nigeria has been described as the most impoverished of all sectors (Baike 2002). Facilities in most schools are dilapidated and inadequate (Adelabu 2003). The teaching environment in most African schools is dismal. Lack of basic tools such as chalk, chalkboard, desks and chairs abound in many schools. Lumadi (2008) confirms the fact that African teachers in general face tremendous challenges. In a research conducted in South Africa, Lumadi observed that the conditions in the schools in which the research was conducted were far from conducive to learning for sustainable period of time. Classrooms have broken windows, cracked walls, no doors; some buildings were collapsing, whilst those that were incomplete yet available were without roof, which warrant classes to be cancelled during bad weather. Lumadi (2008) pointed out further that if the allocation of resources remains as skewed as it is, where the majority of rural schools are made of grass and thatched grass, with no pipe water, no electricity, no modern technical equipment, no affordable transport for both learners and teachers, effective teaching will not take place. Though this was Lumadi;s experience in South Africa, sadly enough, this is the scenario in most African countries. One cannot talk of an enviable status for teachers “trapped” in a system described above. In some cases teachers have to teach under tress; not because the teacher is so much in love with nature but for the stack reality of not having any other alternative. According to Lumadi(2008), In a certain region in South Africa, the whole school with 18 classes shares the same duster. Grade 1 and 2 learners share chairs. The textbooks used by most teachers are obsolete. In extreme cases up to ten students share a textbook. Subjects like physical science, which require laboratories with apparatus, are taught theoretically and to think of internet services within the school for the use of teachers and students will be tantamount to asking for the
impossible. 41% of students overall in the countries investigated by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) : (Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zazibar) study in schools which are in need either of major repairs or of complete rebuilding, and only 12.8% in schools which are said to be in good conditions (Bonnet 2007). Similarly, most primary schools across Southern Sudan do not have basic and essential facilities and services for creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning (Deng 2006). Working in an environment with dilapidated structures and without basic facilities, apart from giving teachers a diminished status is also tormenting to say the least.

The absence of continued professional development opportunities through sponsored conferences and workshops is another factor that is yet responsible for the unimpressive status of teachers in Africa. Qualification upgrading programme, where they exist for teachers in Africa, usually provide a passport out of primary teaching (Moon 2008). In Ghana schemes that allow teachers to avail themselves of paid study leave are very popular. Each year, there are 4000 on study leave while 6000 new teachers leave teachers colleges (Hedges 2002:361). However many of those on study leave do not return to teaching. The system is therefore unintentionally promoting a steady flow of teachers out of the profession (Hedges 2002:356). Little wonder that teachers in Africa are accorded very low status.

Societal attitude towards teachers and the teaching industry generally is another factor that has kept the status of teachers in Africa on the downward trend. In the public mind whilst few would want to be treated or advised by doctors or lawyers with ‘out of date’ knowledge, there is little perception of what a teacher should know(Moon 2008:2). A South African research project focusing on Grade 11 learners, who at this stage are seriously considering different career options obtained valuable results highlighting specific attractors and deterrents that might influence their decision to consider teaching as a career, the prospects of working with children, sharing knowledge with others, playing an important contribution to community development were expressed as strong attractors (Park 2006). In contrast, strong deterrents identified by the study were: the respondents’ perception that pupils no longer respect teachers, their negative assessment of teachers, remuneration, the perceived unpleasant working conditions caused by poor discipline in schools, their observation that teachers do not look very happy in their jobs and the perceived extent of violence in Schools (Park 2006). Park (2006) rightly adduced that student perception reflects an accurate picture of the current experience of teachers. Incidentally what the research shows as the situation in South Africa is also what operates in most other African countries. The fact that teaching as a job is seen by most people in African as the very last resort after every other option has proved impossible shows how low the status of teachers in Africa has gone. According to a research carried out by Mulkeen et al (2005) many teacher trainees in Africa do not perceive teaching a high status profession. Similarly many of the teachers on the field in Africa are victims of low self esteem and most of them also feel that society is rightly dismissive of them as teachers. The perception that the status of teachers in society is declining is encouraged by the use of shorter teacher training programs and lower entry qualifications (Gaynor 1998:14) Similarly, Waitshega(2005) also reported that teaching in Botswana has suffered from general negative comments. The Botswana National Commission on Education (1977:5-6) expressed concern in these words “teaching is regarded as a profession of low status in Botswana and some Batswana (citizens) enter teaching as a second or third choice or because nothing else is available”. Botswana National Commission of 1993 expressed the same concern that “low morale and declining status” of the teaching profession is still evident across the country. In Nigeria, Dr. Nwosu, the then leader of the
accreditation team of the National Commission for Colleges of Education remarked that the teaching profession in Nigeria has been relegated to the background and that teaching is not accorded the respect it deserves (Punch 2004). In Africa, teaching is perceived as a path to further education or an exit strategy. As one Tanzanian student put it, “it is the only profession which will allow me to advance to higher levels of education” (Towse et al 2002:644).

