

Philosophical Foundations of TVET and Reforms in Kenya: A Critical Analysis Across Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods

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ABSTRACT

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has consistently failed to produce competent graduates with the skills necessary for self-reliance, despite significant reforms spanning both the colonial and post-colonial periods. This paper critically examines the philosophical foundations that have informed TVET reforms across these periods, with the aim of enriching future reform efforts based on 21st-century progressive education theory. The study was guided by two objectives: To examine the concept of TVET reforms in Kenya, and to identify gaps in the philosophical foundations underpinning those reforms. The findings revealed that colonial-era reforms dismantled the sound philosophical foundations of traditional vocational education to serve colonial, political, social, and economic interests primarily to subdue Africans, extract cheap labour, promote missionary interests, and encourage self-sustainability. Following independence, post-colonial reforms prioritised literary education over vocational training in order to appease Africans and enable them to assume white-collar roles vacated by departing colonialists, thereby undermining gains made during the colonial period. Efforts in the 1980s to promote self-reliance through vocationalization were short-lived by the close of the 1990s. From the mid-2000s onward, renewed efforts to strengthen TVET have sought to align it with lifelong learning and self-reliance, as inspired by Vision 2030. While the introduction of a Competency-Based Curriculum provided a more progressive foundation and emphasised equipping learners with workplace and entrepreneurial skills, implementation challenges persisted, including inconsistent content and weak alignment with infrastructure and teacher training.

Keywords: Philosophical Foundations, Reforms, Pragmatism, Transformative Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Self-Reliance.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education reforms comprise planned changes that must be anchored on philosophical foundations in order to guide how education functions in meeting the aspirations of a nation and its people (Dash, 2015). The rationale for such reforms is to render education pragmatic that is, effectively responsive to national development needs. Technical, Vocational, and Education Training (TVET) has gained significant traction globally, particularly in the post-2015 education agenda, owing to its perceived potential to address the social and economic challenges of the 21st century (UNESCO, 2016).

In Kenya, the history of TVET reforms since independence has been shaped by the imperative to develop learners' skills and competencies for poverty alleviation, employment creation, and industrial development (Sifuna, 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2019). Philosophy fundamentally guides the direction of education; it provides the inspiration for learning and establishes incentives for continued participation (Mwinzi, 2020). In fact, every dimension of education curriculum, aims, discipline, methods, and teaching practice is shaped and determined by philosophical orientation (Dash, 2015). Consequently, sound and meaningful education reforms are expected to be grounded in strong philosophical foundations. Philosophy in education provides meaning to the frameworks and prescriptions that make educational practice goal-oriented and responsive to societal

aspirations (Mwinzi, 2012). Therefore, any reform effort addressing problems of relevance and utility in education must rely on clear philosophical prescriptions; without such grounding, education systems become structurally unstable.

TVET reforms have been advanced for various reasons: to meet labour requirements aligned with industrial needs, combat unemployment, eliminate poverty, and foster industrial development. The international community has similarly emphasised the relevance of TVET in bridging the longstanding gap between skills development and industrial growth, as encapsulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Germany, for instance, has operated a successful TVET system grounded in a clear pragmatic philosophical paradigm that integrates academic knowledge across disciplines with real-time workplace experience, resulting in the highest TVET enrolment rates in Europe. In China, a strong philosophical foundation—rooted in Confucianism and Marxism, particularly since 1949 has been linked to notable success in vocational education. According to Schmidt and Cheng (2012), Marxist philosophy of social division of labour contributed significantly to the adoption of a highly specialised vocational curriculum.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, traditional communities maintained firm foundations for TVET, training children in skills such as weaving, brick-making, mat-weaving, blacksmithing, carving, pottery, leatherwork, basketry, and raffia work, among others (Fafunwa, 1995). However, missionaries accorded TVET little recognition; the focus was instead literary and catechetical, as documented in Nigeria and Ghana (Fafunwa, 1995; Boateng, 2012). Consequently, during the colonial era, the philosophical foundations of TVET were considerably weaker than those underpinning the literary tradition. Where they existed, they were either guided by traditional notions or shaped by exploitative labour strategies arguably constituting the genesis of the enduring negative perception of TVET (Mosoti, 2006). Post-independence attempts to reform TVET as a critical pillar of socioeconomic development have frequently fallen short, with persistent skills mismatches reported across many African countries (AU, 2007), thereby justifying the need to critically examine the philosophical foundations guiding such reforms.

