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Of Ritualistic Researches: The Case of Kenyan Universities, Faculty of Education

Wycliffe Osabwa

Tutorial Fellow, Alupe University College, Kenya

Abstract:

This paper is charged with interrogation of the nature and significance of researches carried out by postgraduate students in Kenyan universities, specifically those in the field of education. As it were, universities exist not only to teach but also to review and create knowledge through research in order to proffer solutions to challenges bedeviling humanity. Anything short of this is outright mediocrity. In this vein, the current paper seeks to postulate three points concerning research: that it must be done out of necessity so as to save face, time and money; that the meaningfulness and significance of the resultant content should stand out more than the form; and that unless the phenomenon under study is a wholly new concept, it should build on the previous good researches for continuity and gradual progress – a guarantee that the researches are drawing closer to the much needed solutions. This will chart some direction and promise a future for education, a field that is proving more dynamic than most. The paper recognizes that the education faculty develops teachers who later on nurture pupils and consequently prepare them to take up other fields of study. This effectively implies that poor education background spells disaster for all other disciplines; the more reason for the review and establishment of proper educational theories and practices which can only be guaranteed through appropriate research.

Keywords: university education, research, ritualistic research, productive research, education futures

1. Introduction

World over, universities are regarded highly since they are considered the pinnacle of formal education. And not without a reason. Ideally, education is granted to be a process that enables humanity to achieve their social visions (Bennaars, 1998). This implies that a good education is expected to lead to happiness that obtains when human challenges are at their minimum. In this regard, education is a de facto panacea to the many problems that human beings encounter in their daily lives. This brings me to the major roles of universities: teaching, creation of knowledge and solutions through research and extension services which benefit the immediate community. Whereas some of the knowledge and solutions created apply to particular situations, they in most cases tend to have a universal outlook such that they can be customized to cater for a variety of situations. Kenyan universities should not be an exception.

It therefore becomes a matter of serious concern when universities anywhere on the globe, as is the case with some in Kenya, fail to live up to one of their core businesses of providing the much needed solutions through meaningful and productive research. It becomes even more disastrous when a key faculty such as education is caught in the loop. Research is not, and should never be done in vain or as a matter of routine whether one is a student or otherwise. Good students learn by doing (Moss, 2001). The seriousness such students accord their researches mostly at masters level goes a long way in determining the kind of scholars they eventually become. In their beginning must be their strength.

2. Research in Universities: For what?

During my reading, I came across very few research works that attempted to interrogate the productivity of researches carried out in universities, more so in Kenya. Many of those that I read often decried the little support - more so financial - that was accorded to research. It looked as if finances alone would work miracles, regardless of the use that such funds would be put to. Nevertheless, one study by Muia and Oringo (2016) came closer to the topic at hand. The study made an inquiry in the 'productivity' of researches in Kenyan universities. I came to infer that the term 'productivity' was therein used to refer to the **quantity** of researches carried out by the universities in question. This took me aback, as I had expected that the term would be used to refer to the **quality** of such works. I do not in any way intend to fault that particular study since the researchers were at liberty to do whatever they believed suited their situation. On the contrary, the study gave me more reasons to work on the current paper.

Ideally, we research because we believe in the untenability of the situation or solution at hand. We believe that there is a better way, a better answer out there. And so we search again. We research. If such a venture has to be taken seriously, the research must be reasonably purposive, and lead to a solution to some problem whose remedy cannot be arrived at casually. It would therefore be defeatist for one to carry out what I term as 'ritualistic research' – one that is done perfunctorily – with a simplistic intention of fulfilling some short term personal goal like meeting basic requirements for graduation. This practice has been prevalent, characterized by students picking on an easy-to-handle topic and following it through, so long as it adheres to some stipulated guidelines which again vary from one university to the other. In most cases, the solutions to the 'problem' identified are either predetermined or commonplace. This paper contends that such vacuous research is as good as left undone for it does not amount to anything. It is a typical case of a ritual, a mindless game which in any case does not have to be undertaken in a university. The street would be a better place.

