REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

by

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Introduction

This paper begins with an important caveat. We have to note that democracy has emerged and thrived in strange conditions. Economic growth and affluence have been seen by Martin Lipset (1959) and Samuel Huntington (1990) as key preconditions for democracy, but this has been at least partly debunked by the examples of democratic but low income India, and Botswana in 1968 when it embarked on its experiment as Africa’s longest democratic state. Aristotle and others after him have seen the presence of a broad middle class as a precondition for democracy, but there are many examples of countries that have successfully embarked on democratization projects with only a tiny middle class, at least in the beginning, including many of Africa’s new democracies. Capitalist economic structure has been widely seen as essential for democracy, but we are well familiar with the tendency for unregulated capitalism to create economic and power monopolies that can undermine democracy. A compelling case has also been made for making the presence of a large working class a pre-condition for democracy; the inclusion of that class in democratic politics has been regarded as essential for breaking oligarchic power and stabilizing democracy. But it is also well known that the working class (rather than the middle class), is more susceptible to cooptation by autocratic governments. And it was also widely believed in the 1960s that Catholic societies such as Portugal and those in Latin America were unlikely to ever become democratic; then Portugal, Poland and Catholic countries in Latin America did in fact democratize. Thus, democracy has a notorious habit of defying efforts to impose preconditions on it.

However, the idea of education as a precondition for democracy has remained relatively strong and harder to debunk, at least in comparison with all the others. Education appears to have a direct or indirect bearing on many of the conditions regarded as favorable to the emergence and survival of democracy. It is related in one way or another with the economic, political, social and cultural conditions that foster democracy.

This paper will to review some of these ideas linking education to democracy in light of the contemporary African/Ghanaian experience, and thereby partly confirm and partly debunk the association between education and democracy. I am seeking in particular to demonstrate that it is not only education per se that fosters democracy, but specific aspects and types of education. It will end with some thoughts on what could be done to foster democratic development through education and how we may improve the delivery of civic education in a new democracy such as Ghana.

The links between education and democracy

The philosopher Karl Popper made a profoundly astute observation when he linked the emergence of a book market in Athens in the 6th and 4th Centuries BC with the founding of Athenian democracy. Others have also noted how high literacy rates in America in the 18th Century preceded the birth of modern democracy in that country. But what is it about books and literacy – that is education – that links them to democracy? The connection can be seen in several ways:

- Education leads to prosperity, which in turn produces a middle class and fosters the development of middle class values such as self-autonomy, independence of thought and the right to self-determination.
Education provides broad exposure to new ideas (such as liberalism). In general, it fosters enlightenment and the development of a liberal outlook on life.

Education, especially higher education, helps the individual to develop critical perspectives and not only sensitivity to, but also a craving for liberal rights, such as intellectual freedom, which essentially cannot coexist within the strait-jacket of authoritarianism.

Education helps to build the self-confidence to desire to have a say in government, the confidence to resist oppressive rule, and the skills for fighting repression, including the language for articulating opposition to repression and demanding self-government. Thus, educated people tend to be more politically engaged and tend to turn out to vote disproportionately more than the uneducated. It is not surprising therefore that the educated intelligentsia played vanguard roles in West African anti-colonial agitation.

The educational system is often a crucial part of the process of socialization into democratic politics. In addition to providing opportunities for learning about democratic habits, the educational system can and does often provide a good for setting practicing democratic habits. It is therefore a major building block in the construction of a democratic culture. Elections and politics at the secondary school and university levels – Junior Common Room; Students’ Representative Council; National Union of Ghana Students etc, - are veritable ‘free schools for democracy’ as de Toqueville would describe them. I have fond memories of listening to the lively debates and arguments on hall politics among especially the 4th and 5th year law students at the Legon Hall JCR. I remember that it was from the lips of Mohammed Mumuni, currently the Honorable MP for Kumbungu constituency and senior NDC politician that I first heard the word “filibuster.” I believe those events were part of my own education in democracy, though I cannot say that they were always positive.

