

# Kenyan Education System

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**Abstract:** Many assumptions and questions have been raised in the past concerning the education system in Africa as a whole or if at all somewhat education existed before the coming of the explorers and colonialists into this part of the world (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, p. 149). With this background check, the aim of this paper is to explore and find out the mode of education administered to Africans before the arrival of the Westerners, especially the education system that was in Kenya and hypothetically still being practiced today. Many African communities had some form of rich educational system organized by family, clan, and community members (Mosweunyane, 2013, p. 51). Kenya for example had education systems within each community before the introduction of formal education in the 19th century by the Christian Missionaries supported by the colonialists who for their own interest wanted skilled labourers to help them in administration of their newly acquired empire. Children / learners received various forms of education depending on what ages they were. This paper is not meant to provide an exhaustive review of all points and initiatives of the development of Kenyan education system from the historic pre-colonial period to post-colonial period but rather, to draw attention to some core issues that led to the development of education and school systems the country has today. Specifically, the paper will look deductively and exploratively at the various stages of education system that the learners had to undertake starting from the pre-colonial times to the recent times in the 21st century. It is an overview of the development of education in Kenya. A brief insight is also given in the current educational system that was introduced recently in the year 2017. A deeper discussion is not given onto this part, as the change process is still underway, and the implementations of this new competency-oriented system has just started.

**Keywords:** school system, colonialists, African community, education.

**Abstrakt:** V minulosti sa objavovalo množstvo otázok a domnienok týkajúcich sa vzdelávacieho systému v Afrike. Nebolo jasné, či už existovalo vzdelávanie ako také alebo ho do tejto časti sveta priniesli výskumníci a kolonialisti (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, s. 149). Cieľom predloženej práce je preskúmať a zistiť, ako boli Afričanom poskytované aspoň nejaké formy vzdelávania a ako fungoval vzdelávací systém pred príchodom ľudí zo západných krajín. V mnohých Afrických komunitách bol zriadený vzdelávací systém organizovaný rodinou, klanom či členmi komunity (Mosweunyane, 2013, s. 51). Konkrétne v Keni bol vzdelávací systém v rámci komunít už pred zavedením formálneho vzdelávania v 19. storočí. Vykonávali ho kresťanskí misionári, ktorí boli podporovaní kolonialistami. Tí potrebovali zručných pracovníkov v oblasti administratívy v novo vytvorených organizáciách. Deti a mládež boli vychovávaní istým druhom vzdelávania vzhľadom na ich vek. Účelom práce nie je poskytnúť prehľad všetkých historických udalostí a ideí, ktoré

vplývali na vývoj vzdelávania Keni od dôb pred kolóniami až po súčasnosť. Zámerom predloženej práce je zdôrazniť práve tie základné otázky v rozvoji vzdelávacieho systému v Keni, ktoré viedli priamo k vzdelávaciemu systému, aký má krajina teraz. Dôraz bude kladený na rôzne stupne vzdelávacieho systému v Keni v rozmedzí od doby pred kolóniami do súčasného obdobia 21. storočia. V krátkosti sa práca venuje i zmenám v súčasnom vzdelávacom systéme – vzdelávaniu orientovaného na kompetencie. Keďže však tento trend v Keni nastal v roku 2017, je stále v počiatočnom štádiu. Z toho dôvodu nie je možné ho preskúmať do hĺbky.

**Kľúčové slová:** školský systém, kolonizátori, africká komunita, vzdelávanie.

## 1 Pre-colonial period – African Traditional Education

Before Kenya got its independence and tracing back from the pre-colonial times and even before the first missionaries landed their foot on the Kenyan coast, there was a rich history of some form of education that was going on. Amukowa (2013, p. 197) explains that “a reflection on the history of education in Kenya shows that before the coming of Europeans, Kenyan societies had their own systems of education. There were no classrooms and no special class of people called teachers, in other words, there were no schools as they are today.” He further elaborates that all members of the community were involved in the education of the children. Children learnt cultural traditions and customs of their ancestors from the community as well as specific skills from their families and other specialized individuals through apprenticeship programs.

The country has an extraordinarily rich tradition in the field of education and training to its people. Traditional forms of education in Kenya integrated itself with religious, cultural, social, and artistic forms of education.