3. Ritualization of Researches

As shown before, researches are done as routine. Here, the researcher does not have to believe in the exercise. Worse still, the said researcher will at times, if not most of the times, carry out the 'ritual' in proxy. This is partly evidenced by the many advertisements posted right on university notice boards in which some individuals offer to do research proposals and reports at a fee. With the right amount, the 'researcher' is provided with and taken through the reports so as to be able to defend the same before faculty. Clearly, the said researcher is quite detached from the imaginary problem and the supposed solutions. A chain of such incidents render universities irrelevant let alone killing the spirit of future research.

Considering the above issue, one notes that ritualistic researches thrive in our universities because their demand exists. Every other student is in a hurry to graduate and so will do all that is within their ability to go through. Similarly, the faculty supervisors are under pressure to 'produce' as many graduands as possible so as to partly qualify for preferment as either senior lecturer or professor. It also reminds me of the age old expression, 'publish or perish', which has seen many individuals lining up mediocre publications hence contributing to the malaise that is the object of this paper.

Whereas technology is considered as one of the most progressive human invention, it has not been utilized appropriately. A number of individuals have elected to abuse it. I have for instance heard some students wondering loudly why one should labour in books or even go out for field work when there is an option of picking on any relevant previous research work and customizing it to suit their needs! It is no wonder that some universities set the percentage of plagiarized content at 30 or below. What this implies is that plagiarism is condoned.

4. Inadequate Tutors and Haphazard Choice of Research Topics

University education in Kenya is at an unprecedented demand. This has led to a drastic expansion of universities and their constituent colleges, and even tertiary colleges being converted to the much needed universities. For instance, public universities today stand at 31, down from 6 a decade ago (Commission of University Education, 2015). Whereas this was meant to address the challenge of access, it has ended up compromising on the quality of education offered. This is so because the increase in the number of student enrollment was not matched with a commensurate increase in the number of the academic staff. The unfortunate situation has continued to put strain on the limited staff who end up teaching all through. Eventually, research dies. Pray, how would a lecturer who is denied time to do their own research be in a position to guide students on the rigours of research? It is evidently next to impossible. I submit that it is prudent to allow faculty members time for personal research so that they can equally tag their students along – a better way of teaching research. Here, the student will have a hands-on experience which will prepare them to carry out correct, organized and meaningful research.

When it comes to choice of topic, it is expected that the student picks on a matter that is pressing, as well as researchable. One has to demonstrate the urgency of the issue at hand, and what society stands to gain (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). Whereas this should be the case, my groundwork unveiled interesting observations. One of the students that I had a blind chat with had this to say:

When it comes to picking a topic for research, I will look for a less troublesome issue. You can be so foolish so as to pick on a topic that will send you to hell and back. At worst, just flip through previous studies, settle on one that looks pretty manageable and relevant to your area of study and go ahead to modify!

I came to realize that many postgraduate students, more so at masters level, did the same. Clearly, such a trend cannot guarantee any meaningful research from our universities. It can neither guarantee us future researchers since their foundation is already weak. Where then does this leave us? My thinking is that students must be guided appropriately concerning the choice of topic. This does not in any way imply that the topics be selected for them. Instead, supervisors can come up with hard and fast guidelines that will spur their students' imagination so that they come up with relatively viable topics, without necessarily curtailing their right to exercise free choice and creativity. For instance, the faculty can advise students to make a follow-up on recommendations from previous research works which are deemed significant. This will lead to cumulative knowledge and continuity of thoughts and solutions fronted in the preceding studies. I submit that it makes no sense for researchers to pick topics at random, conduct studies, synthesize reports and provide recommendations for further studies, recommendations which end up gathering dust on shelves like white elephant projects.

Another issue that crops up under topic selection is bandwagon thinking. This involves researchers focusing on one main issue, usually a prevalent one, but approaching it randomly and independently. This reminds me of a seminar presentation that I attended sometimes back at some graduate school. In the course of the seminar, I heard one of the facilitators (an accomplished academician) heap an avalanche of praises on a student who had made a presentation. This was a good thing since it is motivational. Regardless, I had a little trouble with the reason behind the praises. The student was being congratulated because her topic of choice was 'the in-thing', a phrase that was used to refer to a trending topic. Actually, the topic hinged on gender disparity. That was ten years ago. To date, the topic seemingly remains trendy as evidenced by many researches that still trade on the same! Does that ring a bell? Have the 'trending' researches managed to solve a thing, given that the topic is still green? Far be it from the thought that I am against trending topics. Not at all. I am just curious to know if this is reason enough to carry out a research. I strongly believe that one's personal conviction should be a principle factor in determining the topic of study. Further, such a conviction should be supported by the relevance of the topic and its propensity to bring forth either alternative knowledge or some credible solution to an existential challenge. I submit that trendy researches are cosmetic, time wasting and therefore uncalled for. Universities must remain hallowed places devoid of mediocre antics.

