

democracy & education

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Linking primary education and democracy in Africa

It is argued that democratically-elected governments may have a greater incentive than authoritarian regimes to provide their citizens with primary schooling. It is also argued that democracy may be reinforced by primary education encouraging democratic attitudes. Is there evidence of any truth in these statements in African countries?

A major question for development is to find if and when democratic governments have a greater incentive to provide basic public services in comparison to autocratic states. If governments depend on people's support in elections, then they are far more likely to spend a large part of their budgets on primary education, one of the most important basic services.

The issue of primary education has been prominent in recent election campaigns in some African countries, including Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya. It is also

argued that the opinions of more educated people may favour democracy over other systems of government. This may have nothing to do with attitudes, however, but relate instead to income levels.

Research by the London School of Economics looks at the extent to which the emergence and sustainability of democracy in African countries has depended on the population's education levels. The study finds there is a clear link between democracy and greater provision of primary education, yet less evidence that primary education leads to significant shifts in creating democratic attitudes and therefore causes democracy:

- Democratic African governments have a greater incentive than authoritarian states to provide primary education for their populations.
- People with primary education are generally more likely to support democracy but the size of this effect appears to be small.
- Time plays a major role in the effect of democracy on education, and the effect of education on democracy: if a country experiences a rapid change towards democratic elections, governments have an incentive to expand primary education provision rapidly. Yet a large and rapid

expansion in primary schooling provision takes decades before leading to a shift in opinions towards democracy.

These findings are based on evidence from 12 African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe), yet they are likely to have implications for broader discussions on the link between education and democracy:

- Democracy can be a powerful incentive to governments to provide basic services, even in very poor countries that have 'weak' economic and political institutions.
- If democracy is dependent on the emergence of 'democratic attitudes', then expanding the provision of primary schooling may have a relatively small effect in promoting these attitudes, which will spread only over a long period.

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Promoting democracy through school inspectors in the Gambia

Education is a valuable tool for helping to bring about democratic values and behaviours. Yet evidence suggests that training new teachers on education for democracy is not enough on its own to effect democratic changes. If school inspectors and advisers also undergo professional development on this critical issue, what impact will this have?

Since the end of the Cold War, democracy has increasingly taken hold in Africa. Ten of the 53 countries are now considered democracies and ten are semi-democracies (including the Gambia), yet 21 remain autocracies. Over the years, authoritarian rule has deepened poverty levels in Africa.

Recent research on attitudes to democracy in Africa showed that many citizens overwhelmingly support democracy. However, many had only a vague understanding of democratic values and procedures. Education

has a role to play in increasing understanding of democracy by providing the knowledge, skills and values associated with a political culture that supports democracy.

A study by the University of Birmingham discusses one example of how education can help achieve the development of democratic values and behaviours: a project which explored how the Gambian inspectorate could encourage sustainable democratic practices in schools.

Evaluations from workshops found that most of the participants identified specific aspects they had learned as useful and could state one aspect of their practice that they would change as a result of the training. They felt a need in their inspections to move towards more openness, trust and discussion with teachers to improve schooling. However, a difficult issue they identified was how to find visible evidence of democracy at work in a classroom.

The study made the following findings:

- There was evidence that the workshops brought about a change in knowledge, attitudes and practice on education for democracy among the inspectors and advisers.
- The project had an influence on the inspectorate, which as a result recognised that education for democracy should be

part of their brief.

- There was evidence of strong support for democratic education and a link was made between education for democracy and education for peace.
- However, the research also found evidence of social and cultural tensions around democracy and democratic education. Workshop discussions pointed out that for many years Britain had a state religion (Church of England) and membership of an upper house of the legislature was hereditary. Similarly, the apparent contradiction of Islam and elders with democracy in the Gambia may well be resolved in a more democratic manner over time. If more democratic forms of education are to be established in the country, there is evidence of other tensions and barriers that will also need to be dealt with in future.

