CHAPTER 32

Whose African Education Is It?

Marika Matengu and Ailie Cleghorn

This chapter draws on studies carried out over the last five years in Namibia, most recently Matengu's research in three areas: Namibia's education policy, teachers' folk pedagogy in pre- and lower primary classrooms, and indigenous parents' views of what they aspire to for their children. These studies, each in different ways, illustrate contradictions between Namibia's policy that expresses a value on the country's linguistic and cultural diversity, in contrast to the concurrent national need to maintain a uniform standard 'for all.' This body of research, especially along with that of Prochner et al. (2016), shows how a globally defined national standard collides with the need for local, contextual solutions in order to increase equitable outcomes within an education system that has long been marked by extreme inequality. It is in this context, for example, that interviews with severely marginalized indigenous parents show how parents want their children to be educated so that they may retain their identity while also being fully prepared to take part in modern society; survival of their indigenous lifestyle is becoming increasingly challenging and even prohibited in some communities. In this way, a call is sent to education planners for a system that ceases to be discriminatory, while adapted to the needs of local indigenous communities by being inclusive and promoting social justice—for all.

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J. M. Abidogun and T. Falola (eds.),
The Palgrave Handbook of African Education and Indigenous Knowledge,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38277-3_32

Background

The question at the core of this chapter and its focus asks to what extent, if at all, Namibia's national education system effectively incorporates or acknowledges indigenous knowledge, structures, and methods, or, as an imposed Western education system systematically negates and marginalizes indigenous African knowledge and its production? While taking an Afrocentric perspective, we will first provide a brief overview of two distinct African cultures in Namibia: The dominant Owambo culture and the unique San indigenous culture, with special reference to their indigenous education structure, knowledge production, and methods of dissemination. This discussion will then be tied to previous studies in order to clarify the contradictions within the Namibian education system. The chapter will end with a few thoughts on how the education system could be reconstructed to make it more African, less discriminatory and attuned to the needs of each cultural community.

Overview of Indigenous Cultures in Namibia

Located in southwest Africa, Namibia is a vast country of some 824, 000 square kilometers with a small population of approximately 2.1 million, of which the Owambo group represents nearly 50% of the total population and the nomadic San indigenous groups represent a small population of approximately 30,000 people. The San have lived in Namibia as hunter-gatherers for thousands of years; they inhabited Namibia before the arrival of the Nama, Damara, Owambo, and Herero groups, who migrated from different parts of the African continent and who represent the current dominant tribes. Namibia's population is culturally and linguistically diverse, with 13 languages recognized in the national language policy but more than 20 dialects and unwritten languages are spoken in homes.

Namibia has been recognized as an excellent example of a country in the Global South that was on the receiving end of the spread of long-dominant education concepts from the Global North. There is little evidence to suggest that local or indigenous knowledge systems infuse or underlie the ongoing trend toward a modern system that purports to meet the needs of all, including the most marginalized in rural communities where the local-global tensions are noted through a focus on language issues.

The current education system evolved through periods of German colonial rule from 1884 until World War I when the apartheid system of segregation that emerged in South Africa was enforced in Namibia. Through over 100 years of oppression, Namibians have maintained their informal education system alongside a racially discriminatory formal education system. In rural communities, informal education has served the needs of the local economy, equipping people with relevant skills and competences such as hunting and gathering. However, as the economic environment has become more dependent on formal employment and traditional livelihoods are threatened

particularly by climate change, the relevance of informal education has become debatable while the importance of formal education has become increasingly important for traditional, rural communities.

