Epistemological beliefs and perceptions of education in Africa
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Chapter 2

Conceptual and Contextual Background

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to outline the wide theoretical spectrum of the investigation and to highlight fundamental characteristics of the setting in which it took place, as to endorse an informed perception of the study. Epistemological beliefs and perceptions of education constitute the structuring constructs of the present study. An overview of these constructs is provided in Section 2.1. Section 2.2 starts with a review of the notion of epistemology and proceeds with a tentative synopsis of the enduring discussion around this very concept within Western philosophy. That review is meant to bring to light the rather contentious character of Epistemology. Even though, it stands out as the germane concept in this study, once it is upon the two structuring dimensions of epistemology, namely the nature of knowledge and the nature of knowing that the epistemological beliefs theory is built. On the other hand, the knowing dimension of epistemology looks as if holding up the theorising about perceptions of education.

Bearing in mind the academic context of the study, Section 2.3 provides a summary of the ongoing endeavour towards a conceptualisation of African philosophy and African epistemology. That section aims at pinpointing eventual distinctive elements that may be regarded as the foundations of the epistemological traits of the target group of the study. Section 2.4 provides an abridged description of the setting of the study (Mozambique), highlighting its educational system and educational issues. The intention of that section is to give the reader relevant factual information about the context, as to ease the understanding of some of the existing conditions and challenges in the education sector in the country. Those conditions and challenges also appear to render the study pertinent and relevant. Finally, Section 2.5 summarises the content of the chapter.
2.1 Overview of the main constructs of the study

2.1.1 Epistemological Beliefs

Personal epistemology is a broad discipline concerned with individuals’ beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the nature of knowing (Hofer, 2002, 2004; Hofer & Pintrich, 2002). Within that broad discipline, Epistemological Beliefs stands for a specific paradigm, one that regards personal epistemology as composed of several specific and, somehow, independent beliefs about knowledge and learning (Schommer, 1990). Inherent to its infancy, research in personal epistemology, in general, and in epistemological beliefs, in particular, embodies unsettled conceptual and methodological concerns. In spite of that, research findings have suggested that epistemological beliefs play an important role in text interpretation and reading comprehension (Schommer, 1990; Schommer, Crouse, & Rhodes, 1992); in problem solving (Benedixen, Dunkle, & Schraw, 1994; Chiu & Tsay, 2003), and in conceptual change (Windschitl & Andre, 1996). Utmost, it has also been found that, direct and indirectly, epistemological beliefs exert some influence on academic achievement (Schommer, 1990, 1993; Schommer et al., 1992; Kardash & Scholes, 1996; Cano, 2005). In sum, epistemological beliefs research findings underscore that, to some extent, learning patterns and the respective outcomes are imparted by the learner’s underlying conceptions about knowledge and knowing, shedding momentous educational usefulness of the construct. As it happens, assumptions and actual research outcomes on epistemological beliefs point to ‘naïve beliefs’ as hampering crucial aspects of learning, such as active participation, analytical thinking and persistence on task, once this sort of beliefs are found to have the potential for inducing the learner to regard and approach knowledge and learning in a simplistic and passive way. Conversely, ‘sophisticated beliefs’ are deemed to facilitate and foster those learning assets (Schommer, 1994). In other words, epistemological beliefs are a "category of informal knowledge that may play a role in students’ knowledge, reasoning, study strategies, and participation" (Hammer & Elby, 2002, p.169). Thereupon, it has been suggested that awareness about learners’ epistemological beliefs should be taken not only as a specific ‘lens’ in the diagnosis of learning problems, but also as an asset in the design and implementation of appropriate teaching plans and teaching strategies.

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8 These are addressed in Chapter 3, where the construct of epistemological beliefs is elaborated.
While providing those insightful hints into the learning and teaching processes, research on personal epistemology has, however, remained quite parochial to North America and West Europe contexts. Asian research initiatives in this area, though seemingly promising, are still budding. Thence, at most, considerations regarding culturally determined differences in epistemological beliefs have been, hitherto, examined along the line West (USA and Western Europe) and East (some Asian countries). Undoubtedly, this signals that studies on epistemological beliefs are particularly overdue in the South (Africa, Latin America and South Asia). Against that background, the present investigation turns out to be a modest contribution towards the expansion of the empirical inquiry on epistemological beliefs into the African continent.

2.1.2 Perceptions of Education

In the framework of this study, Perceptions of Education is a construct that has been conceptualised from the learning conceptions theory to refer to a set of aggregated beliefs about several aspects of education, including learning. Specifically, perceptions of education are hypothesised to accommodate conceptions of schooling and conceptions of learning, thus reflecting individuals’ views and beliefs about the chief motives (aims) to attend school, the main purposes (goals) of learning academic subjects, the requirements (conditions) for learning, the activities towards learning, and the sources of regulation in learning.\(^9\)

Research in teaching and learning has revealed that learning outcomes are closely related to how students perceive and approach learning in their contexts. (Marton & Saljö, 1976b; Svenson, 1977; Saljö, 1979; Entwistle, 1998a; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Building on that, the present study holds that the way in which students perceive and approach learning is also related to how they perceive and value the usefulness of ‘getting schooled’ (or ‘educated’) in their specific contexts. How they perceive and value the usefulness of ‘getting schooled’ is taken as an indicator of their perceptions and expectations about education and learning. The underpinning assumption is that cultural/contextual factors are influential in shaping people’s perceptions of education. Additionally, and as far as the present study is concerned, it is assumed that although the constructs of epistemological beliefs and perceptions of education

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\(^9\) The rationale for such a conceptualisation is provided in Chapter 4.
education are distinct, they may somehow interplay. Thenceforth, one of the purposes of the present study is to assess the likelihood and the extent of the hypothesised relationships between students’ perceptions of education and their epistemological beliefs.

2.2 Revisiting the notion of Epistemology

Epistemology, one of the fundamental branches within Western philosophy, is concerned with the origin, nature, source, limits and justification of human knowledge (Audi, 1998; Klein, 1998). In other words, it is a discipline about what humans can learn (knowledge) and how and by which means they come to learn (knowing). Succinctly, epistemology is a theory of knowledge.

In order to grasp the main orientations in the theory of knowledge, we trace its main lines, starting from the 17th Century, when Western philosophers were especially concerned with the development of the scientific thought. Diverging perceptions on what would be the basis of knowledge turned into the classical fundamental epistemological question: whether knowledge is achieved through reason (rationalism) or it is attained through experience (empiricism) (Dancy, 1985; Woozley, 1966).