While professional misconduct is as old as professions themselves (Anangisye and Barrett 2005), unprofessional behavior by teachers in Africa is relatively on the very high side and this has also gone a long way in throwing the status of teachers in Africa to the dogs. Some of the kinds of misbehavior that are rampant range from charging students for compulsory “extra tuition” to “ghost teachers” who appear on the payroll but do not exist (Gaynor 1998:25) and “remote teaching”, the practice of writing notes on the board or using a class prefect to read out a textbook while the teacher is elsewhere (VSO 2002:25). Other misbehavior issues include drunkenness and sexual relations with students.

Preliminary research in junior secondary schools in Zimbabwe found that male teachers in particular have engaged in violent and sexual intimidation and abuse of girls in a manner that became institutionalized and considered “normal” (Leach et al 2000). Extortion of students or favoritism in assigning or selling grades were also reported as occurring occasionally particularly in Guinea and Madagascar. In Tanzania, reports of teachers sexually abusing females and less often male students are widespread and range from verbal harassment to rape (Chumi 2001; Mweru 2004; Telli et al 2004).

In Tanzania, concerns have repeatedly been raised regarding the prevalence of misconduct among College and School teachers over the years (see for example Mosha 1997; Kuleana 1999; Warioba 2000; Sambo 2001; Boimanda 2004; Telli et al 2004). Similarly, Teachers’ complicity in examination irregularities has been observed in various sub-saharan African Countries (Bumpoh 2002; Maunda 2002:219; Ondongo 2002). Occurrences and behavior described above cannot but keep the status of teachers in Africa perpetually low.

According to Anangisye and Barrett (2005), teachers’ dress was viewed as sending strong messages to colleagues, students and the community. Hence teachers were expected to dress in a manner that befit white-collar workers and distinguished them from peasants or manual workers. This meant wearing clothes that were neither too casual nor too smart and that were clean and not crumpled or torn. Women were expected not to dress provocatively in partial transparent materials or short skirts. However, in some African countries especially in the rural areas, many teachers raise extra income through farming and may in a single day move between the classroom and their farming plot. Hence, it is not uncommon to hear accusations of school teachers or college tutors appearing in class dirty and shabby, with crumpled clothes and dirty shoes. This to some extent confirms the findings that unethical practice tends to be more common and most extreme in conditions of economic scarcity (Bennett 2001; Hallak and Poisson 2005:2).

In the light of the discussion in this paper, it is obvious that the status of the teachers in Africa leaves much to be desired. Similarly, Moon and O’Malley (2008) also pointed out that teaching is in a crisis in many parts of the world. The said crisis, one observes is not only ongoing in many African countries but it is worsening and leaving the status of teachers in an increasingly battered state. While, Moon (2008) rightly observed that teachers and teaching need urgent attention, the issue of teachers’ status in Africa needs very urgent attention. Foxley (2004) however attributed a large proportion of the rescue of the Chilean economy in the 1990’s to the investment in teachers. Teachers specifically, not education in
If Foxley’s assertion is anything to go by, it is only wise that urgent steps be taken to redeem the diminished status of teachers in Africa. Furthermore if one is to go by the dictum that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers, then one can say without contradiction that if effort is not made and quickly too, to rise up and face the various issues responsible for the diminished status of teachers in Africa, the future of teachers in Africa and by implication the future of education and development in Africa cannot be said to be an enviable one. This is because if the status of teachers continue on the downward trend it will become increasingly difficult to retain the best of the teachers on the job and also very difficult to attract others who are capable to join the team. If this becomes the case, even the full fledged professions in Africa will soon begin to have problems. This is because at one point or the other in order to qualify as a member of any of these accredited and well acclaimed professions that are enjoying relatively high status in Africa, one will need to pass through teachers. An enhanced status of teachers in Africa will therefore not just be beneficial to teachers alone but to the entire educational system of the various countries and the key aspects of the nations. In agreement with Varma and McClelland (1996), the one most serious problem with the teaching industry from which other problems like that of diminishing status of teachers derive, is the absence of a well structured and competent professional governing body. A very critical issue therefore is the professionalisation of the teaching industry in Africa in the real sense of the word. This however cannot be done for teachers in Africa; the initiative must come from within the rank and file of those in the industry. When the issue of professionalization of teaching in Africa is fully taken care of, the stage would be set to address other factors that are responsible for the not so encouraging status of teachers in Africa. In addressing these other factors, the role and importance of a virile professional governing body cannot be over emphasized. Therefore until this body is fully in place in the various African countries, nothing serious can be done. To do otherwise would be tantamount to placing the cart before the horse.

CONCLUSION

There is hardly any occupation that is a full fledged profession in Africa that is plagued with the magnitude and varieties of problems that have bedeviled teaching in Africa and turned it into an occupation of very low status. It stands to reason therefore that the professionalization of teaching in Africa will take care of the many problems that have been forcing the status of teacher to nose down over the years. It is therefore suggested that the professionalization of teaching fully in the various African countries be used as a platform for seeking necessary attention, cooperation and assistance from government on issues that have been affecting the status of teachers negatively. These among others are: conditions of service, remuneration, working environment, promotion and promotion modalities, public perception of teachers and teaching and on the job professional training etc. With the professionalization of teaching fully in place in various African countries there would be a locus standi for making meaningful, centrally coordinated and officially recognized effort geared towards normalising the issues of unqualified people in the teaching industry, the self image of teachers themselves, misconduct by teachers etc. This when successfully done, will give teachers in Africa the necessary enhanced status and also give education in Africa a secured future.

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