

REVIEW: ART EDUCATION IN KENYA AND HOW IT CAN HELP SOLVE KENYA'S CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Art featured in all spheres of traditional African society: body art, symbolic writing, attire, religious rituals, and ceremonies, for identity in rank, status, and occupation, as decoration, etc. Creativity varied amongst communities which augmented their uniqueness. Even though colonization contributed towards uniting Kenya, traditional culture was gradually eroded in favor of British where traditional Art became obsolete. The two education curriculums implemented in Kenya since independence have done minimal to promote Art education contributing to it being disfavored as a viable career option since its classified under the blue-collar job group. Vocational training institutes; mainly a product design industry who's foundation is Art education, was established in Kenya to assist in job creation for those gifted in craftsmanship. Art education contributes towards developing problem-solving abilities with practical solutions and in their creative application. The government hoped that the vocationally trained would employ themselves eventually, however, this sector is gripped by various challenges, like their products being overlooked for imports, they lack finances to operate and invest in technology to help improve their products and have a competitive edge over imports. Some of their products lack creativity and are poorly executed as compared to imports. They are also challenged with mass production since their products are handmade. Kenya is currently facing an unemployment crisis whereby the Kenyan workforce (employers) are struggling to find competent employees with problem-solving skills and coping mechanisms to endure the work environment despite their university education. To address this issue, in January 2018, the government implemented a new education curriculum with emphasis on the relevance of Art education in equipping students with the above skills. This excerpt provides insight on the relevance of Art education in Kenya with the hope that it will be helpful towards the implementation exercise and benefit the Kenyan economy.

Keywords: Kenyan Art, Art Education, Creative Industries, Jua Kali, Vocational Training,

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of implementing a new education curriculum by the Kenyan government in an attempt to produce a workforce that can meet the demands of the current developing economy that will work towards achieving vision 2030, the Kenyan government is exacting itself in addressing head-on, the education crisis that has hit this particular sector.

The previous curriculum (8-4-4) had its many challenges among them, overworked and underpaid teachers, insecurity of teachers and pupils living in hostile environments, exam cheating, corruption in schools, the welfare of both students and teachers and unfortunately, the phasing out the Arts programs in schools (Abuya, 2017).

This will be the second time Kenya will be revising its curriculum. The first time was in 1985 where 8-4-4 was introduced to raise a workforce that met the demands of Kenya then, which was filling white-collar positions to help in driving the economy.

The system required pupils to attain 8 years of primary education, 4 years each of secondary and university education. It is unfortunate that the 8-4-4 system gave little regard to promoting the Arts program while giving much emphasis to the sciences and humanities.

Art programs were in the process of being entirely phased out as the system solely focused on attaining high grades and subjects like Art were not meeting school requirements. Parents were taking their children to school based on a school's average performance and that meant that if a school attained a low mean grade they would lose out on admissions which would translate to loss (Wanjala, 2017).

The 8-4-4 system became more of a business venture than focusing on the overall welfare of the child. The new curriculum, however, has been revised in favor of putting the child's interests and welfare above all else. 2-6-3-3-3 is the name assigned to it whereby a child will spend 2 years in pre-primary education and 6 in primary while 3 years each receiving junior and senior secondary education. This curriculum is designed to focus on a child's formative years in development and evaluation for the benefit of gaining problem-solving and analytical skills which the 8-4-4 system failed to implement (Wanjala, 2017).

The examination process in the 2-6-3-3-3 system has been altered in favor of Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs) where the student's progress will be monitored at the completion of every task/course. The 8-4-4 system entailed a summative evaluation process at the end of 8 years of primary and 4 years of secondary education which was proven to be detrimental to pupils as the pressure to maintain high grades was more prevalent than attaining actual knowledge (Abuya, 2017).

The art program has been reinstated and strongly emphasized in this new curriculum as one of the subjects necessary to assist in the development of the above-mentioned skills that lacked in the previous system (Wanjala, 2017).

Kenyan companies are in need of a workforce that are problem solvers (Nicholas, 2018). Individuals that can analyze and evaluate situations and role out solutions and oversee their implementation with minimal supervision. Also, not forgetting raising morally upright individuals to curb the issue of corruption which is one of Kenya's challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In regards to the above, it is imperative that the importance of Art education and its benefits be mentioned at this juncture.

The Importance and Benefits of Art Education

Children are considered to possess some form of creativity during their formative years (Peets, 2017). Before they start talking, children learn to communicate using the sense of touch, hearing, smell, and taste. As they grow older and their sight is good, they learn mostly by observation then eventually they learn how to talk (Babycenter, 2017).

It is advised that their skills be nurtured during those formative years so that they learn how to express themselves better as they grow older. Engaging children in creative problem-solving activities, hand-eye –coordination and activities that allow them freedom of expression are considered beneficial not only beyond the art class but also beyond their school years (Peets, 2017).