For classical rationalist philosophers (e.g. René Descartes [1596-1650], Benedict Spinoza [1632-1677], Gottfried Leibniz [1646-1716]), collectively referred to as ‘The Continental Rationalists’ (Audi, 1995, p.673), the answer to that question would be that the essence of knowing springs from humans’ ability to reason and, thereupon, arrive at logically inescapable conclusions. Rationalism regards human senses as fallible. Consequently, sensorial experiences and empirical information are thought to be unreliable bases for the attainment of true knowledge. Additionally, once contingent, sensorial experiences are thought to be misleading and unsupportive for accounting for basic principles of human knowledge, which, ultimately, are a priori. Time, space, and causality are examples of those principles. The implication is that, for instance, we cannot ‘see’ a causal relation. We can only conclude, by reasoning, that it is there.

Rationalists’ claim on the primacy of reason to knowledge attainment is well depicted in Descartes’10 milestone argument: “Cogito ergo sum” – ‘I think, therefore I am’. Accordingly, reason is seen to provide the knowing

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10 - In Discours de la Méthode (1637). Taken from Quotations by René Descartes in http://www.gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/quotations/descartes.html, retrieved 10.10.03.
human person both a kind of intuitive recognition of what Descartes calls ‘clear and distinct ideas’, i.e., insights about the basic characteristics of reality and the capacity of logical inference. Supposedly, this is the necessary condition for deriving true conclusions from true premises.

Conversely, and on the other extreme of the contention, advocates of classical empiricism, renown as ‘The British Empiricists’ (e.g. John Locke [1632-1704] and David Hume [1711-1776]) would claim that the mind is just as a clear slate of the reality. Hence, knowledge can only be achieved as a reflection of its underlying reality. That is to say that “all our ideas come from experience. The mind has no innate ideas but just innate faculties”\(^{11}\). Therefore, for the empiricists, an individual only comes to know about things (i.e. ‘have them on his slate’) provided that he has experienced them on a sensorial basis. This argument has been appealing for holding out the underpinnings from which irrationality, obscurantism and superstition could be cast off.

On an epistemological continuum, rationalism and empiricism represent opposite extremes. They were seemingly integrated by Emmanuel Kant [1724-1804] into a ‘3\(^{rd}\) alternative epistemology’, in which an a priori ‘factual knowledge’ is admitted, yet under the assumption that if we are capable of seeing and perceiving knowledge and truth it is because of the way our brains are structured. Thus, Kant’s epistemology upholds that basic innate (a priori) aspects of knowing, such as time, space, substance, and causality are instrumental for the framing of sensory experiences. Kant’s central argument is that while sensorial data are to be recognised as the elements from which factual knowledge about the world is constructed (empiricist element), those data, however, are seen as an act of mental construction. This is to say that factual knowledge is ‘known’ as far as it matches the existing structures of the knowing mind, hence casting the data in the innate categories of human reasoning capacities (rationalist element). Kant’s benchmark contribution to epistemology has been the axiomatic idea that the human mind has a built-in capacity for ordering and organising sensory experiences\(^{12}\). Nevertheless, that contribution has


\(^{12}\) - Noam Chomsky’s theory on language learning sustaining that humans can learn any language because of their already ‘built-in universal grammar’ has been cited as a concrete example of the validity of Kant’s epistemological theory (e.g. Bernard, 2000).
not disentangled all issues inherent to epistemology. In point of fact, in contemporary (post-modern\textsuperscript{13}) philosophy, the structuring role of human reason in the knowledge process has been recognised as being even more pervasive. An example of that comes to light from the idea of the theory-conditioned nature of empirical data. This conditioning is no longer perceived as something innate and unchanging, but a dynamic and historically (also culturally) conditioned one. To illustrate that, one can refer to the statement of one of the renowned twentieth-century philosopher, Willard Quine [1908 – 2000]: “Science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience”. The idea of ‘force’ has been explored further by Michel Foucault [1926-1984], who highlights the connection of knowledge to power, thence sustaining that bodies of knowledge are tied to operation of power, deriving from prevailing systems of social control. Another non-negligible contribution to contemporary epistemology is Karl Popper’s [1909 – 1994] notion of ‘falsificationism’\textsuperscript{14}. This entails an evolutionary epistemology, in which knowledge is regarded as a constant process of evolution and refinement. Thomas Kuhn [1922 – 1996] goes a step further and adds the idea of ‘paradigm shift’ to posit that knowledge evolution does not occur gradually but through periodic ‘revolutions’. Winding-up, knowledge has come to be perceived as a historically and culturally conditioned practice of knowing. The dynamic character of knowledge subsumed in contemporary/post-modern philosophy suggests that static and supposedly definitive consensuses about epistemology ought to be regarded as rather idle and illusive.

2.3 On African Epistemology

This study concerns epistemological beliefs of contemporary Mozambican (African) students. Thus, one of its features was bound to

\textsuperscript{13} - Post-modern philosophy is generally characterized not only by rejecting the simple binary oppositions in Western epistemology but also, and above all, by its social and historical perspective about knowledge. Accordingly, knowledge is inherently linked, \textit{inter alia} to place, social position and power relations, from which an individual’s view of knowledge is constructed.

\textsuperscript{14} - Accordingly, what is important in science is not the confirmation, but the attempted falsification, as scientific theories are only hypothesis. As such, they may be falsified and replaced one day. (Synopsis of Popper’s philosophy in Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (www.madeasy.de/2poppere.htm, accessed 22.06.05).
be the analysis of probable convergences and/or conflicts between the culturally (traditionally) imparted epistemological beliefs of these students and the knowledge practices inculcated to and expected from them through formal education, namely at the high-school. Rephrasing it, the question was whether noticeable cultural traits could be found in the target group’s epistemological beliefs. If so, then how well would those ‘informal’ epistemological beliefs, bequeathed through tradition, fit into or conflict with the ‘formal’ ones, conveyed through the western influenced school system?\footnote{Cf. our research question 2.} Taking that into account, and in order to get hold of the contextual signification of the concept, a culturally insightful view of epistemology seemed sensible. To endeavour in that direction, we felt we should acknowledge the recurrent questioning of an eventual African epistemology, usually voiced through expressions such as: ‘Is there an African Epistemology?’, ‘Are there African Epistemologies?’ and ‘How do they look like?’ or even, ‘What is really African in the so-called African epistemologies?’ It is our perception that a great deal of that questioning results from the intractable, pervasive and historically determined superimposition of European culture (philosophy included) on philosophical traditions and formal education systems elsewhere\footnote{Gratton (2003) has observed that it has long been taken as a brute fact that “Africans did not and could not have a philosophy”. He remarks: “[Africans] were taken to be raw materials for inculcation into western modes of thinking” (p.61). To illustrate that, Gratton (op cit.) goes further to quote Hegel [1770 – 1831] as having put forth the assertion that Sub-Saharan Africa is “the unhistorical, undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature” (Quote on Note 1, p.77). Addressing this very issue, Wiredu (2004, p.1-2) recalls that “because the colonialists and relative personnel perceived African culture as inferior in at least some important respects, colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanization (…)”. Therefore, “African philosophy was usually non-existent in university departments of philosophy”.}.