Children were taught by their elders in different stages of life. Even though Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 18) illustrate that this form of education lacked in literacy and formal school, it still served its purpose that it was meant for. The basic purpose for this form of education that Kenyans had during this period was to conserve their cultural heritage from the communities, clans, and families they came from, to learn their native languages and community values that they preserved. It also taught the young to live and adapt to their environment and to be able to use it effectively for their survival (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 18).

### 1.1 Stages of traditional Kenyan Education

#### a) Childhood stage

From when a child was born, the mother was an important factor in his/her growth. Mothers spent a lot of time with their young babies, soothing them, feeding, talking to them, and also singing to them as they attended to them. “At this point a lot of focus was on the physical and mental development of the child” (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 18). Playing took a centre stage of the child’s development with support coming from other older family members. As the child grew and became aware of his/her environment, they were

introduced to other sibling members of the family who also participated in the education of the child. Children were taught how to imitate doing things by their older siblings, how to walk, protect themselves and to survive within their environment as it was very harsh. Community morality also was particularly important part of their learning process that they got through African traditional religion. Sifuna & Otiende (2006, p. 150) add that “the religion instructions were concerned with morality, gave support to the laws and customs of the community and to its accepted rules of conduct which included courtesy, generosity and honesty.”

At the age of seven onwards, education of the child took a different direction. Gender became one of the defining factors on what a child was taught. Children by that time, were already aware of the larger extended family members' e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, step siblings, stepparents or any other person who lived within his/ her locality. Africans lived as a community with large extended families. The boy children were introduced to the activities that men or the male did in the communities e.g., as (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, p. 151) state building, herding, hunting etc. or learning how to protect the families from external conflicts especially to communities who were pastoralists and warriors. Depending on what ethnic community a child came from, the activities related to that, what were taught and given to the child. The educators here were the male parents, uncles, male cousins, grandfathers etc. The girls on the other hand spent time with their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, elder sisters, and female cousins etc. and took part in activities that could prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers. Some of these activities included fetching the water from rivers or from the surrounding water sources, taking care of younger siblings, looking for firewood, cooking and attending to the fields (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 18).

During this period of growth and education, the physical and social environment was an especially important aspect of the (curriculum) Kenyan tradition education as the child had to learn to adapt to his/her environment.

### **Actual environment**

As Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 19) put it that the boy child was taught to function and live in the environment they found themselves in. This meant for example, children born along the lakes or coastal regions had to master the craft of making fishing equipment, fishing to provide food, swimming, sailing etc. The girl child on the other hand from the same region would have the competent of cleaning and cooking the fished fish.

### **Social environment**

Since Kenya was/is a multi-ethnic country, this meant that each social environment had its own beliefs, cultural practices, language, history, and religion. The child was expected to master and have command in their native language use, value cultural practices and rites, protect the community norms, beliefs and traditions which were in most cases oral. “These oral traditions were passed through proverbs, role plays, imitations, dances, direct instructions, riddles, songs, ceremonies and stories that told of heroes of the community” (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 19).

## b) Pubescent and adulthood stage

In many African communities, Kenya being included had (still have) ceremonies directed towards the rites of passage. The ceremonies are held and practised to distinguish the move from childhood to adulthood. Many communities in Kenya for instance practice circumcision of the male. As taught and it is believed that the shedding of blood from the initiates onto the grounds binds them with God and their ancestors. During this period and time, Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 19) further clarify that “initiation was characterised by long periods of training which is/was usually painful.” This pain was meant to help prepare the initiates to endure the challenges of life and the pain that comes with it. These long trainings also helped to prepare them to be emotionally and physically fit to be able to do future leadership roles in the community.

## 2 Colonial Period – Introduction of Western Education in Kenya

Mackatiani et al. (2016, p. 56) explain that the genesis of western education in Kenya can be traced back to the missionary activities in the 19th century. This was after Christian missionaries came to Africa after its partitioning and slave trade had just been abolished. There was a great need to rehabilitate the coming back slaves and converting them to Christianity was the main tool.

