

Education Research in West Africa: The Role of WERA in Fostering Research

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Abstract

This paper discusses education research in West Africa in the attempt to identify WERA's role to provide support that will enable African scholars in collaboration with ERNWACA to coordinate efforts, project and vision so as to respond to Africa's research agenda. Major challenges found in the areas of publications and research dissemination require WERA's support. African scholarship is weak in relation to the enormity of its research agenda. Africa's dwindling indigenous knowledge needs to be revived and linked to current curricula activities in terms of content and pedagogical practices and context specific rich material recourses of various kinds to sustain teaching, learning, evaluation and policy, relevant to Africa's specific needs in this global era. Research seems to be the major mechanism yet African scholars are ill equipped to employ relevant methodologies that can capture Africa's reality in order to enhance sustainable development.

Key Concepts: Research, Indigenous knowledge, Culture, Formal Education and Methodology

Introduction

This paper examines the scope of educational research in West Africa with a view to identify what role WERA can play in advancing transformative research in education that will inform social policy so as to enable development and poverty reduction. WERA otherwise known as World Education Research Association evidently has a worldwide mission to make the world better understood through collaborative education research, disseminating findings and building research capacity. Such understanding makes people to appreciate the universality reference, which holds that all human beings have values, goals, expectations, images and beliefs because they are human even when there are differences. I am not referring here to the Western colonial

domination in its production of a universally valid knowledge that preaches deficit hypothesis knowledge base for colonized people thus invalidating ways of knowing developed by all (Kincheloe,2008). I am referring to what Parker and Shotter (1990) point out as the essential importance of respect and appreciation for people whose culture is different. I see WERA's approach as having a moral implication whereby the identification and understanding of cultural differences will give a better insight into African's knowledge systems. This will lead to improvement in explaining why the persistent argument that western education and research practices do not address African realities. Africa had had great civilizations and had been modernized.

WERA's organization of this particular symposium underscores its underlying philosophy of not emphasizing only a worldwide perspective but also a worldview perspective by which reference is made to cultural frames of the universe. This includes a psychological and cultural outlook regarding the place and role of human beings (Nsamenang 1992a). We need to revisit our perceptions about people and their culture to enable a better understanding of why research must address contextual contingencies that impact social, educational and economic life. In reiterating what I consider to be WERA's mission in educational research, I borrow the views of Kincheloe, (2008,p.5) which hold that "Universalism, the idea that all scientifically produced knowledge is true in all places and at all times, is a key concept----- of knowledge and its relation to critical pedagogy----." "Universality reference by UNESCO (1999, p.1) postulates that "all cultures can contribute scientific knowledge of universal value"

African communities today are "contexts in which interactions between cultures are highlighting differences, revealing needs, uncovering problems, throwing up concerns, offering alternatives, and signaling the need for changes in attitudes, approaches, methodologies and service provisions" (Smale, 1998, p. 3).

To discuss research in West Africa, I believe is an attempt to inform others about the context of Africa as a whole and West Africa in particular since the untapped rich knowledge terrain for research has scientifically been inadequately presented by researchers . The rich folk and crafted knowledge systems of Africa must be made accessible through relevant and appropriate research approaches with researchers who would not make value judgments about Africa's knowledge on

standards and quality measured against Euro-American standards and values. Essentially, researchers in education need to have a clear picture of the field and its characteristics in time, space and philosophy. It is only in doing this that we can understand the implications of speculations by some scholars who have constantly distorted its reality in terms of material spiritual, epistemological, psychological, educational and cultural richness.

The main question to be addressed in this paper is the extent to which WERA can support educational research in West Africa through capacity building, scholarly writing, publishing and creating a network of a research community for experience sharing, learning and searching for funding for comparative research.

Historical Perspectives

From a historical perspective, Africans like other human beings have tried both to obtain and create their own knowledge about their environment and to appraise its significance. It is in the same manner that they have tried to make significant meaning of their world and life itself so as to extend their knowledge to improve their way of life rendering it more comfortable and secured. A backdrop of the African story tells us this has been very difficult. Yet Africans are united by a common spirit irrespective of the many detracting issues created by colonialism. Such is the case because even the concept of universality is understood only as an ethnocentric justification of self –interested and exploitative colonial actions with the concepts of superiority and inferiority creating a devastating precedence that has weakened Africa and misrepresented it (Tedla, E. 1996, Kincheloe, 2008). Capacity Building in the area of research and scholarly writing that may lead to scientific publications is challenges facing African scholars.