Optimistic and positive-minded interpretations, however, have considered that the apparent scepticism around African philosophy (and its epistemology) reflects the need and the challenge to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ the most distinctive and important relics of African philosophical and epistemological traditions, believed to have stood the test of foreign influences, and use them to demonstrate the existence of an African epistemology (Outlaw, 1996).

Keeping in mind the nature and circumstances of our target group, as explained above, all possible scenarios were expected to emerge in terms of these subjects’ epistemological traits: convergence, divergence, or even
coexistence. In other words, it could be that our subjects’ epistemological beliefs and perceptions of education would either solely reflect features subsumed in the prevailing accounts of what is seen to be ‘African Philosophy/African Epistemology’, or, instead, diverge from that and solely reflect educationally imposed epistemological traits or, in a third possibility, reflect a coexistence of those two supposedly opposing views. Whatever the outcome, we believed it would be in itself an important result of the study, as it would constitute a leap towards insights into epistemological beliefs in an African context.

Academically, epistemology stands as a discipline within philosophy. Therefore, in order to, conceptually, build an outline for a possibly congruent ‘answer’ to the underlying question “Is there an African epistemology?”, we shall start by attempting to portray contemporary African philosophy.

2.3.1 Current trends in African philosophy

According to Oruka (1990), African philosophy is to be seen as consisting of four schools or trends. These are: Ethnophilosophy, Philosophical Sagacity, Nationalist-ideological Philosophy, and Professional Philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy is a trend that conceives of philosophy as both a latent and an explicit reality within people’s everyday actions, guiding and maintaining their culture. Thus, the alleged concern of this trend is the description, valorisation and preservation of culturally rooted forms of thought of a particular African community and, eventually, of the whole Africa. Those forms of thought are assumed as unified and communal forms of knowledge, the reason why they are deemed to be treasured. In view of that, ethnophilosophy advocates that an African philosophy should be concerned with articulating metaphysical and epistemological elements that reflect the essential African values, categories and assumptions, and cast the unity and uniqueness of African cultures. Those elements are believed to be implicit in folk-wisdom, namely in traditional myths, beliefs, rituals and arts, as well as in popular proverbs and in the languages. Ethnophilosophy, or ‘folk-philosophy’ (Emagalit, 2005) is entrenched on the conviction that those elements “can take the place of philosophy, in spite of their lack of explicitness, individuality and self-reflexive rational activity” (Ndaba, 1996, p.11). As Gratton (2003, p.66) puts it, it appears that African ethno-philosophers believe to have attained a
genuine and truly indigenous African “intellectual matrix”, which they strive to propose as an undeniable frame of reference in the pursuit for an African philosophy.

Representatives of African Ethnophilosophy include Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti, and Leopold Senghor, despite some reported points of disagreement amongst them. Placide Tempels and Alexis Kagame are unanimous in sustaining the primacy of African languages and both claim that African philosophical principles, particularly those of the Bantu people, are to be mainly found in their languages and beliefs. John Mbiti is renowned by sustaining that African philosophical principles stem from the specificity of African cosmology and religions, while Leopold Senghor, one of the advocates of Negritude, holds that an African approach to reality is based on emotions rather than on logic, therein encouraging participation rather than analysis (Imbo, 1998; Mosley, 2003). Essentially, ethnophilosophy maintains that, rather than the isolated individual, the ultimate generator of knowledge and values is the whole society, through its collectively shared practices and thoughts. On those grounds, proponents of ethnophilosophy are critical to what they regard as the Western (mis)conceptions about African traditions and urge Africans to commit themselves to the rehabilitation of African culture (philosophy included), towards African renaissance.

Apparently appealing due, mainly, to its potential in boosting a collective uplift of the African cultural and political identity (through the rescuing of the ‘endangered’ African roots and authenticity), ethnophilosophy has not stood unchallenged. Criticism has been focused on three aspects: (i) at the lack of solid empirical foundation to sustain claims and judgments about tradition, (ii) at the over-interpretation by the interpreter (ethnophilosopher) of what is presented as traditional.

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18 - Negritude is an ideological standpoint concerned with the affirmation of the African cultural heritage by sustaining the independence and the validity of Black culture on its own terms.

19 - Embedded in ethnophilosophy and embraced further by the proponents of the nationalist-ideological philosophy, the call for an African renaissance has been retrieved and echoed in current political discourses on development, particularly in South(ern) Africa. (See, for instance, Mbeki, 2001; Boele van Hensbroek, 2001a).
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 communal thought – a shortcoming deriving from the descriptive nature of ethnophilosophy along with its lack of critical reflection and scientific rigour, and lastly, (iii) at the idyllic assumption about consensus in African traditional societies (Hountondji, 1996; Osha, 1999). Arguing specifically against the ‘myth of African unanimity’20, Hountondji (op cit.) stresses that “cultural traditions are always a complex heritage, contradictory and heterogeneous, an open set of options, some of which will be actualized by any given generation, which by adopting one choice sacrifices all others” (p.161). Implicit in that assertion is a caution warning that the idea of African unanimity underrates the mental capabilities for independent and critical thinking among Africans, and legitimates all traditions and practices, including those that by themselves or by the values that they underpin have had excruciating effects in development, in general, and in education, in particular21.

The second trend in African philosophy proposed by Oruka (op. cit.) is the Philosphic Sagacity. This is a kind of individualised ethnophilosophy, characterised by advocating that the actual sources and agents of knowledge and values in a given society are its sages and not the entire community. Sages are individuals whose wisdom is seen as transcending that of the community, going beyond their acknowledged vast factual knowledge to their supposedly inborn capability of critical reflection. Perceived in that way, sages are taken not just as knowledgeable individuals but also as elected rational and critical thinkers, whose opinions and recommendations are tacitly and commonly accepted and respected. Under this philosophical trend, sages get the status of formal ‘community thinkers’ (philosophers). Therefore, they are implicitly accredited as representatives or spokespersons of the community culture, and the ones capable of making critical assessment of what the community takes (or has to take) for granted.