Owambo Culture

The Owambo people are a southern African ethnic group, representing nearly 50% of the Namibian population. The Owambo people are an ethnolinquistic group who speak the Owambo language, with the main dialects of Oshindonga and Kwanyama, but many Owambo people also speak either English or Afrikaans as their second language which they have learned mainly through the public education system. In many spheres of their lives, the Owambo people have adapted to modern life introduced by the colonizers and missionaries. For example, the traditional religion of the Owambo people is the primary faith of less than 3%, as most state Christianity to be their primary faith. Culturally, dancing combined with drumming is an important way of cultural expression. The traditional livelihood of the Owambo people has been to raise cattle, fish in the oshanas, and farm. They are skilled craftsmen. They make and sell basketry, pottery, jewelry, wooden combs, wood iron spears, arrows, richly decorated daggers, musical instruments, and also ivory buttons. However, the traditional agricultural lifestyles are rapidly being replaced by educated Owambo people who prefer to seek livelihoods through formal employment in various sectors. In national politics, Owambo people's representation is larger and more dominant than that of any other cultural group.

San Culture

The San have experienced serious demands in a short period of time to move away from the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a modern life and cash economy. The values and norms by which the San have lived for centuries are different in many respects from those of the dominant tribes in Namibia, such as the Owambo. In San traditional society, children have not been kept apart in specific age groups nor confined to 'classes.' Children were brought up as equals with adults, with plenty of practical contact in the field to learn the intricacies of tracking, hunting, and gathering. When small, they were in almost continual bodily contact with adults; they learned by listening, watching, and practicing; they were disciplined orally, not physically.

The land and natural resources in some parts of the country that have provided a livelihood for thousands of years have recently been declared areas for conservation and national parks. In the areas of such restrictions, those who gather certain plants and hunt without formally acquired permits face the threat of arrest. The San are thus engaged in a fight for recognition of their cultural and social existence. Despite independent democratic governments in southern Africa, the San are still extremely poor and seen as the lowest group in the social hierarchy (le Roux 2002). San children suffer from

discrimination and negative perceptions by other groups due to lack of clothing, transport problems, hunger, and disease. The enrollment of San children in school is much lower than the national average; and due to early drop-out, few San children are able to finish secondary school (MoE 2010, 2015), a rate that has not changed significantly regardless of the adoption of policies that enforce inclusion, suggesting strategies to prevent educational marginalization (MoE 2015).

Policy

Several African studies highlight policy implementation as a matter of concern. In many instances, there is an evident gap between policy rhetoric and implementation (Ebrahim 2012). This gap is largely attributed to the policy content which tends to reflect the ideological origins of the Global North (Penn 2011) or the realities of the wealthier political class and education elite, (Nsamenang 2005) rather than the cultural values and belief systems of the majority of the citizens (Carnoy 1999; Serpell and Nsamenang 2014). With reference to the field of early childhood education (ECE), if the theories that inform the development of ECE fail to capture local realities, policy makers are only creating 'fictions of childhood' (Lewis and Watson-Gegeo 2004).

Critical policy research recognizes the complexity and ambiguity of policy formation during which mediators interpret the policies "in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and contexts" (Ball 1993, 11). Policy content is compromised at various stages through bargaining, arguing, and lobbying (Dyer 1999; Gale 2003). Any compromises during the process are often made at the expense of those who have less voice in the political and administrative arenas of society. It is worth noting that in countries like Namibia, policy development and reforms are often largely funded by Euro-American donors; hence, their voice is dominant in debates and arguments about the content of policies. Levinson et al. (2009, 774) observe that "dominant groups position themselves best to order an education system in its own vision and interest." Even if policies appear to defend the rights of vulnerable groups, without a situationally constructed will to policy formation, they might remain as mere political symbolism (Jansen 2002). Especially in the former apartheid countries, policies should be seen as the practice of power that requires constant and critical review in order to bring about a more just education (Jansen 2002; Sayed and Ahmed 2011).