Introduction of western education in Kenya can also be said to have been triggered by two major historical events that happened in Europe and North America, namely as stated by Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 22):

- i) The need for missionaries to neutralize the guilt and to make up for the wrong that was created by slave trade and caused a major injustice to mankind.
- ii) Due to a religious revival that was happening in Europe and North America, there was a zeal to reach out and save lost souls with fervour. This led to the formation of various Christian societies in the 18th century.

The first Christian Missionaries entered Kenya through the coastal region. This was not a new happening as the people from the coastal region had already witnessed the Portuguese introduction of Christianity. The Portuguese arrived at the Kenyan coastal region (Kamau, 2018) in the 16th century. “Although these missionaries did not remain to take up sustained evangelical work, they, however, are said to have made sporadic contacts with the local population. It is claimed that they had over 600 converts from among the local populace to Catholic faith” Sifuna & Otiende (2006, p. 179).

Ludwig Krapf (1844) and John Rebmann (1846) were the first missionaries who are credited with the introduction of western education. They were members of Christian Missionaries Society (CMS) to first have established the first mission school which was introduced in Kenya at Rabai Mpya near the place of Mombasa and Mombasa town (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 22) in 1846.

Early missionary education was dedicated to the conversion of traditional African religion to Christianity and to set up schools. The CMS sent many “[...] Africans to India to train as

Catechists in Sheranpur Nasik in preparations to offer service in schools that were already springing up” (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 22).

The main objective of British educational policy in Kenya at that period and time was, as stated by Natsoulas, (1998) “to create a small semi-literate indigenous population of “good” Christians and, especially during the interwar period, to educate Africans through a village-oriented agriculture and skilled-based curriculum.”

After the progress in the society and the arrivals of the missionaries, schools were set to be on religious education and focussed on formal education along with religious teachings. With these, the colonial administrators who were also making and expanding their ways through the new world e.g., West Indies, parts of Africa, British emperor was becoming stronger and their colonies a broad were an important marketplace through which British produced and sold their goods (McDowall, 1989, p. 109). They therefore wanted Africans to be trained on practical skills of carpentry, agriculture, masonry and on other allied crafts. The reason behind this type of training was to make them available for performing the task of the colonial government and the European Settlers at a cheaper labour.

Some of the main aims of Missionary Education as stated by Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 23) are:

- i) To convert the Africans into Christianity.
- ii) To enable Africans to read the Bible hence they were offered basic reading, writing and arithmetic (3Rs) skills.
- iii) To produce African catechists and workers who could offer evangelic-catechetical work – through singing, reading scriptures and prayers.
- iv) To westernize the African.
- v) To teach hygiene.
- vi) To rehabilitate the freed slaves.

With the construction and expansion of the railway track from Mombasa to Uganda, the missionaries got their way into Kenya’s interior to expand their work which was spreading of Christianity and introducing schools and education to the indigenous people. An attempt to set up a school and mission at Yatta in 1894 was resisted by *the Kamba* tribe. The missionaries then penetrated western Kenya and set up schools and missions.

There were more and more missionaries coming in. Many schools were being set up by various missionaries’ example the (Christian Missionaries Society) also known as the CMS missionaries set schools in Taita stations, Embu, Maseno, Ng’iya etc. The Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) moved from Mombasa to Kibwezi, then to Kikuyu where they established a station in 1898, Kijabe, Bogoria etc. The Catholics were not left behind. The Holy Ghost Fathers (HGF) established their presence in Mombasa (1890), Bura, Nairobi (1899), Mang’u, Mukumu, Yala, Asumbi, Kakamega etc. Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) settled in Gendia, Kamagambo in western Kenya (Ndaloh et al., 2009, pp. 22–23).

Ndaloh et al., further clarify that by 1918, there were 16 missionary bodies in the country. Catholics and CMS formed the bigger percentage. During these periods, they controlled

46 stations with a pupil population of 7405 and 261 village schools with 13,699 pupils on the roll (2009, p. 23).

The first school in western Kenya was established at Kaimosi in 1902 by the Friends Africa Mission. During the colonial era, the number of Kenyans with exposure to education steadily increased and a good number of them were privileged to proceed abroad for further education.