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20 - The notion of ‘African unanimity’ matches that of ‘uncertainty avoidance’ proposed by Hofstede (1986, 2000) to refer to a behaviour thought to be typical of ‘High Power Distance” societies.
21 - For instance, traditionally, it is seen as culturally correct that, as a sign of respect to elderly people or to authority (teachers included), youngsters should not question their ‘wisdom’. Such a practice is conducive to inculcate or reinforce a belief in omniscient sources of knowledge and stimulate passive attitudes towards learning. We can also mention the discrimination towards women and even towards other tribal or ethnic groups as some of the commonly widespread malevolent practices in African traditional societies. The ethnically motivated genocide in Rwanda is an outspoken extreme example of the latter.
Criticisms levelled at this philosophical trend include methodological concerns similar to those raised in respect to ethnophilosophy. An additional methodological shortcoming concerns the fact that this philosophical trend was developed based on a fieldwork carried in just one setting, namely the Kenyan rural areas. At the conceptual level, the major concern lies on the fact that not all the reflections and questionings of the sages are necessarily philosophical (Hountondji, 1996, op cit.).

Nationalist-ideological Philosophy comes to be the third philosophical trend proposed by Oruka. Also inspired from and striving to revive the traditional African society, this philosophical trend gives emphasis to what it regards to be the values and virtues of the traditional African socialism and familyhood. Thereupon, in essence, the nationalist-ideological philosophy turns to be a socio-political philosophy (Emagalit, 2005, op. cit.) for the reason that it cultivates principles claimed to sustain the pursuit of a genuine and meaningful liberation of the African continent. This philosophical trend is shaped by the thinking of renowned African political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau. Apart from decolonising their countries, these leaders were concerned in ‘decolonising’ the respective people’s minds. Sharing a Marxist inspired ideology, they strove to implant in their respective countries a kind of ‘African socialism’, which they regarded as a recommendable and a viable political and economic system for the purpose of uniting people into nation-states, and for promoting communal development and self-reliance. To legitimate that endeavour, those political leaders evoked the traditional African society, in which, they believed, principles of communality, solidarity and egalitarianism proved to apply, allegedly in a successful way (Peterson, 2001; Van der Berg, 2005).

To a large extent, criticism levelled at ethnophilosophy also applies to nationalist-ideological philosophy. We refer specifically to the lack of empirical foundation, to the over-interpretation of sources, and to the myth of African unanimity. Furthermore, because of a perceptible influence of Existentialism and Marxism on its guiding principles, this philosophical trend has been reportedly accused of importing Western ideas into African philosophical practices (Gratton, 2003). Given that, criticisms have cautioned that ideology should not be taken as philosophy. Yet, a more specific criticism has to do with the ‘top-down’
character of the nationalist-ideological philosophy, once it is actually
designed solely by the political leaders themselves. Consequently, “the
lifetime of the [nationalist-ideological] philosophy has generally not been
longer than that of the period in power of the national leader” (Boele van

The fourth African philosophical trend in Oruka’s categorization is
termed Professional African Philosophy, also known as Universalist
Philosophy (Mosley, 2003). Advocates of this trend include Kwasi Wiredu,
Paulin Houtoundji and Henry Odera Oruka. Their claim is that African
philosophy should be seen as part of a universal discipline (philosophy)
that is concerned with the critical analysis and interpretation of reality, in
general22. On the one hand, such a claim sustains the view that
Philosophy must have the same meaning in all cultures. On the other
hand, it entails the assumption that the matter and the development of
philosophy in Africa parallel the concern and the development of
philosophy in Europe and elsewhere. Under such a universalistic
outlook, and according to the advocates of this trend, African
philosophy is that practiced by African philosophers on philosophical concerns,
which do not have to be necessarily African. Thus, based on African
social and cultural background, African professional philosophers are
challenged to go beyond and enrich what is only based upon European
backgrounds. However, that ought to be done in rigorous compliance
with the methodological requirements inherent to a philosophical
inquiry. Drawn from there is the view that an African philosophy should
be both holistic, yet situated, and be critical also with regard to African
traditions themselves (Hountondji, 1996; Venter, 2004).

Understanding philosophy as a ‘critical literature’, Wiredu (cited in
Osha, 1999) goes further and somehow parallels Cabral’s call for a “re-
Africanization of the minds” (Cabral, 1970) by suggesting that African
Philosophy should be so critical as to enable ‘conceptual decolonization’.
To clarifying that, Wiredu (1998) conceives decolonization in two
complementary ways. On the one hand, he urges for the development of
a critical conceptual self-awareness to avoid or to reverse the
unexamined assimilation of conceptual frameworks embedded in the
foreign philosophical traditions. By that, Wiredu suggests a

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22 - “I think it is a colonial type of mentality that regards African philosophy as something that
should be kept apart from the mainstream of philosophical thinking”. Wiredu (1998 – Online
Review).
decolonization of African minds from values and beliefs imposed through foreign languages, foreign religions, and foreign political systems. On the other hand, Wiredu urges African philosophers to exploit as much as possible the resources of their indigenous conceptual schemes in their thinking on African and on universal contemporary philosophical issues.

The converse of what is seen as the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy becomes the crux of the criticism on the professional school in African philosophy. Basically, in claiming to be part of the universal thinking, this trend has been under criticism for allegedly disregarding to specify its particular ‘African’ object (Then, the question: ‘What is African in African philosophy?’). In other words, African professional philosophers are seen as treading heavily on the ‘philosophy’, but risking to lose the ‘African’ (More, 1996).

Based on their essential similarities and differences, and for the sake of simplicity, the four philosophical trends surveyed above can be reduced to just two: the particularist and the universalist (Gratton, 2003). The particularist trend would then been seen as encompassing Ethnophilosophy, Sagacity Philosophy and the Nationalist-ideological Philosophy, all based on the assumption that philosophy is historically and culturally mediated. On the other hand would stand the universalist trend, substantiated by the African Professional Philosophy, which conceives philosophy as a universal system of thought, independent of cultural or historical circumstances. Overlooking methodological requirements, the particularist trend is associated with the idea that specific African philosophical concerns (e.g. reconstruction of specifically African metaphysics and conceptual schemes) should be the object of African philosophising. Conversely, the universalist trend, overlooking the ‘Africanness’, holds that there is no European/Western mode of thinking in opposition to an African one, but just a human mode of thinking. It is on that basis that the universalist trend sustains that African philosophers should enrich the universal thinking by using the ‘lenses’ of their cultural and epistemological background.