In pre-colonial Kenya, traditional communities had cultivated a robust system of vocational education that provided both foundational and advanced skills necessary for self-reliant and autonomous living, imparted on a daily basis (Mitei, 2015). This traditional vocational education embodied strong philosophical underpinnings with clearly defined aims, objectives, and methodologies (Njenga, 2020). It was, however, largely relegated to an inferior status under colonialism, where it was chiefly offered to Africans to supply cheap labour for colonial governments (Kahu, 2024). Kenya thus inherited a weakened TVET philosophical foundation that contributed to the perception of vocational education as an education of lower status. Significant efforts have since been made to introduce reforms through a series of recommendations in various educational commissions, particularly in the post-colonial period, in recognition of TVET's centrality to national social and economic development. Despite notable reform efforts, qualitative gaps in TVET persist. Nason (2019) reports an ongoing mismatch between the skills acquired by TVET graduates and the requirements of industry and the labour market. UNESCO (2019) further highlights that TVET continues to face challenges of negative public perception and the provision of training that inadequately meets market demands.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the concept of Technical and Vocational Education and Training reforms in Kenya.
2. To critically examine the gaps in the philosophical foundations that have informed TVET reforms in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

TVET reforms in Kenya since independence have repeatedly fallen short of their intended objectives. While both colonial and post-colonial governments have recognised TVET's centrality to socioeconomic development and have undertaken successive reform initiatives aimed at increasing enrolment and equipping graduates with relevant skills, these efforts have not yielded the desired outcomes. A key concern remains the failure of TVET to produce graduates with adequate skills to efficiently meet market needs and generate self-employment. This

failure may be traced, at least in part, to the philosophical foundations that have informed TVET reforms. Despite this, a rigorous analysis of these philosophical foundations as they relate to addressing skills gaps and graduate employability has not been comprehensively undertaken.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section examines the concept of TVET reforms, identifies gaps in the philosophical foundations informing those reforms, and considers how progressive education theory might inform future reforms.

The Concept of TVET Reforms

TVET reforms refer to planned actions targeting changes in the content, methodology, aims, objectives, and regulations of vocational education and training, with the aim of aligning them with the knowledge economy and labour market requirements (Renold, 2018). The growing demand for a trained and educated workforce in the emerging global economy has prompted governments worldwide to undertake critical reforms in TVET (Cong & Wang, 2012). A review of reforms documented between 1962 and 2001 reveals a deficit in the philosophical foundation applicable to TVET, which was then largely viewed as an extension of general education (UNESCO, 2020). Kahu (2024) argues that combining general education with TVET may have contributed to the absence of a sound and purposeful philosophical foundation to guide TVET reforms toward their expected objectives.

TVET has consequently witnessed a paradigm shift aimed at revolutionising it in alignment with labour market demands and sustainable development goals as outlined in the 2015 UN resolutions (UNESCO, 2016). There is a prevailing philosophical approach in general education that has been adopted at the national level; however, it requires interrogation to determine whether it strengthens or erodes the effectiveness of TVET in meeting global standards and enabling graduates to compete in the international job market (Kahu, 2024). Following its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, the Republic of Macedonia embraced the Western education legacy and embedded new philosophical foundations into its educational practices. These reforms were necessitated by the shift away from the Marxist and socialist ideologies characteristic of former socialist states (Republic of Macedonia, 2006). However, that study's focus was limited to general education, and the extent to which the same philosophical orientations were reflected in TVET reforms was not explored.

Prakash (2020) analysed TVET reforms in Nepal and concluded that they may not adequately capture the aspirations of youth, despite the country's serious deficiency of skilled workers. The scholar argues that reforms have not been grounded in effective policies addressing TVET objectives, content, methods, and industry linkages. Without a clear philosophical pathway to guide meaningful change in TVET, Nepal's challenges are likely to persist regardless of the reforms undertaken. Before colonisation, Africa was guided by indigenous philosophies such as perennialism, functionalism, holism, and communalism, which defined African education. African education was comprehensive, with moral and vocational dimensions at its core. Colonisation introduced a paradigm shift, marking the onset of education reforms shaped by alien colonial philosophy. Kahu (2024) argues that the confusion evident in TVET reforms across many African countries can be traced to a philosophical bias against vocational education, which was reserved primarily for preparing Africans for manual jobs considered inferior to those held by European and Asian populations.