Education is believed to correlate strongly with the development of social capital such as trust, reciprocity, civic engagement and possibly civic tolerance – which are considered the deep values of a democratic political culture. Education produces social joiners and civic activists who, according to Robert Putnam in his book, Bowling Alone, are “as a rule, more tolerant of dissent and unconventional behavior than social isolates.” (p355)

However, it is important to point out that education by itself is not a sufficient condition for the emergence and stability of democracy, even if it achieves these lofty goals. It is true that all the older and advanced democracies (also OECD countries) boast of close to full adult literacy rates, while literacy rates are lower on the average in non-democratic states elsewhere in the world. Indeed, on the average, literacy rates are lowest among the non-democratic countries of Africa such as Niger (16% of population 15 and above), Ethiopia 39%, Guinea 41%, Chad 42%, Guinea Bissau 45%, Cote d’Ivoire 46%, and Togo 52%, etc. But China, the former Soviet Union, and Singapore serve as good examples of contemporary societies that remained or have remained undemocratic in spite of very high levels of literacy. Likewise, several African countries with very high literacy rates such as Zimbabwe (89%), Libya (80%), and Swaziland (79%) have autocratic governments.

High literacy rates may be important for democracy, but perhaps what people do with education and how they use it matters more. It is true that education produces knowledge, and knowledge is power. It is also true that power can be used in ways that are socially responsible and protective of the interests of others. In fact, we saw the positive use of the power of education in the leadership roles played by the African intelligentsia in the anti-colonial struggles. We have also seen the positive use of education in individual, educated, middle-class professionals and students engaged in pro-democracy struggles and activism on behalf of the rest of society and in defense of the poor and the disadvantaged, and often at great risk and inconvenience to themselves. But it is equally true that the power and influence that come with education can be used in ways that are dis-empowering, oppressive and exclusively self-serving.

Conditions under which education conduces to democracy and produces democratic outcomes

Modern democracy may be roughly defined as a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, directly or indirectly, through competition and cooperation by their elected representatives (Phillipe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, 1991).
Of course, you cannot have democracy without democrats, but democrats are made, not born. You may have a formal democratic system, but without democrats it will not function as one. Thus, in addition to formal democratic structures and constitutions, it is essential to have an educational system that produces democratic attitudes. In fact the two are mutually reinforcing. No amount of democracy education will work, if people enter an anti-democratic political environment or workplace.

The kind of education necessary for building and sustaining democracy includes:

- Reasonably broad access to education, leading to mass literacy and generalized prosperity. A system of extensive public education for the disadvantaged in society and especially for women (following Mary Wollstonecraft) has also been widely recognized as essential for democracy. Broad access to education is necessary in order to avoid the development of huge social and economic inequalities, a society of a super-educated few and an under-educated many, a society of a highly literate few and mass illiteracy. It is therefore necessary if we are to avoid extreme power asymmetry and the creation of conditions apt to produce an aristocracy or an oligarchy.

However, some caution must be introduced in offering public education as the answer to education for democracy. Public education comes with the risk of state monopoly on the delivery of that education, and this can produce all kinds of perverse effects on democratic development. State monopoly on education can reinforce state hegemony as it did in the former Soviet Union and other communist states, and currently does in North Korea and Cuba. In Ghana in the 1960s, efforts by the state to monopolize education were very much a part of the authoritarian designs of President Nkrumah. Attempts were made under that regime to use the schools as instruments of political indoctrination and government propaganda.

Public education can also foster vulnerability to governmental manipulation in autocratic states. As “wards of the state” and/or dependents, students, lecturers, and indeed the whole academy may succeed in mounting opposition to authoritarian rule and to governmental hegemony. But many SRC or NUGS veterans in these struggles would confirm that it is exceedingly difficult to sustain such pro-democracy and anti-military rule activism when the same government is your tuition payer, landlord, and pocket money provider.