-Wiredu (1998) regards language, religion and politics as the main avenues of conceptual colonization, through which foreign systems of thought were historically superimposed on the African ones.
To summarise, we firstly recall that although Philosophy has been a well-established subject, it remains a contentious discipline. As Wiredu (1980) has observed, “its issues are so riddled with controversy that there is hardly a single question to which there can be said to be an established answer. Not even on the question of what philosophy is, is there agreement” (p.139). Such a state of affairs has also and recurrently characterised Western philosophy. As discussed earlier, contemporarily, the contentious character of philosophy has been brought to the fore by the so-called post-modern philosophers. Likewise, it can be sustained that the apparent lack of agreement on what African Philosophy should encompass and aim at, or even on which approaches it should adopt in order to be really ‘African’ and yet remain an accredited philosophical enterprise comes as no specific fate of African philosophy. It is rather a “sign of the relative maturity of African philosophy as a disciplinary field” (Outlaw, 1996, p.62). As a matter of fact, African philosophy is “in the making”. Thus, there is ground to concur with the view that “a principal driving force in African postcolonial African philosophy has been a quest for self-definition” (Wiredu, 2004, p.1).

2.3.2 An outline towards an African Epistemology

The foregoing discussion has brought to light that the pursuit for an indisputable African Philosophy is far from being over. The prevailing diversity of trends in African Philosophy, associated to the fact that those trends do not converge in some aspects, testifies to the contentious nature of philosophy in general, and underscores the limitations of the epistemological inquiry. It thus becomes obvious that neither a clear-cut nor a conclusive answer can, so far, be found to respond to the perennial question about the existence of an ‘African Epistemology’. So, what follows is just a heuristic outline of some paths that could be helpful for a contextualised interpretation of the outcomes of this study which, explicitly, attempts to identify and discuss African students’ epistemological traits in an African context.

Earlier in this chapter, while reviewing the contemporary debate around epistemology within Western philosophy, we learnt that knowledge has come to be perceived as a historically and culturally conditioned practice of knowing. Building on that, and considering, on the one hand, the outgoing survey of trends in African philosophy and, on the other, the complex historical and cultural conditionality under which the practice
of knowing has taken place in Africa, we contend the view that a contemporary African epistemology is to be thought of as a mosaic of philosophical traditions in the practice of knowing. Some of those practices of knowing have been implanted through distressful processes of acculturation and enculturation, as testified by the social and political history of the continent. Along with geo-political ends, the Western tradition in the practice of knowing was formally imposed on the native ones which, nevertheless, have not completely died out. Under that frame of reference, current African epistemology could be seen as a dynamic hybrid of the following traditions in the practice of knowing: (i) the actual African traditional practices, (ii) the practices introduced along with the Islamic religion and culture, and (iii) those practices imposed by the Euro-Christian epistemological tradition Nasseem (1992). Particulars of those practices of knowing are described next.

As already discussed, Western epistemology can be summarised as conceiving knowledge attainment as a dynamic and historically determined process, based upon analytical and discursive procedures. These procedures have been introduced into the African practices of knowing, mainly through formal enculturation. Meanwhile, prior to Western epistemology, Islamic epistemology has brought into the continent its ‘three modes of knowledge’, namely the empirically driven knowledge, the knowledge by pure reason, and the knowledge by intuition, yet safeguarding that some degree of divine intervention ought to play a role in order for an individual to achieve ‘definitive’ knowledge (Aftab, 2000). Thus, it has been put-forth that the Islamic epistemological heritage in African practices of knowing rests on its rational-illuminative method (Nasseem, 1992).

Under the ‘purely’ African tradition, the practice of knowing would entail an integrative epistemology, wherein knowledge is regarded as “(the) understanding of the nature of forces and their (cosmic) interaction” (Nasseem, 1992, p.3). Thus, African knowledge practices are perceived holistically as integrating the acknowledged domains of knowledge, namely the rational, the empirical and the mystical. In sum, traditional knowledge practices in African imply an ontological interconnectedness between man and nature, an active involvement of all society members, a compliance with shared beliefs - including the recognition of the wisdom of elderly people/sages, and the subsumed unifying force of the usages and customs of the ancestors. Conceptually, an epistemology embodied
in the above described framework is likely to entail and elicit beliefs such as:

i. That knowledge acquisition occurs through an individual active attachment to nature, involving all his faculties, as he sees, manipulates, reasons, feels, imagines and intuits;

ii. That knowledge acquisition is a collective process, as humans are social beings and are to be found interacting with nature in a collective way;

iii. That certain kind of knowledge may be a ‘monopoly’ of certain individuals (‘omniscient authorities’), as it is admitted that some individuals (elderly people and sages) are endowed with knowledge and wisdom that transcend that of the community in general.

The beliefs outlined in i. and iii. may seem contradicting each other. However, a belief in omniscient authorities (belief iii.) is likely to co-exist if the knowledge in stake is detached from immediate and perceptible reality (the abstract knowledge, for example). Because in those circumstances the involvement of the learner is apparently unfeasible, learners are more likely to regard knowledge as an inborn gift of the selected ones, namely the sages and elders at the community level, in general, and the teachers in a more formalised educational setting. Consequently, the opinions and the teachings of the elderly, the sages, and the teachers are more likely to be taken as definitive, not subject to any questioning, under the belief that these are ‘the authorities’ when it comes to knowledge and wisdom.

**Précis**

Mozambican high-school students - the target group of the study, are heavily under the influence of Western epistemological practice of knowing, conveyed by formal education, which lies basically on analytical and abstract thinking, based upon a distance between the subject and the object. At the same time, those students live under the natural influence of some relics of African traditional epistemology. This has the potential to impart, *inter alia*, beliefs in omniscient authorities, and to impact individual’s attachment with the objective world, thought to be understood not only through analytical and discursive thinking, but also through intuition, emotion and participation. In some cases, given the cultural history and the cultural heritage of the country, some
of the students of our target group are also under the influence of the Islamic epistemology\textsuperscript{24}, thence also under a rational-illuminative perception of knowledge.