These schools and new way of lives did not also go unchallenged. Natsoulas (1998) explains that some of the communities' e.g., the Kikuyus felt that some of their traditions were being compromised. They boycotted to go to church and to attend schools. As a result of the boycott which is mentioned to have been 90% effective led ways to many pupils dropping out of schools. Many African valued their cultures and adhered to them. There were culture conflicts as the missionaries preached against some of the African traditions and their gods which did not go well with many Africans. "Africans were not very enthusiastic about missionaries. Their reaction was one of indifference, hostility, and apathy" Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 24).

As time went by and with societal changes, many people received western education, change of mind came in and many people were encouraged to attend schools as it provided new areas of different kind of jobs which led to being rich hence high societal status. Some of these schools built by missionaries are still in use as educational centres to date

### **3 Post-colonial Period**

#### **Schools after Kenya's Independence**

After Kenya got its Independence, many changes were brought into the education system of the country as Kenya had "inherited a centralized system of education from Britain (Colonialists)" (Sanya, 2001, p. 13). The education system therefore after 1963, was focused on the overall development of the citizens. Due to these changes, the African post-independent government took various steps to rectify the education system that was prevailed in the country i.e., the three-tier system which found Kenyan schools racially segregated e.g., schools for Europeans (white), Asians and Africans as stated on an online post (State University, 2019). There was a need to have schools that included every citizen irrespective of the race they came from.

So, to eradicate all the negative effects caused by the colonial school system, the government had to introduce an education commission in Kenya proposed by the Ominde Report 1964 that would help see education system into a means that accommodated all. It proposed the idea of an education system in the country which could help in strengthening African Socialism and national integration. The National committee on educational objectives and policies which specifically focused on economic, social and cultural aspirations as was proposed by the Gachathi report 1976 and then Mackay report of (1981) made the removal of advanced secondary education and proposed the introduction of 8-4-4 system which was in use from 1985 (Ndaloh et al., 2009, pp. 31-65).

There were inspections made in colonial government schools and calls for reforms on school system that asked for an all-inclusive kind of school without segregation on racial lines (Mackatiani et al., 2016, p. 56). The government also made this move to promote national unity and nationhood.

The Kenya education commission saw the commencement of Ominde Commission (1964). It was the first education commission after Kenya got its independence (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 31).

As stated by Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 31) the objectives of Ominde Report were:

- i) Develop an education to foster a sense of nationhood and promote national unity.
- ii) Develop an education to serve the people of Kenya and the needs of Kenyans without discrimination.
- iii) Develop an education system that enabled every citizen to play a valuable part in nation building.
- iv) To promote social equality and remove divisions of race, tribe, and religion to pay attention to training in social obligations and responsibilities.
- v) To ensure that education is regarded as an instrument for conscious change or attitude and relationship, preparing children for that change of outlook required by modern methods for productive growth (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 31).

## **4 School System and Structure**

### **a) School system**

The Ominde report gave way to the introduction of 7-4-2-3 system. This same system which was used before the collapse of East African Community (1967) which by this period comprised of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

### **4.1 Kenya 7-4-2-3 System**

Kenya continued using the same system of education but under the umbrella of a different examination name from their regional / national identity.

This system meant that 7 years was to be undergone in primary school (Standard 1-7) which ended with a national examination Certificate of Primary Education (CPE). These exams were marked and examined at a central place with results getting released later and those who did well proceeded to secondary school. Secondary school took a period of 4 years which at the end of the 4th year, the students did another national examination under the name of Kenya Certificate of Education (KCE).

In event that the students performed well, they went to join high school which was mostly referred to as '*higher*' for duration of 2 years. 3 years was finally allocated for the University undergraduate studies (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 32).

## 4.2 Kenya 8-4-4 System

Sifuna & Otiende (2006, p. 255) state that “a new school structure was introduced that came fully operational in 1989 had an eight-year of primary education, four years of secondary education and another four years at the university.”

Amukowa (2013, p. 208) in (Muya (2000) affirms that the 8-4-4 system of education, which was pre-vocational in nature, was introduced in January 1985, following the Mackay report of 1982. It was the famous era of the retired President Daniel Arap Moi. Introduction of 8-4-4 system of education, adopted 8 years (Standard 1-8) of primary education, 4 years of secondary education (Form 1-4) and 4 years of university education (Amukowa, 2013, p. 202). With the introduction of the 8-4-4 system CPE and KCE which were used in the 7-4-2-3 system changed to be Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) respectively. The Forms five and six were terminated.