The history of West Africa can be divided into five major periods: first, its prehistory, in which the first human settlers arrived, developed agriculture, and made contact with peoples to the north; the second, the Iron Age with the existence of empires that consolidated both intra-African and extra-African trade, and developed centralized states. Between the 5th and 16th centuries these powerful kingdoms and empires flourished in West Africa, and much of their power was predicated on the development of trade with North Africa and with the Arab lands to the east (Laurel Sanford, 2007, <http://www.powellcenter.org/uploads/colonialwestAfricaU.pdf>) .Some of these empires with great civilizations in the 8th century AD (Ghana Empire, Mali Empire and Songhai Empire) today are modern states. Even a University of Timbuktu existed.; third, major polities flourished, with extensive contact

with non-Africans; fourth, the colonial period, in which Great Britain and France controlled nearly the whole of the region; fifth, the post-independence era, in which the current nations were formed, preg-nated today with the aftermath of colonial philosophy and administration. French West Africa today, is made up of Benin, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Togo; English West Africa is made up of Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria as shown on the map.



Figure 1 Map of Africa

Source: http://www.travelnotes.org/_vti_bin/shtml.exe/Africa/index.htm/map

The richness of the African setting is crucial and nowhere else does the environment so

powerfully shape and sharpen orientations and attitudes as in African where Nsamenang (1992a) cited Mazrui, (1986b, p, 41) as saying that “geography is the mother of ((African) history”.

Cultural Issues

Africa’s rich culture has not adequately been addressed in research especially that on education. Confirmation is obtained from Mazrui, (1986b) who referred to contemporary African reality pertaining to a social scenario characterized by Africa’s rich indigenous inheritance, Eastern traditions and Western legacies. The talking drum is an instrument unique to the West African region, yet very little is known about it nor its significance and functions. Despite the variety of cultures in West Africa, from Nigeria through to Senegal, there are general similarities in dress, cuisine, music and culture that are not shared extensively with groups outside the geographic region. Islam is the predominant historical religion of the West African interior and the far west coast of the continent; whereas Christianity is predominant in coastal regions of Nigeria, Ghana, and Cote d’Ivoire. Elements of indigenous religions are practiced throughout the continent. Africans believe they are bounded by a common spirit. Along with historic migrations, these religions have culturally linked the peoples of West Africa more than those in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

In many African traditional religions, there is a belief in a cyclical nature of reality. It is believed that the living stands between their ancestors and the unborn (Mbiti, 1990). Like various other traditional religions, African traditional religions embrace natural phenomena such as the moon, sun, stars, rain and drought and the rhythmic pattern of agriculture. Secret and sacred societies are important parts of indigenous religion. Among traditional secret societies are hunting societies whose members are taught not only the physical methods, but also respect for the spiritual aspect of the hunting and use of honorable magical means to obtain important co-operation from the animal hunted. These religions are not static. They incorporate the ever changing actual experiences. Rituals and religious observance, and spiritual traditions indicate that it centers on spirits in various aspects of nature, deities and the ancestors. Rituals and festivals have socio-medico- religious values whereby rituals serve as sanctifying institutions through which to approach an otherwise unreachable God (Nsamenang 1992a). Yet the west believes that all African traditional religion is considered similar. Traditional African religions involve

teachings, practices, and rituals that lend structure to indigenous African societies. These traditional African religions also play a significant part in the cultural understanding and awareness of the people and their communities. Yet these do not constitute components of the current school curriculum nor are there relevant research findings that can help people to understand the role of religion in the lives of the people and even the differences between traditional religion and euro-centric religious practices. Other cultural issues that would impact education are perceptions of gender, early marriage that influence access, progression, retention and completion, but they have not been adequately studied.

Education

The concept of education in relation to teaching, learning and assessment including guiding policy begs for profound research endeavours particularly with the pressing need to integrate technology in pedagogic activities. Clearly, there is need for a generative science of education that will support research so that research evidence will orient the construction of education programmes. In this age of technology, it would appear education is lagging behind to adapt scientific achievements to pedagogical practices and learning. The paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy with the integration of technology necessitates new reflections. On this account, the demand on education to keep pace with technological advancements and to define precisely the competences required to meet the needs of the technological age requires research support (Tchombe, 2006, 2008). Even the great depth between theory and practice in African education system that usually would pose a negative impact on process necessitate evaluation. A pertinent challenge is where do Africa's pedagogies fit in? This is a great challenge in the face of scientific technologies.