Taking those circumstances into consideration, the expectation at the outset of the study was that the outcomes could unveil underlying African epistemological traits. The extent to which those traits could conceptually conform or clash with the practice of knowing generally required from the students in their formal education setting would then be an aspect to deserve our particular attention, once it could pinpoint possible sources of epistemologically entrenched learning difficulties.

2.4 The context of the study

2.4.1 Mozambique’s demographic and socio economic-profile

Mozambique is a country located in the East-Southern African region, with a coastal line of 2470 Km along the Indian Ocean (Mozambique Channel). It borders five countries, namely Tanzania in the North, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swaziland on the West, and South Africa on the South and South-West. With a total area of about 800,000 Km\textsuperscript{2}, Mozambique’s population is of about 19,800,000 inhabitants\textsuperscript{25}.

Mozambique’s territory is organized into 11 administrative provinces, which are grouped into three regions: Northern, Central and Southern. The Northern Region consists of the provinces of Niassa, Cabo Delgado and Nampula; the Central Region comprises the Provinces of Zambézia, Tete, Manica and Sofala; and the Southern region includes the provinces of Inhambane, Gaza, Maputo and the capital city Maputo, with a province status. The Central Region is the most populated, with 42\% of the total country’s population, while the Northern and Southern Regions accommodate respectively 33\% and 25\% of the whole population (INE, 1998). Though the country’s average population density is of about 20.1 inhabitants per square kilometre, the 11 administrative provinces that form up the country are unevenly populated, as most of the population is concentrated along the coastal areas. For instance, while the average population density in the hinterland (and largest) province of Niassa is

\textsuperscript{24} - Muslims constitute 20\% of the Mozambican population and Islam is the 3\textsuperscript{rd} major religion in the country (INE, 1999).

of only 6.3 inhabitants per Km², the population density of the coastal provinces of Nampula and Zambézia are of 37.6 and 29.3 inhabitants per Km², respectively. Standing as a particular case, the ‘cosmopolitan’ capital city of Maputo has a population density of around 3,500 inhabitants per square kilometre. In average, only 29% of the total Mozambique population lives in urban areas (INE, 1998).

Mozambique remained a Portuguese colony for almost five centuries until it reached its Independence, in 1975. Before the Portuguese domination and settlement, Arab and Swahili traders had settled in some key economic points along the coastal line. Those settlements are reported to have contributed not only for the incursion and diffusion of the Islamic religion, but also for the ethnic and linguistic diversity that characterizes the country (Departamento de História da UEM & Tempo, 1982). Currently, sixteen (16) main ethnic groups make up the Mozambican population. Reflecting that ethnic diversity, twenty three (23) indigenous languages, all belonging to the Bantu family, are spoken throughout the country by virtually the entire Mozambican population. About 75.6% of Mozambicans are exclusive speakers of at least one of the indigenous languages. Meanwhile, Portuguese, the language of the colonial power has remained the official language and language of instruction. Yet, that language is spoken as a mother tongue by only 1.2% of the population, being a second language to about 30% of the population (INE, 1999). About half of the Mozambique’s population follows traditional religious beliefs, while about 30% are Christians and some 20% are Muslims.

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26 - As the capital city and the main political and economic centre, Maputo had been the major urban centre. It became particularly overpopulated during the ‘civil war’ (1976-1992), as it was a shelter for many of the displaced from the rural areas. Most of those shelter-seekers have definitely settled in the capital.

27 - Data from the 1980 census indicate that 98.8% of the population claimed to speak one of the indigenous languages as a native language (INE, 1999).

28 - Political reasons, chiefly caution and concern in promoting and reinforcing national unity were behind the adoption of Portuguese as the official language. On the other hand, unlike in countries such as Tanzania and Kenya, where there is a língua franca (Swahili), in Mozambique none of the main indigenous languages is spoken throughout the country. Additionally, most of the spoken indigenous languages remain in their oral form, making their use for instruction or written communication rather unfeasible. [It is noteworthy that promoting and developing the country’s indigenous languages was not a concern of the colonial rule. On the contrary, even the oral use of those languages in public institutions was outlawed (Firmino, 1977)].

29 - While Christianity was imposed by the colonial power from the 15th Century, Islam was implanted earlier through contacts with Arab traders, mostly along the coastal zone, where Muslim remains prominent.
Data gathered in the latest Human Development Report (UNDP, 2005) and referring to Mozambican key indicators of the year 2003 indicate a population growth rate of 1.8%, while the average infant mortality rate is of about 140 deaths/1,000 live births. The average life expectancy at birth is reported to be of 41.9, mainly due to HIV/AIDS epidemic, whose infection rate in the country is of 12.2%, in average (UNDP, 2005).

Most of the Mozambican population (47.8%) is aged between 15 and 45 years old, and 42.7% is under the age of 15. The “older” population can be subdivided in two groups: 7% that are aged between 45 and 64 years old and 2.5% who are older than 65 (INE, 1999). Such a pyramidal structure of the population reflects that the Mozambican population is mostly young, which entails, among other issues, a high demand on the scarce education services, as well as a high rate of unemployment30, taking into account the very limited job opportunities in the formal labour market.

Since the end of the civil war, in 1992, the country has been experiencing remarkable economic recovery, as peasants and farmers have resumed their agricultural activities, being agriculture ‘the basis for the country’s development’. Foremost, Mozambique’s economic recovery has been boosted by huge foreign investments, especially in areas such as metal production (aluminium, steel), natural gas and timber exploitation, fishing and services. At the macro-economic level, the result of those investments has been an extraordinary GNP growth. Nevertheless, the country is still ranked within the poorest 10 in the world, given its low per capita income (around U$230 in 2003) and a poverty line of 69.4 (UNDP, 2005). Imports outnumber exports by around five to one, which makes the country still dependent on foreign assistance to pay for trade imbalance and to balance its budget, particularly in support to social sectors, which have been severely under-funded through the national budget. For instance, only 4% of the country’s GNP is assigned to Health services, while 2.4% is allocated to the overall Education sector, from primary to higher education (PNUD, 2004).

30 - 21% of the active population has reported to be unemployed (INE, 2004). That refers to those who have registered as unemployed to the Ministry of Labour, seeking for a job. However, the actual unemployment rate in the country is far much higher.
2.4.2 The Mozambican educational system and its challenges

2.4.2.1 The colonial education at a glance

The resort to the colonial heritage as a reference point is sometimes regarded as a tired cliché, given its frequent use and abuse to justify situations that are often unjustifiable and to defend the indefensible. But in the case of education, reference to the colonial legacy is an imperative, precisely because it explains many of the problems and challenges that education has confronted and continues to confront (UNDP, 2000, pp.1-2.).