For one to be a good communicator, listening is an essential skill. Critiquing visuals and using one's imagination to generate ideas enables one to be good at expressing themselves. And for one to be able to solve problems they need to be able to find the problem by analyzing and assessing situations which is difficult to do if they don't learn to pay attention and observe the issues at hand in order to be able to make informed decisions.

Art education is able to provide the above by simply teaching children basic skills like listening, which allows them room for imagination and creativity which is an ideal tool for formation and generating of ideas. Dancing has the benefit of instilling confidence in children and also regarded as a form of expression and relaxation while drawing and painting encourage them to be observant and helps improve their hand-eye coordination among other things (Jolley, 2010).

A report conducted in 2002 by Arts Education partnership revealed that students who participated in drama, music, and dance were more proficient in writing reading and math as taking part in those activities enabled them to improve their social skills and encouraged them to have a motivated attitude when tackling issues (Henry, 2002).

Arts education improve literacy skills and critical thinking skills when analyzing and critiquing artworks and these skills can be transferable to other subject areas.

They are not only restricted to art critique (Kennedy, 2006).

As mentioned at the beginning as one of the main challenges industry players in Kenya is finding personnel with effective interpersonal skills. Research shows that Art education helps improve visual analysis skills, learn from mistakes and make better critical judgments (Pogrebin, 2007) which is vital in problem solving.

Social cohesion is a useful tool for the growth of a society both economically and socially as it helps society members interact on a level playing field as contributes towards bringing together socioeconomic gaps. Art education provides the above necessary skills towards the promotion of these causes (McCarthy, Et.al 2005).

Art and the African Perspective

The role of art in any society is to promote social, cultural values within society. In African societies, Art was at the center of all cultures as it was considered a form of communication, a form of identity as well as a form of expression (Fisher, 1984).

Although civilization has its advantages, one cannot disregard the fact that it has been detrimental to the promotion of African cultural values and traditions which also resulted in the annihilation of African Art (Beckwith: Fisher, 1990).

Colonialism in Africa involved a process where communities were forced to abandon their culture in favor of the colonial master's culture (Sowell, 2008). Colonialism portrayed African culture as primitive and wild and therefore needed to be abolished in order to pave way for civilization. The Africans who eventually adopted the colonial master's lifestyle disregarded their own cultural practices proclaiming them to be primitive (Boahen, 1990).

Art Education in Kenya

Art and Design education was initially introduced in Kenya as a form of vocational training for creatively talented people based on the premise that people with artistic talents faced challenges in other subject areas like in sciences and humanities which was an issue subtly implied academically (Ondigi, 1998).

The 8-4-4 curriculum put in place in 1985 focused mostly on producing white collar graduates because it was believed at the time, that Kenya needed those kinds of skill-sets for the growing economy (Wanjala, 2017). The above realizations may have resorted to students in vocational institutions not being given much emphasis as the ones in university.

Kenya is also currently faced by a shortage of jobs as there are so many jobless youths who are university graduates. The Kenyan government has failed to create job opportunities for it's growing white-collar population according to the Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard) of June 6, 2001.

At its review process, the new education curriculum (2-6-3-3-3) that was implemented in 2018 January, was toying with the idea of phasing out the art and design curriculum as very few individuals take up this course. Various schools at secondary school level under the previous 8-4-4 curriculum have stopped teaching it for lack of quorum in student application as well as having challenges in finding Art Teachers as there is a shortage in this particular subject. Efforts by the government to promote Art education as a viable career has been very little.

Art Education in Kenya is still looked down upon despite the Art and Design Industry contributing enormously to the Kenyan economy in terms of revenue and job creation in Design, Advertising, Tourism and Jua Kali (informal) sector. (Agak, Et. al. 2009).

Developed countries like China, USA, Germany, and Europe have invested heavily in Art and Design education largely because of the economic value this sector generates for their countries. Tourism, promotion of artworks in museums and art galleries, advertising and marketing, product design, fashion design, interior design just to mention a few, are some of the career areas yielded from Art Education and they are a viable source of employment as well (Murori, 2016).

Africa, on the other hand, has leaned towards importation of products from other parts of the world over promoting their own. This attitude has resulted in the depletion of creativity by African locals as the demand for their product is minimal (Murori, 2016).

The art industry would be a great source of employment for many and serve as a versatile income generating sector for the government for the promotion of uniquely creative artworks if the above issues discussed are implemented.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research has been selected to conduct the research methodology.

The Industry: Comparison between Kenya and the World

Art and Design covers a wide margin as a multi-disciplinary course. At primary school level, Art Education covers a general area as pupils are exposed to different artistic experiences. At secondary school level, Art education is more practical as students are given an opportunity to exploit the various disciplines under Art. At University level, the disciplines are more specialized where students are taught in depth according to the specialization of choice (Robarts: Sally 1981).