Since 1985, public education in Kenya has been based on the system mentioned above. From the time of its commencement, there has been a stable growth in the advancement of education in the country. The country is now recording a great number of public and private universities and middle level colleges.

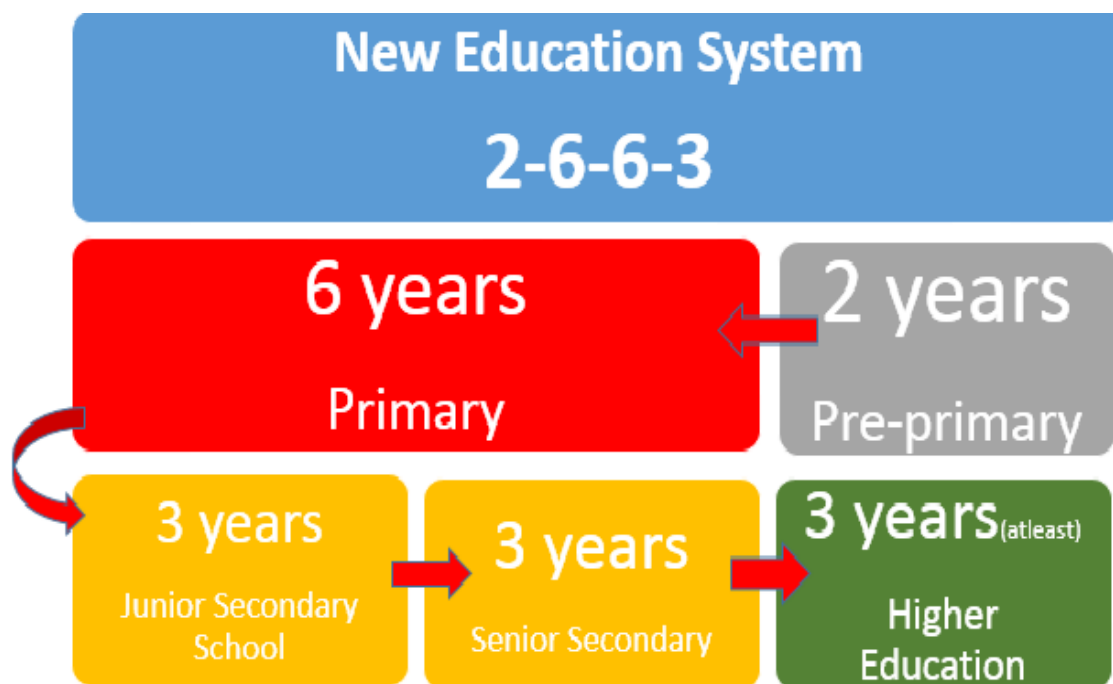
With 8-4-4 system being consumed by the majority of the citizens, there are also a few private schools that offer British curriculum with Ordinary levels also known as ‘*O-Levels*’ at the end of the 4 year of secondary education and after Advanced Level known as ‘*A-Levels*’ at the end of two years of high schools.

## 4.3 Kenya 2-6-3-3-3 System

Kenya is welcoming a new school system that is anticipated to be effective and less examination oriented as 8-4-4 system (Sanya, 2001, pp. 13-14). The system will involve having 2 years in Pre-primary school, 6 years in Primary school, 3 years in Junior-Secondary school, and 3 years in Senior Secondary school before joining a University school for another 3 years. This system is still in the process of being implemented and required trainings given.

Below is a diagram which briefly explains the structure of the new system.





**Figure 1:** Basic education model of the new curriculum 2–6–6–3.  
(Source: *Education News in Kenya*, 2017.)

## b) School structure

### **Pre-school Curriculum**

Kenyan pre-schools are meant for younger learners from ages 3–6 years. Ndaloh et al. (2009, p. 82) explain that this stage “caters for children growth and development processes in the physical, mental, social, emotional, moral and aesthetic dimensions.” The stages are classified as:

1. Kindergarten 1 (*KG 1*)
2. Kindergarten 2 (*KG 2*)
3. Kindergarten 3 (*KG 3*)

At this stage, the pupils as they are called in pre-school and primary school are involved in various activities. Some of these activities include: Language activities, Counting activities, Environmental science and social activities, Physical/psychomotor activities, Music and religious activities (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 83).