Most importantly, as in the experience of Ghana today, public education can foster a decline in education standards and quality, especially when funding is miserly or grossly mismanaged. This leads to the creation of a small privately-educated elite and a mass of half-literate citizens, a condition that poses a mortal threat to political stability. It also creates a negative social and intellectual climate, one that could encourage the emergence and flourishing of fascist movements.

- The kind of education system that conduces to democracy is one that is not too narrow in content and one whose pedagogical approach is not too regimented or oriented toward rote learning; it is an education that promotes the development of critical thinking and habits of self introspection.

In fact it has been argued by scholars like Benjamin Barber that “(L)iberal arts education and civic education share a curriculum of critical reflection and autonomous thought.” Liberal arts education here is contrasted with the “servile arts” which prevailed in feudal settings as education for the “unfree” and indentured, and education which subordinated learning to apprenticeship a vocation.

Comments on civic and democracy education

As I have sought to convey in the preceding sections, left on its own, even the best education might only produce knowledge. It may only confer power and privilege. Left on its own, education only generates indirect socially beneficial outcomes, and perhaps very little of that. Indeed, some of the most highly educated and literate of people have been notorious and enthusiastic anti-democrats, or even bloody tyrants. It worth noting that Pol Pot in Cambodia and Salazar in Portugal - were both holders of doctorate degrees; even Jonas Savimbi had nearly completed his doctoral work.

In Ghana, any number of super-educated leaders and top notch professionals, including many former student leaders and academics, have been keen promoters and/or
supporters of military and civilian dictatorships. Some have enthusiastically participated in torture, gross abuse of human rights, and abuse of power – as the NRC proceedings are currently laying bare. Indeed, educated middle class people can be highly self-centered, narrow-minded, passive and content to be part of a “morally repugnant elite.”

It is for this reason that we have to place special emphasis on civic and democracy education in the context of democratic development. Such education must help to grow, nurture, and sustain democratic civic virtue and attitudes such as:

- Tolerance for opposing political beliefs and for social and cultural difference as well as ambiguities, i.e., tolerance of ethnic, religious and ideological minorities;
- Civility in political discourse, so that for instance the opposition is not so high strung and the ruling party is not so arrogant and dismissive;
- Trust in other political actors and the social environment, especially trust that they will play fair, keep their word, concede genuine election defeat etc;
- Willingness to compromise that springs from a belief in the necessity and desirability of compromise;
- Moderation, accommodation, cooperation and willingness to bargain with others, i.e., so that attitudes are non-fundamentalist, and political players do not take non-negotiable positions, except perhaps positions on the broad framework of democratic politics as the only legitimate basis for politics;
- Conviction on the part of citizens that they have a duty to protect the vulnerable;
- Commitment to democratic principles and to the democratic system of governance, i.e., at least elite conviction and acceptance that ‘democracy is the only game in town’ to use the phrase of Adam Przeworski or that there no alternative legitimate routes to power except democratic ones. So that, for instance, no professional or political leader accepts to serve in a regime instituted through a coup or some non-democratic means;
- Conviction on the part of citizens that they have a duty to resist oppression;
- Attitudes to authority that are neither blindly submissive nor automatically dismissive and hostile;
- Sense of civic competence and political efficacy, derived principally from the possession of skills and confidence to command the attention of your political leaders and demand accountability.

The above values and attitudes do not occur naturally in society and among citizens. Therefore the principal task of civic education in advancing the cause of democracy is to help citizens acquire and develop attitudes and competences required for democratic citizenship, and to help the society to effect a transition from authoritarian to democratic citizenship.

### Reflections on delivering civic education in a democracy

Civic education can be delivered by multiple agencies in state, civil society, and the private sector. It should involve a combination of primary and secondary socialization agencies, private sector, civil society and specialized state/public institutions. Monopolistic and state controlled approaches must be avoided in the context of promoting liberal democracy.

Ideally, it should begin with the family, which is the primary socialization agency. But family values are not necessarily civic values. In addition families are often organized along strictly hierarchical and patriarchal lines. This may be the forum for building some form of social capital but not necessarily the type that is appropriate for democracy. Socialization at the family level may not ordinarily offer much democracy-relevant or democracy-affirming experience, unless parents are somehow willing and able to instill such ‘non-traditional’ values into their children.