Mukhwana (2020) notes that African leaders and policymakers have demonstrated a rising consciousness about TVET's role in providing the skills necessary for industrialisation. The African Union's plan of action for the Second Decade of Education (2006–2015) recognised the importance of TVET as a means of empowering individuals to take control of their lives and recommended its integration into general education systems (AU, 2005). In Kenya, TVET reforms have gained momentum following the disruption of traditional utilitarian vocational education, which had been rooted in a strong philosophical foundation. According to Okaka (1996), technical and vocational education was deeply embedded in traditional communities, with children learning house construction, spear and knife making, and utensil crafting. Sifuna (1990) explains how the Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities possessed rich philosophical foundations for vocational education with clear aims, content, and methods that served them well. Formal education, including structured TVET, began during colonialism in the early 1900s, premised on the erroneous belief that Africans had no existing education system

to offer their children (Smith, 1934). Kahu (2024) contends that Africans began to disregard colonial TVET because of its orientation toward manual jobs—a stigma that may not yet have been fully overcome.

Following independence, Kenya embarked on educational reforms intended to reflect African values and address the inequalities introduced by colonial and religious segregation. The Ominde Report brought a major shift by prioritising academic education over technical and vocational training. Bogonko (1992) notes that the aim was to produce an elite workforce capable of filling roles vacated by colonialists. Foster (1965) argued that general education was more suitable than vocational education given the nature of formal labour markets in Africa. Consequently, vocational education remained underfunded and of low quality, reinforcing reliance on academic pathways (Berman, 1971). However, rising unemployment exposed the limitations of this approach. Revitalisation efforts emerged, including the establishment of polytechnics and the National Youth Service (NYS), following concerns raised by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (Njenga, 2020). The Gachathi Report also emphasised aligning education with employment needs and fostering positive attitudes toward manual and technical work.

Mwiria (2001) posits that the Mackay Report introduced the 8-4-4 system of education, integrating practical subjects to enhance employability. The Kamunge Report further reinforced TVET's role in promoting entrepreneurship and innovation. However, Ngure (2013) notes that the hurried implementation brought significant challenges; inadequate infrastructure including workshops and laboratories stalled TVET's progress. The Koech Commission (1999) identified contradictions in policy, recommending the removal of practical subjects due to resource constraints, thereby undermining TVET goals. This context underscores the need to critically examine the philosophical foundations informing TVET, in order to establish a coherent and sustained basis for achieving development goals.

Gaps in the Philosophical Foundations of TVET Reforms in Kenya

The social and economic demands of the 21st century necessitate a re-evaluation of education systems to assess their suitability in addressing contemporary challenges. Adaptability, relevance, and progressiveness are qualities defined in large part by philosophical perspectives (Wainaina, 1985). Education, whether formal or non-formal is a vital instrument for the realisation of societal aspirations. TVET, in particular, has been identified as a critical vehicle for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) globally, as well as local aspirations such as Kenya's Vision 2030 (UNESCO, 2015; ROK, 2007). Despite successive reforms, insufficient attention has been paid to how TVET in Kenya is conceptualised and implemented from a philosophical standpoint.

A country's educational philosophical foundation is an ideology that governs policy formulation, organisational processes, and implementation; it therefore requires constant redefinition and detailed scrutiny to identify gaps in need of reform (Kisirkol et al.; Kahu, 2024). No civilisation can envision a meaningful and functional education system without grounding it in a clear philosophy that provides direction on what should be taught and why (Ndichu, 2013). When an education system or programme such as TVET fails to meet its objectives, an examination of its philosophical foundations is essential. Among the central problems in Kenya's education system are inequitable access to educational resources, high costs, and a lack of relevance to labour market needs (Kamau, 1997). A particularly significant challenge for TVET is the persistent mismatch between the skills obtained by graduates and the competencies demanded by employers.

Osabwa, Malenya, and Ndichu (2021) examined the philosophy of education in Kenya and its relationship to skilled human resource development. Their study analysed education philosophies across both the colonial and post-colonial periods, finding that the philosophy of education established at the onset of colonialism set the stage for the historical and ongoing unresponsiveness of education to local needs as suggested by Fraser (1909) and reinforced by the Phelps-Stokes Commission (1925) and the Beecher Report (1949), which directed Africans toward industrial education deemed inferior to that offered to Asian and European populations. However, that study examined philosophical foundations in general terms; the present study focuses specifically on TVET, given its centrality to achieving the SDGs and Vision 2030.