5. Of Red Tape and Stale Research Methods

In every meaningful endeavour, order is paramount. Any academic enterprise is cognizant of the fact that form is as important as content. Regardless, one should not lose sight of the most needful thing; that which subsists after all is said and done: content. We tend to remember facts more than the form in which they were presented. We tend to remember a message more than the language in which it was communicated. We tend to remember the taste of bread more than its shape or even colouration. From the taste of bread, for example, we are able to recommend it for another person's use. Its shape, colour or even package is auxiliary.

I submit that it should be criminal in the realms of research to accord more latitude to form than content. Whereas procedure is important as it should be, we cannot elevate it at the expense of the substantial topic. Ideally, a balance may be struck between the two – method and content. There is real danger of narrowly-focused researches losing sight of the actual issue at hand while concentrating on fixated procedures such as methods of data collection. One will often hear a masters student wondering aloud when they will be allowed to go to the field and carry out research. For them, research entails 'going to the field' to gather data. The interpretation and implications of such data is given little thought, as long as the process meets some measurable precision and effectiveness. The whole exercise is reduced to a detached, mechanical, cosmetic and routine venture. The research work and the researcher are not one, for there is no spirit that joins them apart from the short term objective of meeting some academic requirement.

I recently did a paper and submitted it to an international journal of repute. As it were, the paper would either be accepted or rejected and with reasons. My paper was rejected wholesale on the basis of method of research. The reviewer noted that the method employed was not scientific. That science is procedural, and that such a procedure was necessary for verifiability. I was taken aback since I had done a philosophical analysis and made clear from the outset that I had done so. Pray, what was there to be verified? My stream of consciousness? My intuitive reflection? My bracketed opinions? At least I knew one thing: science is empirical and bases on sense experiences. I also believe that such experiences must be reflected upon by asking right questions in the right terms and in the right manner. R. S. Peters (1939) sees all the procedures that follow scientific experimentation and observation as a philosophical inquiry, since they set out to clarify and discuss the meaning behind such procedures and observations. It is therefore simplistic to conceive science as strictly a sensory affair, knowing very well that the process does not stop at that. It is equally fallacious to imagine that truth can only be obtained through purely scientific methods, and that any exercise that borders such methods automatically passes as a research work. This is typical of what Rorty (1999) terms as 'methodolatry' – uncritical worship of method.

Philosophy involves interpretation of sense experiences, implying that it takes over after empiricists have gone to the field to collect data. Actually, they employ philosophy whether consciously or not. For science to be complete, a correct interpretation of the results obtained must be made. Anything short of this will make nonsense out of the sense experiences collated. What is my point? I hold that many researchers especially the upcoming ones are dwelling more on form and less on content. For instance, why should a research work be under marked or disqualified simply because the recommended font and page margins have not been adhered to? What value does the employment of the latest version of citation (for example APA Version 7) add on the quality of a research work? What is the reasoning (or thinking?) behind the requirement in some universities that a research topic should not exceed 20 words? I submit that when researchers are constrained by unreasonable demands, the resultant report can only be that limited. I equally submit that the energy one uses to meet such unreasonable demands takes toll on them to the extent that such energy and will is divided between meeting the bureaucratic requirements and handling the problem at hand. Unfortunately, many researchers, more so graduate students, tend to concentrate more on method and format than content. They will for instance go to the field to collect data using (mostly) structured questionnaires from which the data will be processed using preset computer programmes such as the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), followed by a warped discussion and finally a predetermined conclusion. I need not say that most of the questions posed in the questionnaires are either leading ones, or those meant to confirm the researcher's predetermined position. To make matters worse, some of the questionnaires never leave the researcher's office; for they are

filled in by ghost respondents. Actually, data is often times 'cooked', as one researcher confided in me. For those that are dispatched, whether physically or electronically, the supposed respondents tend to tell the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear.