The various disciplines under Art and Design include: Painting, Tv/Videography, Graphics, photography, architecture, illustration, animation, kitchen art, Web, Fashion/Textile, Interior, Printmaking, Weaving, Woodwork, Ceramics, Metalwork, Sculpture, Product, Publishing, Advertising/Branding, Environmental/landscaping among others. All the above are intertwined when it comes to the application even though they are taught as specialized areas.

Here is a practical example of what that above statement translates to:

An investor expresses their interest in starting a business/ company, therefore, they will require a company name and an identity and they will enlist the services of a graphic designer for that purpose.

The same company may also require a premise/ office for operating their business and the premise will need to be branded and decorated/ designed for identity purposes, therefore they will enlist the services of a graphic designer to do the branding and an interior designer to design their office space. In some cases, they may enlist the services of a decorator to accessorize their office space.

They will also require the services of a graphic designer to design their office stationery and create visuals that will sell their services/products to the market and in this era of digital media, they will enlist the services of a web designer to generate digital content for their company. While creating adverts for tv/ digital media they may be required to source for a videographer and photographer to assist with that area.

If the company is manufacturing products, they'll be required to enlist the services of a product designer to assist with the formation of the product by considering their artistic input. Also, a graphic designer to design and brand the product package. If the company offers services, they will still enlist a graphic designer to create visuals that will market and sell their services.

Should the company decide to have its staff where dress code/uniform, they'll enlist the services of a fashion designer to help in coming up with convenient and appropriate attire that will best represent the company.

The purpose of the above example is to show how Art and Design apply itself as a multi-disciplinary course across the board. One cannot simply create, produce and sell anything without involving art/design hence the reason it is vital to a country's economy not forgetting it creates employment opportunities for many in the process.

Observing an international company like IKEA for example.

The founder Ingvar Kamprad has attempted to provide solutions to day to day problems by creating products that help improve daily functions by applying simple artistic solutions. The company makes home furnishings and appliances that are not only eco-friendly but also easily assembled and are sold at pocket-friendly prices.

According to Forbes magazine (2005-2010), the owner of IKEA was once considered among the top ten billionaires in the world and the company is said to be worth over 40Billion US dollars (Palmgren,2018).

IKEA has adopted the above-mentioned example where different disciplines in art/design have been adopted and intertwined to produce practical products that are both contemporary and functional and with it's over 400 hundred stores worldwide, it has employed numerous people in the process.

In Kenya, there is the informal industry known as 'Jua Kali' which is comprised of skilled craftsmen both formally/informally trained in handmade product creation. Jua Kali is said to be in existence for the last 3 decades in Kenya (Kiringai: Sanghi, 2016).

Jua Kali adopts the same principle as IKEA of making simple products made from eco-friendly materials for day to day home use. The difference is, Jua Kali products are handmade and doesn't have an established structure for conducting trade effectively. Jua Kali is largely recognized as a product design industry.

According to a Micro Small and Medium establishment survey report in 2016, the industry injected about 1 billion USD into Kenya's economy despite the many challenges it faces (Omondi, 2016). The uniqueness of Jua Kali which also contributes largely to its folly is, the fact that most products are handmade.

The advantage that comes with that is that the products can be custom made to suit a specific client's needs, however, the disadvantage of that is the inability to mass produce at a faster rate since the products are handmade.

The major challenges that the above sector faces is the lack of sufficient space to conduct and carry out business, many Jua Kali operators are unlicensed and lack formal education thus limits their creative ability. Access to their clientele is also a challenge, a good number of the operators have no formal structures and operate in semi-permanent structures hence the name 'Jua Kali' meaning 'fierce sun' (Biswa, 2017).

Harsh weather conditions affect their business operations also, being exposed to accidental hazards like fires which are often the case in their workshops.

CONCLUSION

The challenges the Kenyan Art education faces are accessing similar support as in humanities and science subjects. Schools invest in science laboratories and equipment but it is rarely heard of that a school invested in a modern design art studio or gallery for art students.

As revealed in this excerpt, 8-4-4 curriculum failed to promote a positive attitude towards art subjects and the same attitude transcended out into the industry. Despite Art education contributing immensely to the Kenyan economic growth, it is still not as appreciated as white collar professions.

The folly of Art curriculum is to engage students fully in knowing and understanding what opportunities lay out there for them in their various areas of specialization. While it is important for one to nurture their talent and acquire the necessary professional skills to gain meaningful employment, it is also important to create an avenue for art students to see how they can adapt themselves to society and provide design solutions to their day to day problems.

The government together with Art key players (industry and education) should work together to develop programs that integrate all the areas so that students can have a feel of what the art industry entails while the industry can participate in fine-tuning the curriculum in order to meet industry demands.

The government also needs to pump money and offer assistance in the *Jua Kali* sector by investing in modern technology and providing conducive environments for these business fellows to conduct their business. The Education sector can curtail programs like design thinking, creative economy and art management classes, for instance, are ideal for the above artisans.

It is the hope that this new education curriculum will emphasize on the importance of art education so that attitudes towards these courses improve in both students and teachers and the society at large.

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