

Mwalimu on education

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MARIA KAMM has spent her career in education and entrepreneurship in Tanzania. She is the founder and executive Chairperson of the Mama Clementina Foundation and a founder of the Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation.

Having retired, and looking back on my 48 years as an educator in search of the influences on my work I realise now that it was the life, the philosophy, and the integrity of Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the teacher, Mwalimu, that provided them. Much has been written regarding his education policies, but for me, his approach to education can best be summed up by his response to one of his daughters after she was selected to continue her education in a Government boarding school upcountry. She did not want to go, and asked her father to intervene with the Ministry of Education to get her transferred to a day school in Dar es Salaam. “My daughter,” he said, “you are one of the few Tanzanians privileged to be selected to continue with your education, you should be grateful for the opportunity. It is a privilege, you either accept to go upcountry or you stay at home”

In March 1967 Mwalimu introduced the policy of Education for Self Reliance. At the core of the project was nation building. His vision was to create a nation of one people, and of one language, Kiswahili; a confident, educated people with equal opportunities for all; free of tribalism, racism, corruption, and discrimination on the grounds of religion or regionalism.

For Mwalimu, the purpose of education was to provide young people with a holistic knowledge base. This was an approach that emphasised self-discipline and the striving for excellence. At the same time, the aim of education was to prepare young people to serve society. For him it was the nation’s moral obligation to invest in the education of young men and women; likewise it remained a moral obligation for the youth who were educated by the nation to “pay back” those who had sacrificed and invested their meagre resources to educate them, namely their rural community.

I was privileged to be one of the heads of a secondary school, and directly engaged in the implementation of the policy of Education for Self Reliance. This was when I realised the great challenges and demands involved in implementing this policy. Carrying out the plan called for an understanding of the vision behind it. It called for committed “servant leaders” who were both selfless and aggressive in introducing educational innovation. It demanded a daring spirit, confidence and skills, and all backed up by administrative competence.

The decision to go ahead with Education for Self

Reliance resulted in substantial changes to the post-independence curriculum, among them the introduction of universal primary education, and the introduction of manual work whereby educational institutions were allocated with land to be cultivated by students. Schools also became community centres of education. Adult Education was introduced and students were obliged to teach the three Rs to the rest of the community.

In 1970 discriminatory practices in the organisation of secondary schools were abolished. State schools managed by religious organisations were taken over by the Government and were immediately opened for admission to all denominations, and the names of schools were changed to do away with religious identity. New subjects were brought in, national examinations set, and marking took place in Tanzania instead of English, as it had done under colonisation.

Mwalimu’s philosophy of Education for Self Reliance gave the country a sense of direction and national pride. The policy was loudly applauded by the people. Looking back, we might ask ourselves what happened to the vision, to the philosophy of Education for Self Reliance. Sadly, from the late 1980s onward, the policy lost momentum.

It is possible that the attitudes and foreign-orientated values of those whose job it was to implement the policy hindered innovative thinking, and hampered the development of dynamic leaders able to understand and implement the new changes in systematically.

It could also be that the implications and consequences implicit in the call for change were not fully understood by all those involved. Mwalimu’s goal of a new educational model called for sacrifice and personal commitment to an egalitarian society free of the scourge of tribalism, racism, religious conflict, and regionalisation. Mwalimu’s vision of education was the spirit and the mirror of the nation.

Perhaps there were not enough disciples; committed, experienced followers were too few to guarantee a concerted and sustainable policy of Education for Self Reliance. It might also be that the sense of power and the enthusiasm that came with independence may have blinded some leaders to the seriousness of the implications and consequences of being a ‘servant leader’. Nevertheless, Mwalimu left a legacy, a voice of conscience that can still be heard. History will contribute to that legacy. **F**