Africa is the cradle of humanity and its experiences and philosophies are found encoded in its symbols , rituals, design, artifice, music, dances , proverbs, riddles , poetry, technology, sciences and oral traditions. Yet these are not well integrated in the curricula at all levels. Nor some employed as data collecting strategies to enable a clear understanding of the African's theory of mind. Africa needs a new type of education that is rooted in the traditions of African philosophy and indigenous education especially with the increasing demand for entrepreneurship education at all levels. This type of education that focused on skills development is paramount in Africa's indigenous pedagogies. There is a plethora of books on Africa written by others. Indigenous African education plays a vital role in the transmission of essential concepts in understanding and experiencing the fullness of life. This

transmission takes place through the teaching and learning of skills, ability, craft, virtues, morals conduct, etiquette, discipline and order through participatory approaches such as apprenticeship and with the home and community serving as laboratories(Gloria Emeagwali, 2003)). These are all interrelated components of indigenous education that enable people to understand what it takes to be fully human. Africa's traditional education adopted a philosophy that was pragmatic, functional and productive with the product of being socially responsible through an apprenticeship mode of learning. Colonial education deviates from this and focuses more on an elitist education that produced skills that respond to colonial mission and vision. It is essential to underscore that traditional African education; and epistemological practices are not based on a standardized test-driven curriculum with defined ways of teaching and learning within a standardized curriculum. WERA's reflections on how this can be synchronized will be strategic in its role and mission to provide the way forward and making its voice heard in the developing world.

Although a great deal has been written about Africa, however, these have been written from a Western perspective that is highly ethnocentric. These have used European and American standards, concepts and cultural peculiarities as universal measures to evaluate traditional African art, music and other social institutions, which may not be appropriate. Evidence can be found in Cole and Cole (1996). As we know, the way people interpret their world shapes their understanding of themselves, nature and divinity. However, there is no denial that Western thoughts form the basis of modern African education, but Africa's traditions must be transmitted to the next generation and formal education is a major mechanism.

What type of research model would ensure that modern education systems based on Euro-American paradigms address Africa's peculiarities? Research in education in West Africa should examine the foundations of the continent's modern education. Education as indicated from research influences economic, social, cultural (Tchombe, 2008) and political development in Africa. Therefore, so the focus on Western education models postulates that development in Africa derives from western concepts indicated by western social theory. Since development in Africa would be a derivative from western epistemology and perhaps practices, such will not be responding to the needs of the people. Therefore, how do we conduct research that enables the development of curricula through all levels of educations and enable students draw from early history of Africa through comparative views on government,

religion, arts and cultural activities? How can such curricula enable students at various levels to analyze the economic and social systems using proverbs or poems that can be applied in today's context?

The education system in most countries in West Africa is facing monumental challenges such as resource deficiencies. Why? Africa is so rich with mineral and natural resources. This is compounded with the misallocations in the composition of public spending across educational levels leading to poor quality schooling from elementary to higher education. Grade repetition and dropping out of primary school before completion are serious problems. Transitions and certification are also serious problems, which are also compounded by gender insensitive pedagogies. Transitions from one level to another are problematic. Girls are at a particular disadvantage. Across all grades, repetition and dropout rates are systematically higher for girls than for boys because of early marriages, early pregnancies and other gender-related practices. Among children that do progress through school, there is considerable concern about the extent of learning and cognitive outcomes and the prospects of job opportunities.

Teachers' quality and quantity are also areas of great concern at all levels with the best teachers moving towards greener pastures (Europe and America), increasing the brain drain in the continent... Other concerns are the characteristics of school infrastructure, supplies and equipment, the home environment and parental background, all of which represent concerns over the value added of going to school.

The relevance of strategic curricula content is also crucial. Clearly, the ability of countries to increase human capital, which is essential for development, has been seriously compromised by the weakness of education systems. Governments confront numerous challenges in their efforts to increase access to basic education, to improve education quality, and to increase the efficiency of the management of the educational system. The concern for education governance and decentralization at all levels is being addressed. For each of these policy objectives, research is needed to understand the factors at different levels that affect education outcomes, And how the policies meet the challenges of modern West Africa. Such challenges include how to build and retain capacity in West Africa. The west fans and fosters brain drain and talent flight stealthily.