I am of the view that the methods employed in research, more so in data collection, should be reviewed. There is a need for a sincere conversation on the place of such tools as the questionnaire. For instance, it is common knowledge that many of the respondents and even objects of study like animals will often modify their behaviour on sensing that they are being observed. In the end, the responses received may not be credible. A good study will not only go for mere responses but reasonable ones. Situations abound where respondents gauge the researcher's intentions before providing the required information and often lead to distorted findings since the responses are often insincere. My point is simple: whether scientific procedure is adhered to or not (depending again on one's definition of 'science'), the content of the research work and its reasonability must be brought to question. In this regard, I must add that the Tertullian attitude accorded to philosophical researches can only aggravate an already bad situation.

I hold that universities must, pursuant to the above discourse, speak louder and clearer than before. They must elect to rise to the occasion and conduct serious researches which correctly spell the term "quality". They must refuse to put faculty members under classroom arrest just like it happened to Galileo many years ago. There is a need for more Copernican revolutions, and this must begin with raw and sincere discourses: sincere because most of the culprits are conscious of their malpractices, and often act exigently; raw because the discourse is likely to get murky, rough and unsettling.

I have just randomly picked on one aspect of research: data collection through questionnaires. I picked on them because they are the most preferred, at least from the cursory glance that I took when doing textual analysis. I stood to question the authenticity of responses collected through the questionnaires, given that society is increasingly becoming dishonest and that some of the questions may be touching on the raw nerves of the respondents. I wonder for example if a group of respondents, say teachers or nurses, will provide honest responses when involved in a research that touches on their (mal) practice. The same may be said of their students or patients respectively, when called upon to respond on issues that touch on the kind of treatment they receive from their service providers. I submit that in as much as questionnaires have a definite structure and long history of use, they somehow tend to preset the mind of the respondents, more so adults ones, to think in a pattern that is likely to misinform the researcher. They are predominantly pre-emptive, to say the least. Ritualistic researchers will never stop to think about such possibilities, and consequently end up with reports that are neither informative nor progressive.

Going forward, I propose more radical ways of data collection, ethics notwithstanding. I propose, for instance, that raw and blind study techniques be used, especially where the overall research is highly unlikely to adversely affect the respondents. What do I mean? Consider this scenario: A researcher may want to find out how particular university undergraduates perceive different styles of teaching. Instead of collecting data using questionnaires for example, the researcher may opt to give the students a term paper on the same. Believe you me, so much data will be collected from the essays that the students will have written. The information collected will likely be sincere, detailed and full of personal conviction. The researcher will probably get more data than he or she had bargained for, including but not limited to the tone therein. The tone in the written papers, for example, will give a more credible account of the respondents' feelings than what mechanical phrases such as 'AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE' would have. The researcher may then go ahead and extract the responses which will then be filled in the questionnaires. *This implies that the questionnaires should at times be the researcher's own tool, not to be directly given to respondents.* Such and kindred perspectives should be brought to the discussion table for review so that we move away from ritualistic researches.

6. Educational Futures: Which Ones?

My discussion tended to veer into the general, though my main focus was on the productivity of research works by graduate students of education from Kenyan universities. I picked on education because in my understanding it is the cause of all other disciplines. Further, the education discipline boasts of so many theories and practices, most of which do not speak to each other. It will be instructive for proper research to continuously be done so that the otherwise wide gap between extremities of theory and practice is minimized.

How does education *cause* all other disciplines? This is it: graduates of education become teachers who handle children from early stages of their lives up to that opportune time when such children are ready to take up different specialties. Thus education founds them. For that matter, it is instructive that all educational processes during the formative years of the learners be accorded a seriousness that is beyond reproach. Such can only be if the graduates are equally well prepared. Again, the graduates can only be well prepared if they are exposed to well-researched and up-to-date educational theories and practices. Then, we can guarantee that all other fields including education will receive well prepared individuals.

I hold that the future of education in Kenya is depended upon the researches carried out in the Kenyan universities by the education faculty and their students. They can choose to regurgitate old facts and reproduce them in different words. They can as well choose to look east, west or heavenwards for the education solutions of their country – a practice that is not unprecedented. Cases abound where various task forces in the education sector have simply crossed the border and adopted educational practices which they believed were progressive, only to discard them later because they could not hold. Freire

(1970) asserts that a society's problems can never get better solutions apart from those that are largely fronted by the very society.