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'Democracy, Development and Education: Working with the Gambian Inspectorate', *International Journal of Educational Development* 26, pages 618-630, by Clive Harber, 2006

Education in support of democracy in Malawi

It is assumed that education has an important influence on people's understanding of and support for democracy. The World Bank argues that investment in education is essential for advancing towards democracy and improved governance. Is this the case, however, in newly democratic developing countries with low levels of education?

As there has been relatively little research into this issue in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, a study by the University of Oxford and University of Sussex examined the impact of different levels of schooling on people's attitudes towards democracy in Malawi. The study analysed Afrobarometer data conducted in 1999, at a time when most voters would have been educated under the former dictatorship of President Banda. It places particular emphasis on the effects of primary schooling as most voters have not been educated beyond this level.

After three decades of President Banda's

rule, economic recession and internal and external pressure finally led to multi-party elections in 1994. The new government abolished primary school fees, resulting in increased enrolment by 50 percent. However, Malawi has yet to achieve universal primary schooling, with three-quarters of those who enrol dropping out. An important question, therefore, is whether primary schooling contributes to mass support for democracy.

Findings of the study included:

- Education is strongly related to support for democracy, even if schooling occurred during authoritarian rule.
- Primary schooling, even if not completed, has a positive effect on people's preference for democracy.
- However, a more nuanced level of support for democracy, which involves the explicit rejection of alternatives to democratic rule, is strongly associated with secondary and higher levels of education experience.
- Moreover, incomplete primary education goes hand in hand with lower levels of understanding of the meaning of democracy.

The research supports the views of external agencies such as the World Bank that increasing access to education will improve support for democracy. There are a number of implications for policy:

- Education appears to be a good investment in any attempt to promote

democratic cultures, as it is an effective tool even at the primary level.

- A basic level of support for democracy can be attained by increasing the number of students who complete primary education.
- However, more robust support for democracy requires participation at secondary and higher levels of education.
- As these gains are experienced even where education is provided under authoritarian rule, careful consideration needs to be given to the benefits of investing in specific citizenship education given limitations of time and resources in schools.

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Citizenship education promotes social reform in Brazil

Although there is near universal agreement on the importance of human rights, many people in both rich and poor countries remain socially excluded. They may have the formal status of citizens without being able to practise effective citizenship. How can education encourage active political participation to help bring about social justice for all?

With the rise of the 'globalised world', the concept and identity of the nation-state is increasingly being challenged, forcing people to reconsider traditional views of what it means to be a 'citizen'. Citizenship education has long been taught in schools around the world and in some countries it is being reintroduced. However, many conflicting views exist on the content of such courses and what exactly 'citizenship' is.

A study by the University of London's Institute of Education looks at a case study in the local municipality of Pelotas, a large town in southern Brazil, which introduced educational initiatives based on participatory democracy during the period 2001 to 2004.

The study found that the Pelotas approach:

- aims to address Brazil's history of authoritarianism and political exclusion

and to provide the education to which all citizens have a right

- reflects the principle of participatory democracy in the planning and development of its policy
- is characterised by extensive social, political and civil rights as well as active participation and collective organisation
- focuses on universal values but allows some room for difference
- aims to empower citizens to defend their rights and to participate politically
- encourages critical attitudes towards authorities and allegiance to the people rather than the nation or city.

This approach is not an attempt to defend the legitimacy of the existing government but rather to create a new society with full, active citizenship for all. It challenges the theoretical debates in the literature in three main areas:

- Given Brazil's history of political exclusion, participation is viewed as a question of rights: exclusion was addressed by changing structures rather than by encouraging working-class people to be responsible and participate.
- Citizenship in Pelotas is not seen as an allegiance to a geographical or ethnic area, but to the community of people, or the society that people live in. A good citizen is someone who defends rights

and seeks justice for all rather than working for the glory of the 'fatherland'.

- Good citizenship, therefore, does not mean unquestioning allegiance and so schools do not need to develop conformity to policies that promote the glory of the nation. People need a sense of justice and to be critical to ensure that the principles of justice are upheld.

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