Under the colonial rule education was clear and openly exclusive for the majority of the population (Mondlane, 1969; Johnston, 1990; Buendía Gomez, 1999). As it is elsewhere expounded, “the [colonial] system is designed to make it almost impossible for an African to get an education which qualifies him for anything but menial work afterwards. The whole system of African schooling is designed to produce not citizens, but servants of Portugal” (Mondlane, 1969, p.75). Like in other Portuguese colonies, in Mozambique there were two categories of school systems: The Roman Catholic mission schools, designed and accessible for the indigenous population, and the State (official) and private schools, catering for whites, those of mixed and Asian race, and for the ‘assimilados’ (indigenous who had ‘renounced’ their native culture and taken on the Portuguese one). The ‘curriculum’ and practice of the school system for the indigenous populations was consistent with the colonizer aim. The following quote is outspoken as to that aim:

We try to reach the native population in breadth and depth to (teach them) reading and arithmetic, not to make ‘doctors’ of them ... To educate and instruct them so as to make them prisoners of the soil and to protect them from the lure of the towns, the path which with devotion and courage the Catholic missionaries chose, the path of good sense and of political and social security for the province ... Schools are necessary, yes, but schools where we can teach the native the path of human dignity and the grandeur of the nation which protects him31.

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Such a school system found its legitimization within the historical framework of the crusades, whereby and for the sake of expanding Christianity, the colonial powers had the ‘sacred’ mission of ‘civilizing the savages’ (Buendía Gomez, 1999).

As a consequence of that educational policy, only 7% of the population (mostly settlers and ‘assimilados’) could read and write when the country became Independent (1975). The foundation of the colonial educational system was inextricably based on the denial of indigenous values and culture (UNDP, 2000). Therefore, it goes without saying that, to a large extent, the nature of the education received by the few indigenous who had had the privilege of attending school was of an alienating nature.

2.4.2.2 The National System of Education

Longing to urgently reverse the above described scenario, a month after the country’s Independence the new government abolished the religious-grounded and run, as well as the private school systems and declared education (including all school premises) ‘nationalized’, that is, driven and owned by the State. At the policy level, and while designing a new educational system, effort was placed on promoting literacy and adult education, as well as universal education for children at the school age. Special attention was also paid to the education of women and girls, starting by massive persuasion campaigns, taking into account some culturally-rooted values denying or imposing limits to the participation of women and girls in (adult) education (Johnston, 1990). New schools were built or just improvised, quite often by the populations themselves, eager to have access to school.

Introduced in 1983\textsuperscript{32}, the System of Education in Mozambique comprises four sub-systems, namely: (a) Literacy and Adult Education, (b) General Education, (c) Teacher Training, and (d) Technical/Vocational Education. Higher Education falls within the sub-system of General Education but it covers training in a wide variety of fields. Concerned in answering to those areas that were neglected during the colonial era, the Mozambican educational system was conceived with the priority aim of:

\textsuperscript{32} - The educational system was introduced through Law 4/83 and updated in 1992, through Law 6/92.
Chapter 2

i. Providing literacy opportunities to adults\textsuperscript{33} and offer them the possibility of proceeding their education and training at secondary and tertiary education;

ii. Fostering teacher training at all levels, so to staff schools with qualified teachers, expand education throughout the country and improve its quality\textsuperscript{34};

iii. Increasing technical and vocational education (e.g. agricultural, industrial and commercial) at secondary and medium levels, as to minimize the shortage of skilled people in those areas.

As the present study is bound-up with secondary school students, it is worth highlighting the specific objectives of Secondary Education in Mozambique. These are:

a. To consolidate, increase and strengthen the knowledge acquired at primary level in natural and social sciences, mathematics and the areas of culture and aesthetical education;

b. To prepare the students to carry on studying at higher levels or to participate in productive activities;

c. To promote knowledge about health, nutrition and protection of the environment (MINED, 1995).

As it will be illustrated in the following section, it has been acknowledged that these objectives, which are qualitative in their nature, have not been properly met (UNDP, 2000; Mário, Buendía Gomez, Kouwenhoven, Alberto, & Waddington, 2002). Thenceforth, improving quality and relevance has been stated as a key policy concerning this level of the educational system. To that end, measures that affect the effectiveness of the school have already been envisaged. These include: curriculum reform, improved qualification of the teaching staff, provision of school materials, and rehabilitation and equipping of schools (MINED, 1995). The implementation of those measures has, however, been rather too slow and apparently ineffective. Apart from the scarcity of human and financial resources, the lack of empirically validated recommendations seems to hamper that process.

\textsuperscript{33} - It is to be recalled that the colonial legacy at independence was an illiteracy rate of 93\% (UNDP, 2000).

\textsuperscript{34} - By 1975, most of the teachers, particularly at secondary education level were Portuguese. With the advent of the country’s Independence they returned to Portugal.
2.4.2.3 Major education issues and challenges in Mozambique

Limited access, irrelevance of the curriculum (including contents, language of instruction and assessment methods), inefficiency (high drop-out and repeat rates), dependency on donors/under-funding, HIV/AIDS impact and, hindering cultural values have been highlighted as the major current issues that the educational system faces (UNDP, 2000). Overcoming or, at least, minimizing them is at stake and constitutes the prevailing challenge to the education sector.