I recently witnessed a ridiculous moment when I attended some education seminar in some part of the country. In one of the presentations, an education officer talked about democratization of schools. He did it with passion and gravitas, claiming that this was the new practice world over. I just wondered how new the practice was, having read the same concept in Dewey's writings that span a century. What is my point? We cannot just jump out of our beds and hurriedly craft papers that purport to talk about education, and deliver the same in the name of a key note address. Talking about democracy in schools, for example (never mind its existential absence in the larger society), and reducing it to election of student leadership as it happened at the conference is to say the least mediocre.

The future of education in Kenya, and by extension other places that share our predicament, can only be guaranteed if systematic, coordinated, purposeful and responsive researches are carried out. Until then, quacks will continue to reign supreme, willfully drafting commentaries on a venture that they know little about. This will go on unless graduate students of education desist from duplicating researches and randomly selecting topics, most of which address imaginary problems. Consider some of the research topics that I sampled:

- Effects of Poor Nutrition on School Going Children in District
- Influence of Student Discipline on Academic Performance in
- Effects of Jiggers among Primary School Pupils in County
- The Impact of Cattle Rustling on Education Standards in County

The list of such topics can go on ad infinitum. For record purposes, I have no qualms with one researching on what they view as significant. However, I get disturbed when quality time and resources are spent on problems that seem to have straight answers or a case where the researcher is confirming the obvious. The sad part is that university faculty is aware of this, only that they seem keen on the procedure more than the substance it yields. In any case, how can they care about what students research on when majority of the faculty members themselves are not engaged in any meaningful research? How can they guide nascent researchers when they have been allocated large numbers of courses to teach, and equally huge numbers of postgraduate students that they must supervise?

With such a conundrum as explicated above, what kind of educational future can one expect? A future characterized by regurgitation of stale ideas and rigid theories which some faculty regard as 'established' and therefore unquestionable? A future where runaway unrest in schools compel education officials to spend in libraries skimming about causes of violence among students, only to come up with recommendations fit to be a term paper for a disoriented first year student? A future where the secretary of the state department of education orders teachers to adopt native languages for instruction, only to turn around and complain about poor performance in foreign and second languages? A future where any politician and activist pass for an education expert, often trooping in media houses to freely comment on education matters? All these fears can be assuaged if research proper is conducted in the education arena so as to ensure relative predictability, control and reliability of the education future. The researchers must of essence assert themselves and loudly tell off quacks and pedants who imagine that the education sector is a playground for children. They can only do so by abstaining from ritualistic studies.

7. Conclusion

I am not sure if I should conclude, or rather if I can conclude. I will nevertheless try as it should be. My conclusion is that Kenyan universities are great entities full of energy. The energy is unfortunately misdirected, whether by design or default. As it were, the universities – specifically their faculty of education - are seen doing the needful: they research, teach and offer extensional services. The issue, however, is the premium they place on research. Whereas little funds are allocated for the venture (more allocations go to areas such as military activities), I strongly believe that the few researches done must be made to meet some minimum threshold, more so concerning the direct needs of the country, needs that are legion. The standard should be enforced the more in education-based researches since education lays the foundation of other fields. It should be noted that most education researches are not capital-intensive. Therefore more researches should be done, and done right, where students are properly guided and weaned off ritualistic researches. Further, faculty members who are burdened should be given time, space and requisite resources so that they can accord budding researchers the impetus that will drive them into future research work, effectively guaranteeing the country an education future. The same faculty members should be given latitude to also carry out their research and consequently serve as models. Lastly, research topics are haphazardly picked. Going forward, the researchers should assume some definite direction that guarantees progress. Hopping from one matter to the other when there exist serious recommendations for further studies from previous related studies should be treated as an academic crime. Above all, the place of research content has not been duly acknowledged. Make no mistake: content and method are not equal partners, yet they are treated as such. This has to be reviewed so that every research work stands out because of its substance. Such must be predicated upon the probability of the research being responsive to real issues affecting humanity. It may not be easy but it has to be done.

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