Research and Collaborative Research

African traditional education and its content have rarely been seen to provide lessons to be learnt. Western perception of reality may not be the same for Africans. The decontextualisation of knowledge in Africa as a result of colonialism disfavoured African education traditions. Current researchers in the social, psychological and education sciences would need to review their research options in term of

theories and methodologies. My understanding of African indigenous knowledge and epistemology suggests the existence of a big gap in education research in West Africa and the appropriateness of methodologies. I strongly believe and would reiterate the importance of understanding the society, cultural practices and the education systems. Education systems are complex and are shaped by a country's economic, social and political history.

Both undergraduate and graduate students in west Africa have gained international research experiences through collaborative research. However, success in collaborative research requires experience, commitment, long term endurance, and follows up, continuous dialogue to provide an enabling environment with optimum respect and collaboration with all the partners. ROCARE which I am representing here has engaged in collaborative research with the university of Montreal in Canada. One area of study which Cameroon participated in was the transnational research on the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Secondary schools in five West African countries (Tchombe 2006). A follow up phase examined ICT, focusing on teachers, with extension to Central Africa. For the fifth edition of the Small grants for interdisciplinary Education Research, ERNWACA and its partners are currently funding research in the area of four identified themes: (1) Millennium Challenge Goals and Education for African Development; (2) Education and socioeconomic integration (Women and Development); (3) Curriculum Reforms for/and Improvement in Education Quality; (4) Non formal Education: Islamic "Schools" (i.e. Madrassas and other Koranic School Centres). To ensure that quality is addressed, four resource persons specialized in the area will follow up the researchers. As a first step, there will be training session for the recipients and scholarly writing and training for the group of the previous year.

My intention in this paper is to initiate a new vision whereby WERA can forge in its mission, with a new research agenda for education research scholars in Africa. This will enable them through collaborative research with the ROCARE Network, to identify and build good practices, skills and knowledge of the past and present through the use of appropriate knowledge, research methods and technologies to identify Africa's rich indigenous knowledge that can also inform Euro- American education systems and practices. Formal education, modeled along western lines ignores the cultures, history and contributions of Africa to the world.

The research community (from universities and research centres), should share experiences and findings regarding the constraint and opportunities to improve educational outcomes in West Africa. Research topics of interest are many. The implementation of any education research programmes requires development of partnerships and networks of institutions including professionals and also postgraduate programmes that consist of Master and PhD, short courses and tailor-made training. Collaborative research programmes often contribute to capacity building of partner institutions through integration with Master and PhD training. The enhancement of research and education connectivity in Africa is urgent. How can WERA coordinate efforts, projects whereby experts can connect with non experts to ensure connectivity? West-Africa is dedicated to enhancing research, outreach services and teaching in the field of education for sustainable development. It seeks to bring together for purposes of discussion, exchange of information, the conduct and dissemination of research, and sharing of information and data about teaching and learning for the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of the region. It will seek to develop resources particularly in West Africa and around West African institutions of higher education and research networks.

In the plan of Action for Second Decade (2006-2015) of Education for Africa, priority areas are: (1) Gender and Culture; (2) Education Management information systems; (3) Teacher development; (4) Tertiary Education; (5) Technical and vocational education and training; (6) Curriculum and teaching and learning materials and quality management. Some of its major goals are to reverse the current phenomena of “data blank” and build capacity at both institutional and individual expert levels to ensure development and maintenance of educational management information systems capable of producing reliable statistical data and effective analysis and use of the data for monitoring and policy development purposes. Concern for research was highlighted in the goal for higher education which must be revitalized so that it is engaged in fundamental and developmental –oriented research among other issues. The promotion of research and original knowledge production in higher education is vitally important ensuring at the same time quality assurance and control. Concern for teachers’ quality and quantity has spilled over from the first decade 1997-2006 with focused on the enhancement of

quality and relevance of pedagogical research, which improves capacity for action research in education. To achieve this, the intervention of strong and recognized networks such as ROCARE, in West Africa, ERNSA in East Africa needs to be strengthened for policy oriented research output. WERA like AU, ADEA, AAU at the levels of the region and continents can be part of this partnership as shown in the figure below showing the geographical scope of WERA.