Access

Concerning this issue, figures indicate that at the lower level of primary education (EP1), the average enrolment net rate in 2003 was of 69.4%, being of 72.4% for boys and 66.4% for girls (MINED, 2003a). The immediate implication of such a situation is that, every year, around 30% of children at school age became potentially illiterate, as they miss the chance of entering the school system. To a large extent, this situation is due to a severe drawback on the efforts in promoting mass education imposed by the devastating “civil” war, particularly in the 1980s. As a result of the cruelty of that war, by 1992, when it, finally, came to an end (after a 16 year-long period of atrocities and destabilization), about 3,530 schools (corresponding to 58% of those that existed by 1983) had been destroyed or closed, affecting more than 1.5 million pupils (MINED, 1994). The drop in school attendance during the war years has had its impact on illiteracy raise. Wils and Gaspar (2002) report that, in 1997, there were relatively higher proportions of younger people who had never attended school amongst those aged 19 and above. According to these authors, those people are amongst the ones that, being at normal school age during the war period (especially during 1983 and 1992), could not attend school, either because they were displaced or their schools had been destroyed. The issue of access cannot, therefore, be dissociated from that of illiteracy. The illiteracy rate of 93% inherited from the colonial era had been reduced to around 52% by 1983 (MINED, 1999). Meanwhile, post-war education statistics (MINED, 1994, 1999) show that though both the number of schools and school enrolments has been increasing since the end of the war, the literacy rate remains rather low. Figures (PNUD, 2004) indicate that in 2002 the average illiteracy rate was 53.5%, being even higher (68.6%) for females.
Relevance

The low relevance of the curricula in relation to the context has been a matter of concern, ever since the national educational system was introduced. In order to reverse that, the policy of the Ministry of Education has been that of, gradually, introducing curricula that “can provide to the citizens the knowledge and the skills needed for them to acquire sustainable means of survival, accelerate the economic growth and reduce the poverty indexes” (INDE/MINED, 1999, p.16). A new curriculum for primary school thought to meet those requirements is being introduced as from 2004. Its innovative features include: the establishment an integrated education with three learning cycles throughout the 7 years; the introduction of the so-called ‘local curriculum’ (activities relevant to the actual context or community), the allocation of specialized teachers for the subjects of the 3rd cycle of learning, the ‘semi-automatic transition’ (pass mark without final exams at the end of each cycle), the introduction of new subjects, namely Moral and Civic Education, Crafts, one local languages and English (these at the 3rd cycle).

Effectiveness

The problematic effectiveness of the system, particularly at the lower levels, can be inferred from the proportion of repeaters at the primary school which, in 2003, was of 21.9% in the lower level (EP1) and of 24% in the upper level (EP2). Table 2.1 summarizes other indicators of effectiveness registered in 2002:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EP1</th>
<th>EP2</th>
<th>ESG1</th>
<th>ESG2</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Ad. Ed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pass rate</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-out rate</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure rate</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Literacy* – corresponds to 2 years instruction, corresponding to EP1;

*Adult Education* – It is one-year training, corresponding to EP2

The pass rate of 70.9% at the Second Level of General Education (High School) is to be regarded as illusive as far as the actual quality of high

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35 - Computed at the end of the academic year. Drop-outs excluded.
school leavers is concerned. As a matter of fact, around 80%\(^{36}\) of high school students score poorly (less than 10/20 points) in the exams for their admission to the main university. Furthermore, 1\(^{st}\) year degree studies are characterized by high repeat and drop-out rates, which also testifies for the poor quality of high school leavers.

**Teachers Qualifications and HIV/AIDS**

The proportion of teachers without pedagogical training in 2002 remained high: 42.3\% and 34.7\% at the lower and upper levels of primary education, respectively, 39.4\% at the general secondary education, and 15.7\% at the high school level (MINED, 2003a). Meanwhile, it has been anticipated that during the period 2000-2010 the public education sector will lose at least about 17\% of its staff, including qualified teachers and managers, due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (UNDP, 2000).

**Quality of the outputs**

There have not been clear and explicit indicators to assess the quality of the outputs of the educational system in Mozambique. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that “nowadays students know less and less”. Such common sense judgments are normally drawn from the performance of the students when confronted with formal and informal situations requiring them to use their ‘general knowledge’, be at school or outside it. To that end, aspects such as language proficiency, spelling, numerical/arithmetical thinking, basic knowledge in history and geography of the country are considered. Reportedly, the issue of low quality is more acute at the secondary education level. That concern has elsewhere been expressed in the following terms: “The most worrying problem in secondary education [in Mozambique] is its low quality and efficiency” (UNDP, 2000, p.49).

Although bearing a rather questionable validity vis-à-vis their purpose, *Entrance Examinations* to the UEM\(^{37}\) can be used as a possible indicator of performance of high school students. Results to these exams have revealed a pass rate below 20\%. Furthermore, only few students happen

\(^{36}\) - Source: 2002 Report of the Entrance examinations Commission at the UEM.

\(^{37}\) - These consist of written examinations on 2 subjects considered to be ‘nuclear’ for the degree course a students aspires to enroll at. They cover secondary school syllabus and only those students who have concluded successfully the high-school level are allowed to sit for these exams.
to get comfortable pass marks, being Mathematics, Language (Portuguese) and Sciences (Physics, Chemistry and Biology) the subject on which high fail rates and low rates of comfortable pass marks are observed.

Effectiveness is an issue inextricably related to students’ characteristics and to the quality of the teachers. Both have an indubitable impact on the quality of the graduates. In that sense, the issue of quality is the one that, in our view embodies the overall trait of an educational enterprise, and the one that, in the context of the present study, underscores the major challenge as far as secondary (and higher) education is concerned. That challenge is that of turning students into inquisitive and self-oriented learners. To that end, the first step entails knowing some of their characteristics, such as their epistemological beliefs and their perceptions of education, as to ascertain to which extent those characteristics are liable to facilitate or to hinder the kind of learning required of them at those levels. The outcomes of this study are meant to shed some light into that quest.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has provided an abridged account of the main constructs of the study. Thus, epistemological beliefs have been introduced as consisting of a set of an individual’s specific beliefs about knowledge and learning. Perceptions of education have been sketched as an integrated set of beliefs about several aspects of education, specially schooling and learning. Owing to its two structuring dimensions, namely ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’, epistemology was found to be a pivotal concept of the above mentioned main constructs of the study. For this reason, the notion of epistemology was reviewed and its perennially debatable nature was discussed in relation to both Western and African philosophies. Specifically, it was highlighted that in a fashion reviving the classical debate opposing rationalists to empiricists, contemporary philosophers have argued for contextually-based, dynamic, and evolutionary conceptions of epistemology. Such a feature is seen also applicable to the budding hybrid African epistemology; an epistemology to be drawn from both the ‘particularist’ and the ‘universalist’ trends in African philosophy, as well as from the influences of both the Christian-Western, and the Islamic philosophical (epistemological) traditions. The
chapter has equally provided background general information about the setting of the study (Mozambique) and its educational system. Linking what is regarded to be the major educational issue (i.e. that of quality) to the main constructs of the study, it has been suggested that acquaintance with both the epistemological beliefs and the perceptions of education of the target group of the study (high school students) could enlighten into some of the basis of the prevailing students’ learning problems, and, eventually, inform adequately for the adoption of appropriate mitigating interventions.