Executive Summary

Colonial Education in Africa: Retrospects and Prospects

William H. Watkins Ph.D.
University of Illinois, Chicago

The professional educational research community has undertaken a wide range of studies over the last century. Research findings have enhanced our understanding in unimagined ways. Indeed the art, science and technology of teaching and learning has come a long way in a short time. Despite advances, gaps exist in our collective understanding because many sociological and socio-political issues remain under-researched. One such area has to do with the foundations and effects of colonization on education and societal development. Colonialism, a worldwide problem, has been particularly devastating to the African continent.

Following the Renaissance, European mercantile endeavors quickly evolved into the exploitative extraction of Africa's raw materials. Colonialism created horrific inequities and unspeakable poverty on the African continent. The new period of imperialism re-ordered the world's racial, socio-political, educational and cultural relationships over the next four centuries. This essay examines the complex dynamics surrounding public education within the colonial drama.

Educational researchers in the West are well served by a better understanding of the ongoing role of education in Europe's colonization of Africa. The introductory section of the paper proposes that a socio-historical and critical social science intellectual framework, advanced by Dr. DuBois and other African(ist) educational sociologists, best allows for a revealing inquiry into the topic. The author aligns himself with this brand of critical scholarship for transformation and social change.

The body of the paper begins with a review of the historical foundations of colonialism on the African continent. The role of Western banks and debt bondage are viewed as major contributors to the deforming of African economic and social life. Further, issues of governance and ethnicity under direct colonialism provide a context within which to introduce educational problems.

Because direct colonialism ended in the 1950s and 1960s, the author provides a description of the problems in the post-colonial setting. A section on modernization and education recounts theorizing and failed efforts at development. As the "Cold War" gave way to a globalized and restructured world economy in the1980s, massive debt plunged Africa into even greater difficulty. The next section of the paper explores the tricky and often misunderstood politics of "structural adjustment" and its crippling effect on Africa's infrastructure and educational institutions.

Having established a historical and socio-political framework for understanding, the paper moves to issues of education and social development. The "authoritarian" school, funding, teaching styles, curriculum and textbook issues are among the topics explored. In all cases, the legacy and aftermath of colonization have created overwhelming obstacles to progress.

The next section of the paper speaks directly to the research and philanthropic communities of the Western industrial powers. It summarizes the flawed "Fordist" ideology and failed assistance programs and policies of recent decades. The overarching conclusion suggests that Western models of development and mass education cannot be beneficially imposed on the African reality.

The paper concludes with a pessimistic assessment of state politics in most African nations. Governing bodies and leaders are mired in bureaucracy, corruption, civil strife and now region-wide conflict. Despite near apocalyptic problems, the human spirit remains resilient. The many "greening" projects throughout the continent continue to advance. With meager resources, local self-help projects struggle to bring about advancement. One such undertaking, the Gao School Museum approach in Mali is presented as an example of innovative education. Committed to collaborative research, experientialism, community investigation and scientific research, the Gao School Museum approach might be the model for real social change outside the entanglements of power politics. Researchers, funders and international agencies should want to further understand the great potential for progress, democracy and social change at the local self-help level.