### **Primary School Curriculum**

Primary school is a very vital stage in preparation for future citizens and the government puts a lot of importance in Primary education. Amukowa (2013, p. 198) asserts that that it is here that while children are in the lower primary school between age 6 and 8 years, they need support in acquiring basic language and cognitive skills. He further elaborates (Amukowa, 2013, p. 198) that “the children enroll in primary schools at age six years and leave when they are adolescents; primary schooling occupies an important period in a person’s growth and development. It should be accessible to all children.”

Over time, the curriculum has been reviewed and changes made to accommodate the current and international trends and labour markets. This is also because the government equips its learners to develop mastery of requisite knowledge, acquisition of relevant skills and attitudes required at the end of this basic school cycle (Ndaloh et al., 2009, p. 94).

This system has been criticized as it is examination based and it renders overload of work to teachers and lessons are absorbed by the learners through memory and recitations (rote learning).

The stages at the basic education as per the current system are divided as follows:

1. Standard 1–4 also known as '*Lower primary*' takes a duration of 4 years.
2. Standard 5–6 also known as '*Upper primary*' takes a duration of 4 years.
3. Form 1–4 Secondary school also known as '*High school*' takes a duration of 4 years.
4. *Elimu ya Gumbaro* also known as Adult education is also available in some schools.

School is divided into three terms a year. First term runs from the early week of January till April, and then the school takes a break. Second term runs from May till August, the school takes another break, then from September till November, then the schools take a final break till January and the cycle continues. Basically, the school year is divided into a three month, in a trimester (Šimek, 2019, p. 14).

### **Secondary School Curriculum**

Kenyan secondary schools are classified into three main groups namely: State funded schools, Private schools and *Harambee* schools. "*Harambee*" as stated by (Bradshaw, 1993) is a Swahili term meaning 'pulling together or let us all pull together.' This was the first Kenyan philosophy steered by the first president of Kenya Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. It called for working together, putting resources together towards a common goal. These *Harambee* schools are therefore community funded and based. Apart from this kind of classification, Kenyan schools are also grouped as noted by Amukowa (2013, p. 209) in (Achoka et al., 2007) into national, provincial and county (district) level schools." Due to the fact that 8–4–4 system is exam based, it means that students are under pressure to have 'A' type of grades or simply referred to as (excellent performances) to be able to join the National schools which are in this case categorized as the best. Provincial schools are treated as the second best and they take students with exceptionally good and best performances. *Harambee* schools on the other hand takes all students with average and good performances and students with good performances and are unable to pay for expensive school fees required at National and provincial school level. Amukowa (2013, p. 209) quotes a figure for example that is being paid at national schools to be 450 and above Sterling Pounds a term or per year depending on the type of school.

The 4 school years attended by the students are divided according to the years the students are at the school. The first school year is called Form 1, followed by second year known as Form 2, then Form 3 and the final 4th year is called Form 4. The students in Form 4 are also known as *the candidates* as because they are candidates for final Secondary School exams known as KCSE.

