IN MALAWI

What’s Essential in a New Democracy?

How educators define what is basic has enormous implications in the developing world—and may have profound effects on human potential worldwide. Here’s a perspective on curriculum and life in a rural society in Africa.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I work at a curriculum development center for a national school system that has a student-to-teacher ratio of about 100:1. Schools are lucky if they have more than 50 books for 2,000 pupils; and chairs, desks, chalk, maps, or even roofs for classrooms are often unthinkable extravagances. In such circumstances, one would expect that the laws of survival would necessitate a focus on what is basic. Yet I came to Malawi to teach physical education, a field often identified as superfluous in even the most lavish curricula. I felt that if I could determine how this subject can be a necessity in an impoverished, developing nation, I would reach an understanding of what education means.

My initial assumption (an assumption I shared with many educators) was that what is basic equates with immediate necessity. But I have found that if basic education is defined by simplicity, education can become a limiting mechanism that restricts students to banality. I hope my experiences may be helpful to educators in any cultural setting who believe that education should be a tool to empower and invigorate people and culture.

Malawi and Its Education System

Malawi is a geographically small republic in southeast Africa with a population estimated at 12 million. Its relative peace and lack of any significant natural resources (unlike some of its mineral-rich neighbors) combine to make Malawi an obscure place to many people. After gaining its independence from British colonial governance in 1966, it was ruled for almost 30 years by Hastings Kamuzu Banda, an American- and British-educated medical doctor, who guided a one-party state as its “Life President.” Banda was a proponent of classical education based on a British model, and such an education became the ultimate (and often unattainable) aspiration of the masses.

When multiparty democracy was instituted in 1994, the citizens elected a new president, whose campaign promise was to make primary education free for all Malawians. In one year, the population of primary school students leaped from about 1.9 million pupils to 3.2 million, creating a crisis in an already struggling educational system. The state was forced to employ thousands of untrained teachers (many of whom had the equivalent of only a 10th grade education) and to pack dilapidated classrooms with as many as 300 pupils in one primary school class. These problems, however, only compounded others, such as the use of the population’s...
second or third language (English) as the language of instruction, the lack of learning materials, and the widespread administrative corruption.

Several complications further limited the quality of the physical education program. Under Banda’s rule, physical education at secondary schools and teacher training colleges had been a handled by a paramilitary youth organization whose primary purpose was indoctrination. Thus, physical education was partly a political tool, focusing on activities such as obstacle courses and calisthenics. The instructors were often not regular teachers, and their primary responsibility was to ensure the communities’ faithfulness to the state’s ideals, rather than to empower youth through education. With the advent of democracy in 1994, physical education remained in the curriculum—but with no qualified teachers—and it carried the stigma of the previous government. My presence as a physical education specialist is a direct result of the country’s need for expertise in the subject.

My Search for Education Essentials
How does one justify spending time and resources on physical education in a country struggling through the growing pains of new democracy facing massive poverty, endemic AIDS, debilitating population growth, crippling deforestation, and many other difficulties?

My first notion of an answer came from reading a book chronicling the history of the U.S. Peace Corps (see box). It included a brief statement from a volunteer who had gone to Africa to teach physical education several decades ago, sharing many of my same questions at the time of her departure. She stated that the African students she taught saw no reason they should not have physical education. They did not want an education that was limited to what had been externally defined as basic. They wanted an opportunity to explore all the diversity education has to offer. I was struck by the idea that what is basic and what is a necessity are not absolutely the same thing.

The volunteer’s reflections produced a major shift in my thinking. I saw that the African community had the natural desire to explore what might be possible. I was excited that the people themselves wanted physical education. Without knowing much about international development, I knew that no program or initiative will work unless the people it is intended to benefit see themselves convinced of its value.

My belief in the need for self-determination was quickly tested when I arrived in Malawi. I found a country and a culture being destroyed by a blinding ambition to achieve a superficial image of the good life, an image that has been conveyed by Western advertising and the media. I saw traditional dances in which the dancers wore Western sunglasses and tennis shoes, ironically diluting the romantic motivations of visitors for watching the dances at all. I saw village women who had exchanged beautifully printed and woven clothing for wraps printed with soft-drink slogans or replica dollar bills. Anything American or European was considered good, and there was a disturbingly pervasive assumption that the wealth in the developed world automatically made everything from that world better than anything in Malawi. I began to wonder whether the desire for a broad-based curriculum was based not so much on emancipating self-determination as on a desire to be like the West.

Fortunately, I had an opportunity to evaluate their motivation myself during my orientation program, when I stayed with a village family for about a month.
I saw a lifestyle that likely fits any definition of simple. Men farmed. Women took care of the house. Children helped with some of each, and they played games in the dirt yards. And it went on like that day after day. At one level such a life can be quite pleasant, and the villagers shared laughter and smiles as they came together at the end of each day, sitting and chatting—what they commonly refer to as “just staying.” I wondered, however, if such a lifestyle did not limit a person’s potential to develop in the modern world. Could such a peaceful lifestyle coexist with the achievement- and material-oriented worldview that, to some degree, pervades even remote rural villages in countries like Malawi? I honestly wish it could—but when I see students’ eyes focused on my running shoes or my wristwatch, and when I find myself unsuccessfully trying to convince them that the riches of the developed world in some ways only create more problems than they solve, I do not think such a drastic cultural pluralism can survive on our shrinking globe.

The Malawi culture, in isolation, has an elegance sorely lacking in Western society. But this culture is distorted by some individuals’ ambition to achieve superficial success. Most people in Malawi see formal education as the road to the good life, and schools as places to shape their actions and follow their aspirations. When schools tell pupils that the basics are math, English, and science, they are telling them that they can only achieve the good life by focusing on what is basic to the industrial world and discounting universal needs. Yet physical education (and music and art) can help society explore the potential of each person through a life that is rich in its diversity.

Since my village orientation, experts have assured me that they have nothing against subjects like physical education—they just think that those things tax the limited resources of the education system. They seem to suggest that because the lives the people lead are simple, they need only a basic variety of education. What are the implications of this perspective on the predominantly rural society in Malawi? How can students develop their individual potential in a stripped-down education system? If people learned physical education in schools, their ability to take care of their physical health, to play sports, and to enjoy physical activities would help them fulfill their potential, and help their society achieve that abstract goal of development.

Among my colleagues in Malawian education, many advocate for physical education, though not necessarily with my rationale. They note the need to cater to the physically active nature of the child and the classical notion of the link between a healthy mind and a healthy body. But I do not subscribe to some of their reasoning. For example, some suggest that physical education can lead to big-money sports contracts or that we need physical education just because the developed world values it.

The extent to which opportunity is a focus of this young democracy can at times be detrimental. Some people interpret democracy as a free ticket for Malawi to become materially rich like the West, with the education system a mechanism for taking advantage of this opportunity. My own perspective, however, is that a society’s education system should provide opportunities for people to explore and develop their own potential; then a society like Malawi can mold its own successful culture within our global village.

**Considering Our Common Motivation**

No matter how different the physical circumstances of education in Malawi may be from those in other parts of the world, we all have a common motivation—to improve children’s lives. My own motives are enhanced when I observe physical education programs in local schools and look into the faces of the young Malawians. Most of these children do not have shoes on their feet; and at certain times of the year, many are desperately hungry. But as they run during warm-up or participate in a new sport for the first time, their luminous joy and broad grins fill me with an assurance of how much human potential exists. The potential in those faces is what I have found to be basic in education.

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