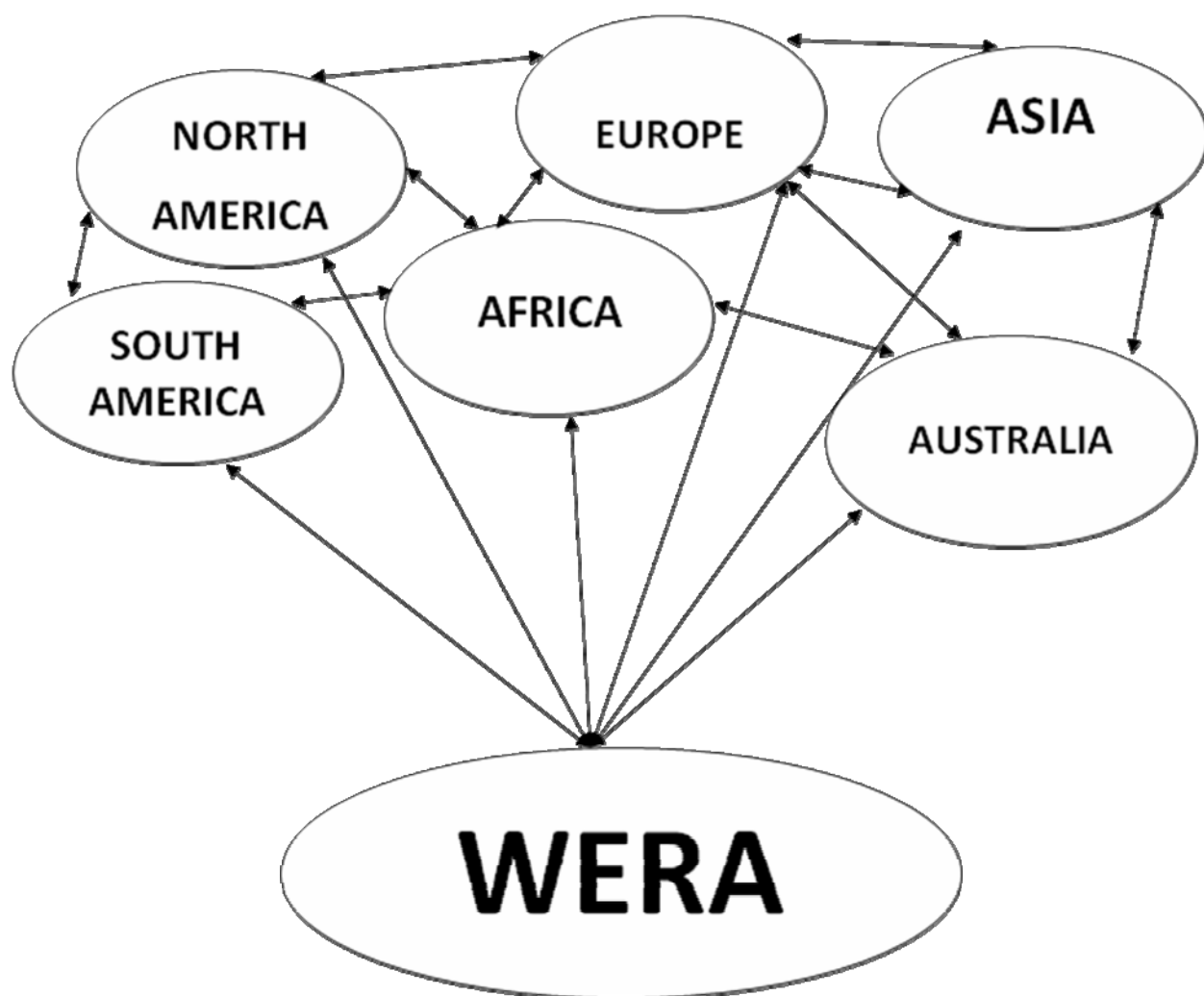


Figure 2: The Scope of WERA's Mission

There is need for Research Capacity Building, Meaningful ways for Research Collaboration that will benefit the advancement of education research in West Africa. However, any research in African context must be based on Africa's triple heritage: Western, Eastern and Cultural (Indigenous) and identity.

Challenges

As evident, there is still the absence of strong leadership in research for West African Young scholars who are still invisible because of their limited training in research methodology and where older scholars are shifting away from teaching and research into politics. Furthermore there is the absence of a good balance between research process, ontological and epistemological concerns. Identifying indicators for building research capacity within multidisciplinary collaborative research models will orient future quality research that will persist in this age of globalization. Funding seems to pose major constraints because of limited resources and because of poor accountability and good governance in the disbursement of such funds. All of these impinge on the research processes, especially instruments which are usually not well constructed, indicating the absence of ideological underpinnings.