### Professional / Technical / Vocational Training Centres

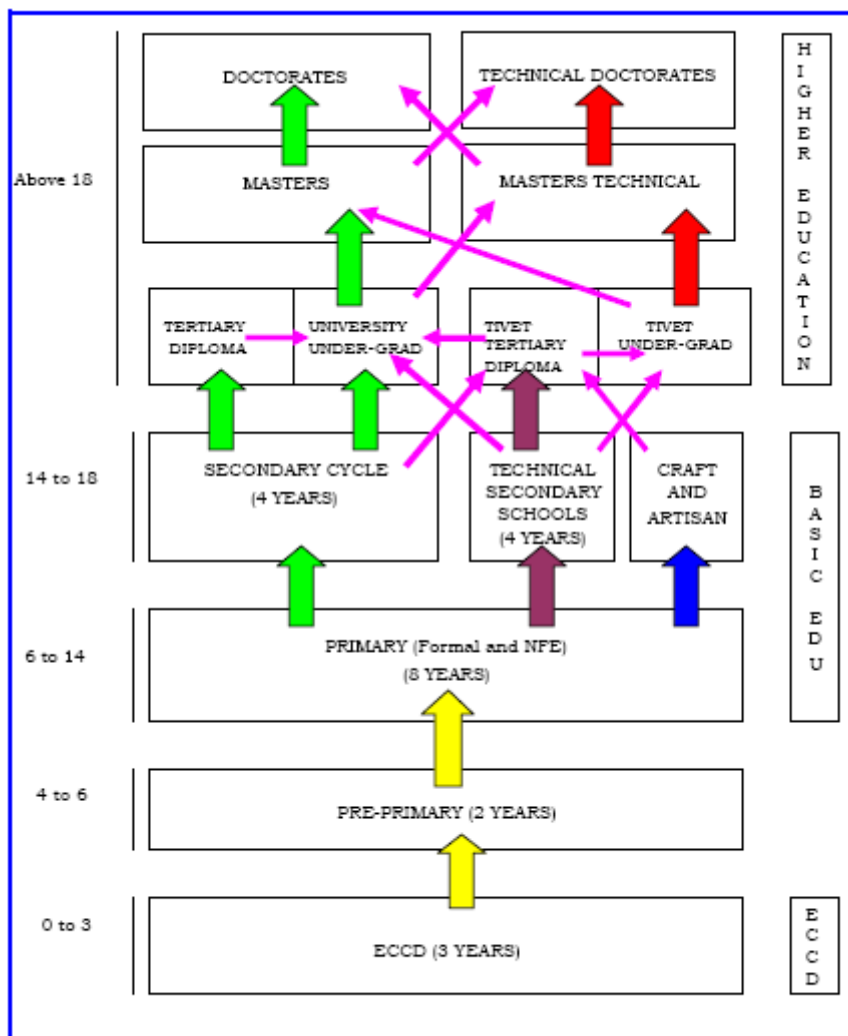
These are two- or three-year post-secondary school institutions referred to as colleges. They give certificates or diplomas (not degree) after successfully completing a course. Some of these courses include teacher training courses, nursing, accounting, food and beverage management, business management courses, tailoring, tourism etc. These services offered by these various specific institutions can be public run, private, or community based.

Example of some of these professional institutions are like Nyabururu Teachers' Training school, Mombasa technical school etc.

### Universities

These institutions offer undergraduate and post graduate courses. Degree courses are also offered for Bachelor studies, Masters and PhD like all other universities all over the world. Example of one of the oldest universities in Kenya is Nairobi University (1970).

Below is a detailed structure of 8-4-4 education system.



**Figure 2:** Structure and Organization of education and Training.  
(Source: Kenya Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2006.)

## 5 Conclusion

It is crucial to indicate that Kenya had its own form of education like all other African countries that made the societies to survive. Eshiwani, 2013, p.51 indicates that “knowledge, skills, and attitudes were passed from generation to generation mostly through word of mouth in the African societies.” He further adds that this is due to the fact that African societies, just like any other society, share a common ancestry which has resulted to the most unique features, which is the ability to adapt to the environment that best suit them. The arrival of Christian Missionaries and colonialists came with an agenda to demean the traditional Kenyan education and cultures and to undertake an action to replace them. Much as their agenda to introduce the new form of education was protested, it has to be conceded that the Christian Missionaries and the colonial powers found their way to achieve their objective of encroachment of a foreign education in the African continent Kenya being no exception. Even though the traditional African learning did not follow any comprehensive and organized formulated curricula, it still served the needs of the indigenous Kenyan with knowledge, skills and attitudes that were important for Kenya and Africa as a whole and furthermore, it is argued that Africa would have developed its own education system, if its indigenous system was not tampered with.

Due to globalization and Africa as a continent being part of the ‘global village,’ it cannot resist change and change for a society or a nation depends on the education systems put in place. The Kenyan education system that has been in use from the independence time, has evolved into various phases latest being 8-4-4 that is slowly changing to the newest Kenyan education/school system 2-6-6-3. The old system has been criticized for being an exam-oriented system not providing the learners with enough knowledge, ground-work and preparedness needed in real life. The paper would therefore suggest a research to be done on the current 2-6-6-3 Kenyan education system or famously referred to as Competency Based System to ascertain its importance in the contribution to the economic & political growth and social advancement of the Kenyan society and if at all it is going to equip the Kenyan learners for local and international markets.

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