We conducted a study in Namibia on how local policy actors make sense of educational marginalization, something that is very evident among indigenous Namibian communities (Matengu et al. 2018a, b). Eight participants were selected based on their active engagement with ECE policy formation. We investigated dilemmas and solutions for provision of a more equitable ECE. Our findings were in line with the critical policy approach in that policies are reproduced through interpretative processes which are messy,

socially constructed, and context bound (Ball 1993; Gale 2003; Levinson et al. 2009). In this process, the voice of international partners and donors is loud and clear. The majority of policy actors make sense of educational marginalization constricted by international ECE agendas which offer few alternatives and little flexibility to policy actors at the community level who are seeking contextual solutions. The sense-making processes suggest a top-down policy formation in which the policy mediators are only implementers of predetermined best practices to which communities are expected to assimilate themselves. This calls broader attention to the hidden aspects of power in policy formation if policy processes are to be owned by the people whom the education system serves. While broader efforts to improve the socioeconomic condition of the rural poor are needed, to improve the current policy implementation process requires developing a policy environment that allows and encourages maneuvering for contextualized ideas. The principles of democratic participation should guide the policy formation process leading to narrowing the gap between theory and practice. Our study also identifies with the sense-making framework in that local preferences should be given a higher priority in developing more just ECE policies. The findings suggest that policy formation is led by the idea of international standards rather than the needs of educationally marginalized communities and their children.

Teachers' Roles and Taken for Granted Pedagogical Beliefs

The role of the school is to deal with social, cultural, and individual diversity in a manner that promotes unity in a nation to which all citizens have allegiance. The challenge is to forge a common nation and social justice in the face of increasing ethnic, cultural, and language diversity (Buckler 2015; Jorgensen et al. 2010). To forge a sense of common purpose and a social justice mandate, teachers must respect and build upon the cultural strengths and characteristics which learners from diverse communities bring to school (Banks et al. 2001). At the same time, teachers are expected to assist all learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become participating citizens of society at large (Howart and Andreouli 2015). Cultural, ethnic, and language diversity provide schools with rich opportunities to incorporate diverse perspectives, issues, and characteristics into the nation generally and within schools specifically in order to strengthen both.

Ellis (1996) has argued that the ideal role of a teacher in a multicultural setting should be that of a cultural mediator rather than a facilitator of learning (Ashton and Pence 2016). This role is even more crucial in early childhood education in which culture has been recognized as an important construct in teaching and learning (Myers 1996). Tillman (2002, 4) has defined culture as "a group's individual and collective ways of thinking, believing, and knowing, which includes their shared experiences, consciousness, skills, values, forms of expression, social institutions, and behaviours."

Teachers who are good mediators seek to “find points of congruence between seemingly contradicting cultural norms” while at the same time they also reach learners at a more emotional and personal level, by having “the ability to empathize with the experiences of others” (Ellis 1996, 217).

The findings of the Matengu 2018 study indicated very little if any attempts to utilize traditional knowledge in the classroom environment. Instead, the early-career teachers preferred to use picture books for teaching despite the plea from learners to listen to traditional folk stories. This finding suggests that especially young teachers perceive traditional knowledge to have very little relevance to the development of the mind. Further, it appeared as if cognitive content had to be derived from somewhere, or someone who had already acquired it, outside the local community. This is not far from conceptualizing the mind as a blank receptacle, a stance that may come easily to teachers working in a hierarchical system in which elders or persons of authority are the ‘holders of knowledge’, to be respected as such and not to be questioned. When teachers perceive their own role as that of an elder with authority, it is a short step to disregarding the experience or knowledge that a learner might bring from home to the classroom.

We saw that teachers similarly held in high respect the authorities within the school system who they did not feel comfortable to question. Instead, they chose to keep their concerns about the system to themselves, expressing a reluctance to question or suggest changes. This was most evident from the way teachers approached mother tongue education. The language policy states that instruction is to be by mother tongue. Since it was often the case that neither teachers nor learners shared the same mother tongue or knew the local mother tongue well, the situation became confusing both for the teacher and the children. Although one teacher stated that no quality education could be delivered under such circumstances, the teachers were immobilized by the conviction that policies should be followed as written. This finding brings us back to the initial question of “Whose African education is it?” In line with other studies (Daiute et al. 2015), we concur that field-based experience has not sufficiently informed education reform. To tackle the challenge of social inclusion, we argue that deliberate, critical, creative, and informative reflection from the field should guide future practice and policy especially in societies such as Namibia which are culturally heterogeneous and still struggling with the challenges of teacher education, linked as they are to the economics of national development.