In terms of research's specificity, if we reflect on the genesis and functions of educational research in Africa as a whole and West Africa in particular, we observe the dominance of Euro-American thoughts, reflections, methodology, knowledge and philosophy. What this explains is that Africa's real interest has not been addressed even in neo-colonial era. Euro-American ideologies and methodology which have more quantitative paradigm still unconsciously prevent researchers in Africa from searching appropriate and relevant methodologies. Problems of epistemology, pragmatic and methodology are dilemmas. There is also the problem related to generic methodology literature. Traditionally conceptual research problems and practicalities find difficulties to link these to conceptual equivalences when dealing with indigenous issues. Even fundamental theoretical and methodological problems that emerge from review of empirical data have implications because of differing world views, cultural perspectives and values on the research process. These impinge on the nature and scope of the problem. Although, there are some well trained African researchers, these are trained in the Euro-American traditions and in their institutions. Research knowledge produced against this background knowledge continues to provide information that fails to account for the many factors that shape the nature of knowledge constituting the beliefs, values and structures of a people. Rather the research continues to serve the needs of others and not those of Africa and its people. Such researchers are far removed ideologically and in practice from the cultural contexts in which the research process operates. The reductionist undertone that this engendered provides a parochial, limited and deceptive body of knowledge (Kincheloe, (2008). The question one

might raise is whether there is an appropriate research method that permits the examination of the reality of a context. What types of research methods would capture the authentic knowledge of African peoples? What this provokes is how do we build and retain capacity in Africa? Furthermore, are there possibilities of creating centers of excellence in African research, scholarship and publications? In addition, inadequate access to current scientific knowledge remains one of the widely reported challenges. A basic research and service challenge, in the face of what the convulsion engenders, is “how can we construct a bridge across cultural difference-----?” (Bram, 1998, p. 23)

Some Strategies for the way forward with the Leadership of WERA

WERA could do the following: (1) Reinforce postgraduate research which is very slow because of the absence of strong leadership from universities. (2) Enable African scholars to strike a balance between their focus on Eurocentric approaches to research because of their Euro-American training (3) Improve African scholarship through capacity building to increase publication in referred Journals; (4) Increase the research outputs of very young scholars through documented, disseminated and utilized; (5) Address a project on evaluation of relevant postgraduate theses from selected universities in West Africa and Research Network such as ERNWACA/ROCARE