The formal education system is an essential agency for the delivery of civic education. When devoid of authoritarianism and anti-democratic practices and in possession of credible civic education curricula, the primary and secondary schools can be key agencies for civic education for democracy. But the culture of our elementary, secondary and even universities can be profoundly anti-democratic. We all know of the autocratic head-teacher, headmaster, university lecturer, education service official, school prefect, or bullying and money-extorting senior student, applying the martial precept of “obey before you complain.” We also know of the culture of hazing in many secondary schools, which allows human rights to be egregiously abused in the name of some type of social bonding.

The society at large, the workplace and the political system...
itself may be full of anti-democratic influences, corruption and patronage. Therefore, whatever level of civic education one acquires through the formal school system must be supplemented with and reinforced through continuous and life-long adult learning. This is where other secondary agencies of political socialization become crucial to civic education.

Moreover, many countries, especially new democracies, recognize that they face a huge deficit in democratic and civic culture. Thus, they establish state, quasi-state and public institutions to deliver civic education. Examples in Ghana are the Information Services Department; the state-owned media, the Center for Civic Education (CCE) in 1966-72; the National Commission on Democracy (NCD) in the PNDC era; the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), the Electoral Commission (for voter education) and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice –CHRAJ – (for human rights) under the 1992 Constitution.

However, state agencies and parastatal civic education bodies are often dogged by perceptions of pro-government bias, especially in conditions and countries where there is weak separation between state, government and even the ruling party. In such contexts, statutory and parastatal civic education bodies may have constitutional independence, but they tend to lack financial and operational, which reinforces the negative perception of pro-state bias.

Moreover, the democratic content of civic education delivered through state institutions may be weak on account of the fact that state agencies themselves are products of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial authoritarianism. Consciously or unconsciously, the version of the civic education purveyed by state and public agencies in post authoritarian states tend to be pro status quo, pro authority, oriented towards citizen obligations and inadequately focused on citizen rights.

There is also the tendency for civic education developed by and delivered through state and parastatal agencies or even the school system to degenerate into political education, indoctrination and national boosterism as in the Young Pioneer’s Movement or the National Commission on Democracy’s brief flirtation with the idea of creating a 31st December Man.

Moreover, in the conditions of economic decline and stagnation prevailing in most developing countries, statutory bodies and public schools are bound to face severe resource constraints. Therefore, even where they are poised to deliver the right kind of civic education, such agencies are likely to be hamstrung by resource scarcities.

And finally, it will be contrary to the spirit of democracy to keep something as important as civic education a state monopoly.

This is where civil society and non-state agencies become crucial in the delivery of civic education and education for democracy. Given their broad reach in society, the churches, mosques and other religious organizations are also important civic education agencies, especially if they have assimilated or can accommodate liberal democratic values.

Similarly, civil society bodies such as professional and occupational associations (GBA, GNAT, TUC, etc) and specialized general NGOs (such as CIVITAS, Ghana Legal Literacy Foundation), as well as the mass media, especially independent media, can play extremely useful roles in civic education for democracy, especially where they themselves are internally democratic and committed to democracy.

Generally speaking, civil society and non-state secular and religious bodies can help bridge the resource and information gap that official civic education bodies are faced with. Moreover, the involvement of civil society in civic education provides an opportunity to pluralize the content and the delivery of civic education. It therefore helps to steer the project of civic education away from or prevent it from degenerating into political education, protects it from becoming a pro-state project, and keeps it on a democratic path.

Conclusion

Education is very useful to democracy. It creates a better potential for the emergence, sustenance, and deepening of democracy. It creates a favorable soil for democracy to grow and flourish.

However, education can do more to foster democracy only where it is broadly accessible, liberal, and endowed with a strong civic content. And it is also the case that the delivery of civic and democracy education will be enriched and sustained only where it involves a combination of private, civil society and public agencies.
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