Indigenous Parents’ Views

Education reports from African indigenous communities have increased international interest and attempt to make education more appealing for the most marginalized (Rios-Aquilar et al. 2011; UNESCO 2014). Most of these efforts have focused on why or how the content of education is socially

and culturally irrelevant to communities that differ from the dominant society. Two key recommendations emerge from the literature. First, the learning content should maintain communities' values and cultural heritage, and build on the knowledge capital already available and needed in the immediate surroundings of the child (Modica et al. 2010; Ng'asike 2014). Second, the content of learning should also contribute toward desired social transformation (Crago et al. 1993; Inglis 2008). In practice, many African countries, including Namibia, have focused mainly on the first recommendation by developing policies that require learning in the main native languages during the first years of schooling. This is due to the considerable amount of research that shows mother tongue education to be the best foundation for early learning, smoothing the social and cultural transitions between home and school environments. However, the language used in the smallest and most marginalized groups tends not to be officially recognized with the result that mother tongue education in these groups remains close to non-existent (Hays 2011). Furthermore, it is not well established how, in countries with marked socioeconomic inequalities, understanding of minority communities' values and culture could foster social transformation (Moll et al. 2011).

In the study being discussed here (Matengu et al. 2018b) parents made no reference to age-specific cognitive and academic skills and knowledge as described in formal education policies. This may well be explained by parents' own disrupted education paths which have resulted in low levels of literacy as well as a sense of disempowerment and lack of awareness of what education content actually entails (Pamo 2011; UNESCO 2014). However, this also brings attention to the need for education that covers broader and deeper issues of wellbeing and development than what the education system currently offers (le Roux 2002).

In the study under discussion right now, parents, young and old, talked freely about gaining more freedom of choice and eliminating all resource-related dependencies, both which presented issues in their own lives. These findings suggest that educational or social equality does not just happen by applying international benchmarks such as new policies, legal frameworks, and theoretical universal access to basic education. The impact of education in indigenous communities will remain limited, unless the deeper feelings and effects of marginalization are taken into account. Thus, we agree with the suggestion of Balto and Ostmo (2012) that there is a need to help indigenous communities to engage in critical reflection on the effects of colonization and marginalization so that they are empowered to ensure that education in those communities responds to their complex needs and goals. The attempt, reinforced by researchers and education planners to make predefined education models acceptable if not appealing, has met with poor results (Penn 2011; Serpell and Nsamenang 2014). Furthermore, there is a significant gap in the literature with regard to most parts of Africa where family is a highly valued and central social and cultural structure, and how this

fact could be at the core of planning an appropriate curriculum and teaching approach. Evidence and rich insights from indigenous communities themselves are needed to inform future education models.

The culture of the San in Namibia and other parts of southern Africa is interestingly similar to that of the Inuit in northern Canada, a topic that will be further developed in a subsequent article. For the moment, the San kinship system reflects their interdependence as traditionally small mobile foraging groups. The San kinship system now uses the same set of terms as in European cultures, but also uses a name rule and an age rule. The age rule resolves any confusion arising from western kinship terms, as the older of two people always decides what to call the younger. Relatively few names circulate (approximately 35 names per sex), and each child is named after a grandparent or other close relative.

Again, similar to the Inuit, San children have no social duties besides playing; however, play is directly linked to learning what is required for the livelihood of the community. Leisure is very important to San of all ages with large amounts of time spent in conversation, joking, music, and sacred dances. Women have high status in San society, are greatly respected, and may be leaders of their own family groups. They make important family and group decisions and claim ownership of water holes and foraging areas. Although women are mainly involved in the gathering of food, they may also take part in hunting.