Progressive Education Theory and TVET Reforms

American philosopher John Dewey articulated a theory of education grounded in seven years of critical research at the University of Chicago. Dewey emphasised the importance of learning by doing, arguing that human beings learn most effectively through a hands-on approach that provides direct practical experience in the functioning or operation of real-world systems (Mwangi, 2020). This constitutes the philosophical orientation of pragmatism: the proposition that reality must be practised. Dewey further viewed education as a social agent of liberation through self-reliance (Schiro, 2012). It follows, therefore, that effective TVET reforms must be grounded in philosophical foundations whose pillars include experiential learning, temporal learning, participatory learning, and action learning. In both the colonial and post-colonial periods, the stated purpose of TVET was to respond to the immediate needs of society. However, the philosophical foundations informing these responses have often been inconsistent, weakly articulated, or subordinated to political imperatives, resulting in reforms that fell short of their transformative potential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed an integrated approach combining conceptual analysis, critical analysis, and prescriptive methods. According to Cohen (2018), scholars frequently combine multiple approaches for triangulation purposes, thereby producing more reliable and robust findings. The simultaneous use of these three methods yielded comprehensive and informative findings on the critique of TVET reforms, as well as guidance on how progressive education theory may be applied to inform future reform directions.

Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by progressive education theory, first articulated in the early 20th century by John Dewey, who maintained an active discourse on education reform until his death in 1952 (Moyer, 2009). Drawing on 21st-century scholarship, Tippet and Lee (2019) describe progressive education as prescribing what constitutes relevant education, including in the context of TVET. According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), experiential learning as distinct from traditional lecture-based instruction involves the learner engaging directly with the realities under study. Tippet and Lee (2019) describe experiential learning as a conduit for knowledge acquisition through actual workplace experience (apprenticeships) and simulations of real-world conditions (situational learning), transmitted through applied learning pedagogy.

Another pillar of progressive education is the temporal dimension, in which pedagogies treat knowledge as dynamic situated by context and evolving through the learning process (Tippet & Lee, 2019). Participatory learning, a further critical component of progressive education, provides for human interactions that generate and multiply knowledge and skills (Freire, 2005). Participatory learning is reinforced through project-based methods and action research (Tippet & Lee, 2019).

Progressive theory is employed in this study to analyse the reforms that have taken place in TVET and to inform future reform directions that more effectively address challenges such as the production of graduates lacking adequate skills for employment or self-employment. The theory prescribes action learning to prepare learners to adapt to dynamic market demands, as well as participatory learning to foster collaborative and community-based knowledge development.

Conceptual Analysis

Beaney (2013) traces conceptual analysis to Greek philosophy, describing it as a regressive mode of inquiry that works back to original principles in order to illuminate the background of an issue or problem. This study applied the three phases of conceptual analysis by examining and analysing the original philosophical principles underlying TVET reforms, drawing on verifiable facts in relation to relevant theory and practice. The process involves disaggregating concepts to reveal the philosophical perspectives embedded in the content, objectives, and methods proposed in the various policies that shape education reforms.

Critical Analysis

Critical analysis, associated with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, involves subjecting notions, practices, and theories to critical inquiry in order to determine their meaningfulness and soundness (Gashe, 2007). It is characterised by reflective thinking that examines the reasons for beliefs with the intention of identifying strengths and weaknesses as a basis for reform. In this paper, critical analysis was applied to examine, systematically and in detail, the TVET reforms articulated in various policy documents spanning both colonial and independent Kenya—specifically, the policy theory and practice concerning TVET as outlined in historic education commissions and sessional papers.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Before colonisation, Kenyan communities maintained a robust vocational education system rooted in utilitarian philosophy, which prepared young people for adult life. Methods such as observation, apprenticeship, and imitation enabled the transmission of crafts including pottery and blacksmithing with boys learning from their fathers and girls from their mothers, thereby transmitting community cultures and livelihoods (Sifuna, 1997; Odinga, 1967; Castle, 1996). Colonialism, however, systematically dismantled these African philosophical foundations of vocational education. Kivuva (2004) documents how, during the colonial period, the purpose of vocational education shifted from communal utility to the production of cheap labour; social stratification was engineered to frustrate African aspirations, and coercive pedagogical methods were deployed to reinforce dominance and subdue the African population (Zvobgo, 1996). These colonial reforms established enduring tensions within Kenyan TVET that continued to manifest in post-independence reform efforts.

Post-Colonial TVET Reforms

At the education ministers' conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, recommendations were made to develop trained manpower across the continent. UNESCO (1962) further recommended that Africans should be enabled both as young people and as adults to adapt to rural lifestyles and to improve agricultural productivity. Kenya subsequently undertook major reforms targeting the aims, content, and methodology of education. The Ominde Report (1964) marked a philosophical paradigm shift away from the colonial disposition in which learners were not the primary beneficiaries of education. In pursuit of this new orientation, the Ominde Commission recommended converting government trade schools into technical secondary schools in order to prepare graduates to enter TVET upon completing secondary education. The report was incorporated into Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on African Socialism (ROK, 1964) as a basis for educational development in the country.