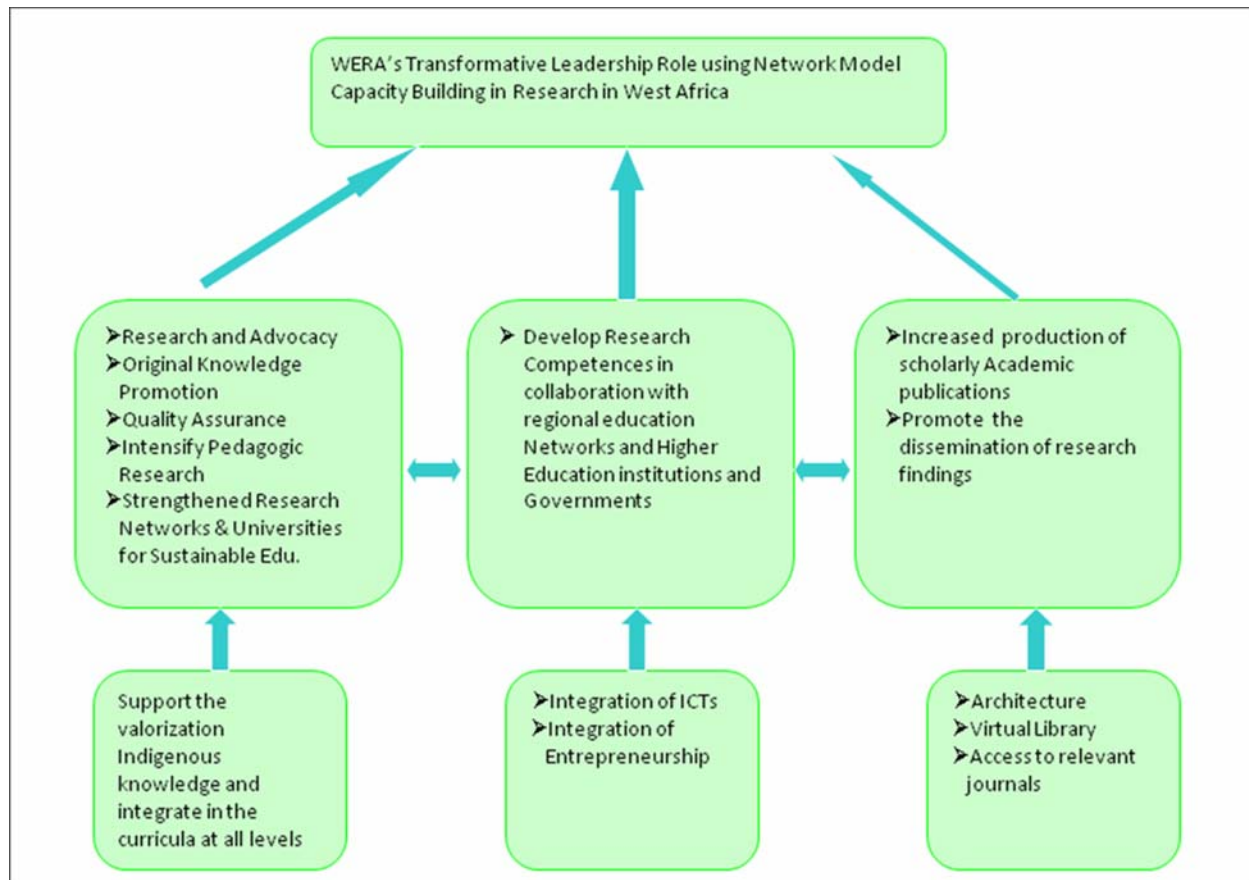


Figure 3: WERA's Identified Role

There is the need for perspectives for maintaining indigenous knowledge in conventional education. The west continues to dominate in the production, organization, and dissemination of the world's knowledge and information and Africa relies heavily on this knowledge. We are aware that scholarly knowledge is conveyed in varieties of ways including journals. Conference proceedings, the internet and some scholarly journals remain most important channels of communication in the knowledge distribution network and African scholars have only very limited access to reputable scholarly journals. Research is still limited but there are increasing efforts at documentation, research and evaluation. While it is crucial to ensure access to international knowledge networks, Africa should also build its own knowledge manufacturing industries and its capacity to popularize its own research. There is urgent need to bring research, policy and practice more closely together through an inter- disciplinary effort. What stands as a major challenge is how to operationalise these views and make it functional?

Networking and mentoring amongst seasoned and young researchers worldwide and especially between African and international scholars should be reinforced. Partnerships for developing the research component of PhD programmes across regions; and research activities in general need more aggressive approaches. Besides encouraging the development of virtual libraries, there is the need to consolidate the database of African publication, ensuring the facilitation of access of African academic journals in international indices of publications. I am very aware of the importance of quality scholarship that must never be compromised but at the same time the globally considered authentic knowledge/methods should not be the usual imposition of superior Euro-American perspectives on the African minority (“inferior”). This is important if north – south and south-south partnerships in educational research have to be fostered.

The network approach should have as objective of the strengthening of research capacity and the production of new knowledge. Such cooperative research networks, which address contextual concerns have an important future in higher education generally. An important criterion for success in any project is the motivation of researchers and strong leadership and commitment compounded by effective mentoring and supervision.

This submission is not suggesting the replacement of western schooling with the African indigenous education; rather it offers a chance to see and to try to identify some valuable aspects of African indigenous education. Today’s conventional practices need to be rooted in indigenous perspectives with opportunities for adaptive learning.

Conclusion

Africa’s hybrid cultural character presents challenges for growing youths who are the recipients of both western and African ways of thinking and actions. Present generation of researchers and scholars are not trained to be sensitive to indigenous Africa issues, how can they show case and innovate Africa’s cultural heritage? We cannot say all the time that Africa has been tainted by Eurocentric misinformation. Research capacity building and a network community of researchers and scholars have a great challenge at their door steps. Financial investment and support in research projects is crucial, yet such is limited today. Network for the dissemination of relevant research findings on Africa and even some of the postgraduate researches will be

motivating to promote knowledge and future interest in research in Africa. There is the need to identify through research the extent of euro-centric thoughts against Afrocentric thoughts and knowledge to enable better clarification and understanding. A vital point is that culture, context and diversity are central to research in education in a global world.

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