As implied earlier, parents in Namibia, as elsewhere in Africa, value education as the only way out of the hardships in which they live. But at the same time, education should recognize these hardships and give attention to capabilities about which the current education models are silent. The question that we would like to pose at this stage is to what extent parents have possibilities to help shape current educational models into something that they find meaningful for their children. Our findings suggest two things. First of all, communication between home and schools rarely happens and, when it does, is characterized by one-way communication from teachers to parents in a language other than that of the parents. In most instances, the purpose of this communication is to inform or correct the parent rather than seek opinion and participation. As Smrekar and Cohne-Vogel (2001) have noted teachers see parents as involuntary clients of the institution, responding as subordinate consumers or receptors of information. Secondly, this institutionalized social order appears to limit the involvement of parents; even if parents value education and would like to be more involved, their roles are seen as distinct from the role of the school. At the same time, parents do not perceive themselves as having the right to question or suggest changes to school practices, bringing us back to the point made earlier by Balto and Ostmo (2012): There is a huge need to raise the consciousness of indigenous groups, not only in Namibia but likely elsewhere.

Discussion and a Few Out-of-the-Box Thoughts Toward Further Reform

The present education system in Namibia remains problematic, especially for minority cultures such as the San, despite the fact that change is quickly taking place in Namibia. As of now it appears that a form of acculturation is taking place which ideally will permit the development of a degree of biculturalism, allowing the San to live in both worlds, their own and the modern. As long as San families remain under-educated and minimally literate children are burdened with unrealistic expectations both from their parents and school authorities. Indigenous parents, knowing that traditional livelihoods are likely to continue the circle of poverty, see education as the means to gaining access to the world of employment and political power while policy makers and educators expect indigenous children to bring development and change to the indigenous communities.

At present, indigenous African cultures are influenced dramatically by Euro-American models of education. The non-formal or informal indigenous education practices are rapidly disappearing due to lack of effort to understand the indigenous pedagogies and values that they are rooted on. There is a dire need to develop more flexible structures of education as well as platforms for exchange of traditional knowledge and modern education. Whose African education is it is a complex question that has to be explored widely from social, cultural, historical, and economic angles.

By way of bringing this chapter to a close, we offer some thoughts about how the system is tied to the society's needed reforms to come and how they may relate to quite different matters than those discussed so far. We have in mind three related matters: teacher education, the ethics of educational research, and innovation at the level of the classroom.

Firstly, teachers work in classrooms, often in considerable isolation from other teachers, school administrators, and surely educational policy planners. In order to construct a true community of practice (Lave and Wagner 1991) teachers' knowledge and practices and aspirations for their learners need to be recognized and valued. This means that for educational research to be useful to future reforms teachers need to be brought into studies as collaborators if not co-researchers. In terms of research ethics, this means that teachers will be part of the community of practice of researchers, sharing in authorship that acknowledges their input, their participation in the selection of research tools and in the analysis of data. Teachers would thus gain voice in the development of reforms that work, in a climate of social justice for all children, marginalized and not marginalized.

These ideas may appear to be too radical and idealistic, but is there a choice? For the teacher to make innovations in the classroom, she needs the autonomy (power) to try different things, to see if they work and to monitor the process of all that. This does not mean taking the teacher out of the classroom to become a co-researcher; it means keeping the teacher IN the

classroom. When teachers work closely with researchers, minds intermingle. Such an approach combines research with innovation and true development.

What does this mean in practical terms? Here is an example. A teacher and community leader had the idea of building a museum in the village where she worked and lived. The museum would portray the local and indigenous people's knowledge of environmental conservation. Local, indigenous knowledge would be made visible to members of the community as well as local schools, generating discussion. The values and culture of the people would be thus acknowledged and honored. The project, as proposed, would combine ethnographic monitoring in its development (research) and collaboration between teachers, the school, the specific needs of the community and local education officials.

We come back to the question: Whose African education is it? How can it be owned by the people themselves in a decentralized manner where power and control are local while systematically and responsibly accounting for change and development 'up the line.' This suggests a major conceptual shift on the part of those officially concerned with African educational reform. The shift would be from one of holding on to power no matter what, and moving to a truly democratic notion of what it means to provide educational 'justice for all.'

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