The stated aim of developing manpower did not fully materialise, however, as there remained a significant bias toward academic education and the preparation of citizens for white-collar, rather than blue-collar, employment (Kitange, 2004). This preference resonated with the Ominde Commission's decision not to include vocational subjects in primary schools, prioritising literary education instead (Makatian, 2022). However, a more pragmatic reform targeting TVET's aim of promoting self-reliance and well-rounded individuals was realised in the Mackay Report (ROK, 1981), building on proposals advanced by the Gachathi Report (ROK, 1976). As a result, the education system was restructured to the 8-4-4 format, practical subjects were introduced into the primary school curriculum, and Moi University was established as a second public university. In pursuit of TVET's philosophical objectives, the TVET Act was enacted in 2013, providing TVET with a long-needed legal framework (ROK, 2013). Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 further redefined TVET philosophy in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET), articulating an aim of producing quality skilled human resources equipped with appropriate attitudes and values (ROK, 2019).

Significant reforms in TVET content were introduced by the Task Force on Realignment of Education to the New Constitution the Odhiambo Report (2012). The report highlighted the need to vocationalise all levels of education beginning at the primary stage, so as to nurture technical skills from an early age. This represented a major milestone in TVET development. Consequently, the Competency-Based Education (CBE) curriculum was launched in 2016 and has since progressed through to the current Grade 10, incorporating learning areas such as pre-technical studies, creative arts, integrated science, and technology.

Summary of Findings

The study examined the targets of TVET reforms and their underlying philosophical perspectives across both the colonial and post-colonial periods, with specific reference to aims and objectives, content, and methodology. In the pre-colonial period, vocational education was grounded in strong philosophical foundations, which were subsequently disrupted by both colonial and missionary education. The content of traditional vocational education was highly relevant to the local environment, equipping learners with skills to engage productively with their surroundings and to fulfil their social and economic roles within the community. The methodology of teaching shifted from learner-centred approaches to teacher-centred, theory-heavy instruction administered through coercion and punishment, designed to cultivate the fear and compliance required to sustain forced labour in service of colonial and missionary interests.

In the post-colonial period, the aims of education including TVET were reformed to reflect the needs of Africans, particularly in terms of supplying manpower and promoting self-reliance following the departure of colonialists. However, this philosophical orientation was progressively undermined from 1990 onwards, when practical subjects were removed from primary education and reduced at the secondary level. More recently, a progressive philosophical perspective for TVET emphasising lifelong learning and self-reliance has been articulated, supported by elaborated objectives aimed at actualising Vision 2030's industrial aspirations.

Reforms in TVET content have seen vocational subjects integrated into both primary and secondary education in order to establish a sound foundation for pursuing TVET careers and facilitating the acquisition of skills aligned with labour and industrial requirements. With regard to pedagogy, instructional methods remained largely teacher-centred following independence, particularly due to the bias toward literary education. Nevertheless, the adoption of a competency-based curriculum which integrates vocational subjects across all levels has necessitated the adoption of learner-centred approaches in both primary and secondary education. At the TVET level, CBET has been adopted alongside dual training initiatives to enhance the acquisition of relevant skills.

The study further found that the characteristics of 21st-century progressive theory experiential learning, the temporal dimension, participatory learning, and action learning can meaningfully guide future TVET reforms. Experiential learning should be used to align TVET objectives, content, and methodology with real-world settings, and approaches such as the dual system should be employed to operationalise these objectives. Participatory learning should be applied to align TVET aims with national goals such as the promotion of national unity, while objectives should reflect collaborative engagement within school and community contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To produce TVET graduates equipped with competitive and self-reliant skills, future reforms must be anchored in stronger and more coherent philosophical foundations, particularly with respect to aims, content, and methods, guided by progressive education theory:

- Experiential learning should be employed to align aims, objectives, content, and methodology with real-world experience, thereby empowering graduates to acquire relevant and applicable skills.
- The temporal dimension of progressive theory should be used to enrich TVET objectives and content in accordance with evolving work and job environments, and to reinforce discovery-based and problem-solving pedagogies that foster effective learning and the acquisition of appropriate skills and competencies.
- Action learning should be used to align TVET aims with the capacity to adapt to changing conditions, while reforms in content should systematically address the skills gap in tandem with labour and industrial requirements.

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