

To Realise the Promise of Learning

My clearest memory of Maman Bitsinda, my first-grade teacher, is the way she teased any pupil who wet their pants. She would lean down to closely check the extent of the damage (it usually ranged from splashy to hopeless), and would casually mention your father's name and tell you how you are a chip off the old block. Her dedication to our learning and education transcended the profession. Even five years after leaving her grade, she would check in on pupils who had passed through her class before the National exams. She knew well that most of her former students wouldn't make it to high school, but she hoped that one or two would. The primary-to-secondary transition rate at my school was around 2 out of a class of 45. Nationally, in 2007 when I finished my sixth grade, this rate was around 55%. It stood at 73% in 2018. This improvement was a result of a creative expansion of our education system through the Nine-Year Basic Education programme and more vocational offerings in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) schools. However, there remain persisting issues relating to the competing goals of education –and it appears that a possible solution might reside, not at the centre, but on the peripheries of our current education system.

Every year, we get a few opportunities to (re-)evaluate our learning system. We put on our experts' hats and diagnose so many social ills, including those in the education sector. Most of us agree that the quality of education in Rwanda remains under par—the ironic jokes about Ireme ry'uburezi, which bear witness to this, abound. The ills are many: a perennial lack of funds, a nebulous system of intended outcomes, inadequate teacher training, pedagogies that change too fast or too slowly, either too much or too little

political content, underpaid professionals, a mismatch between school curriculum and the expectations of the job market, unclear linguistic guidance – the list is long. If our national discourse on education has always been heated, it is because education is, after all, a conduit to many social and individual benefits.

Suggested solutions have been as versatile as the ills they seek to heal. Some have argued for a system more attuned to the needs of the market. A few weeks ago, during the Prime Minister's Report on the state of vocational training to both chambers of Parliament, an Honourable Member suggested that all 12YBE schools should become TVET to produce the skills our economy needs, adding that 'students need not be taught other theories like history.' In response to this view, others argued for a more well-rounded education which, besides forming the future workforce, also forms the future citizenry. (Dr Lonzen Rugira's [article](#) early this year brilliantly summarises these two positions).

Still on this platform, Dr Lonzen Rugira has [pointed out](#) our military's unique discipline and sense of purpose and proposed their people/community-centred strategy as a possible remedy to the unending confusion around school reforms. Once our society decides our education dogma, it becomes easier for other factors to align. As it has been argued, once we define "who we are, where we want to go," the military would step in as a great implementing agent. There are a lot of merits to this perspective.

Yet, there are a few questions that deserve more attention before we can enjoy the fruits of an efficient implementation of education (and perhaps other) policies. First, most of our challenges are exactly around defining this dogma, challenges that require more than the blunt force of an efficient institution. The national dialogue needed to fix this dogma problem will be neither short nor one-time. It will be continuous, and we will have to navigate and negotiate the

changing needs and place of our country in the world. It will also necessitate a consideration of the perspectives of our entire citizenry. Second, education doesn't wait. As we have this dialogue, millions of our children are in school, and they deserve a system that works for them. In other words, any proposed structural changes can't justify inaction, no matter how temporary.

It is important to note that this conundrum isn't an exceptionally Rwandan one. In the late 90s, for example, David Labaree, a professor at the Stanford School of Education, lamented that the American education system was beleaguered by conflicting goals. In his 1997 article, Prof. Labaree identified three distinct and often conflicting goals of American education: democratic equality (the formation of citizens), social efficiency (formation of adequate workforce), and social mobility (individual prosperity). This conflict, he argued, is reflected in the relatively unsuccessful reforms education systems undergo. What looks like an education improvement from one perspective might look like a decline from another. Take second-language acquisition, for example. From the perspective of economic reality, young people do better at their jobs with better language proficiency. From the perspective of history and black liberation, however, second language acquisition has often been a tool of colonisation, forcing the 'native' to either resist or eagerly embrace the reality of the oppressor. How do we solve these tensions?

Alternative pathways towards quality education

To optimise the distinct goals of education, we need to diversify avenues of learning. In other words, we need to design alternative pathways to learning that can give a chance to as many of our people to improve their knowledge and skills as possible. These pathways need not be lofty in goals: community-based culture evenings might do a better job to preserve our language and culture than formal schooling. New

publishing initiatives have done a lot to encourage the culture of reading, and their role in the education ecosystem shouldn't be underestimated. Similarly, debate programmes in high schools have done a lot to improve our students' exposure and critical thinking.

It is increasingly crucial to realise that training our people for a very unpredictable future requires more comprehensive and dynamic approaches because no size can fit all. The more diverse the avenues of learning, the greater excellence we can reach in all expected outcomes of education. This will necessitate bravery of imagination and courage to implement unconventional methods. We can't get stuck with the diagnosis – we must be brave enough to try a few treatments. The more pathways we create for our young talents, the better prepared they will be to compete in a highly competitive and merit-based economy.

We also need an environment without the anxiety of constant grading, where primacy is put on learning and where discipline and accountability don't mean harsh and humiliating punishments. For instance, over the last 18 months, our team at Bridge2Rwanda has worked to develop a summer boot camp ([Isomo Academy](#)) that focuses on improving English proficiency, global openness, and engaged leadership. The deficiency in these skill sets has been the main bottleneck preventing many Rwandans from accessing global opportunities. We have received almost 3,000 applicants from more than 350 different schools. During our recruitment, we got to meet 400 finalists for virtual interviews. We were amazed by the amount of talent and excellence distributed across the country, as we met students with passions and aspirations that transcend their personal gain. Our hope for Isomo is that we can help reinvent spaces for learning and language acquisition.

During my recent conversation with Maman Bitsinda, who has since retired, she told me about her tutoring efforts in her community. I was glad that, two decades later, she was still

educating. She typifies an educator who understands the needs of her students and community. She was offering an alternative and supplementary pathway to learning, no matter how small. To realise the promise of learning, we need to create, for everyone, more pathways towards an education that will equip the learner with key skills and perspectives that will prepare them to lead healthy and productive lives. Learning avenues should be, ultimately, as diverse as human experience itself.