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A critique of centralized curricula in literacy programs: The case of Botswana

The author argues that the Botswana National Literacy Program curriculum does not support linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic diversity and that it needs to be reorganized.

I n this article I begin by outlining the concepts of centralization and decentralization; I then go on to point out the limits of the former and to justify the latter. After an overview of Botswana's socioeconomic situation, I discuss the activities and problems of the Botswana National Literacy Program (BNLP) to demonstrate that some problems are attributable to centralization. Finally, I recommend a decentralized approach and explain how it would enhance the BNLP.

Centralization of the literacy curriculum

In Botswana a centralized curriculum is characteristic of many government-sponsored literacy programs. It denotes concentration of decision-making authority at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Adult literacy, like other forms of education, has tended to facilitate political control by the social and economic elite (Foley, 1999). The curriculum thus tends to represent the perspectives of the politically powerful, reflecting what Freire (1990) branded "banking education." Such an approach leads to teachers having a minimal influence on curriculum contents, choice of literacy textbooks, and language (Apple, 1993; Maruatona, 1994).

The elite realize that education promotes critical thinking, empowers people, and could jeopardize their privileged positions (Giroux, 1995). A centralized literacy curriculum leads to a top-down delivery

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of education where knowledge is handed down as a "welfare" gift to learners (Street, 1994). The approach enables curriculum developers to impose their world views by limiting student contribution. It is also intended to "initiate the poor...and the minorities into the ideology of a unitary, dominant cultural tradition" (Giroux, 1988, p. 61). Centralized literacy ignores cultural and political conflicts in the educational process (Foley, 1994, 1999).

However, this perspective ignores the contested nature of knowledge (Apple, 1999; Carlson & Apple, 1998). The curriculum process cannot be neutral; it represents a contest between conflicting interest groups in society. These conflicts make education a site of resistance to control rather than institutions of unquestioned reception of values and knowledge systems of the dominant culture (Apple, 1996; Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Alexander (1994) indicated that hegemony is not "only characterized by what it includes but also what it excludes...deems inferior and makes invisible" (p. 33). The centralized curriculum has also been criticized for not being customer-driven or linked to other educational opportunities (Odora, 1995; Wagner, 1995). I would therefore argue that a centralized literacy curriculum has major limitations that can be resolved only by decentralization.

In spite of these limitations, there are nevertheless some economic and political benefits from a centralized literacy curriculum, especially in countries where literacy is a priority and intended for social change. Centralization avoids the costs of producing materials in different ethnic languages. It also helps the state uphold "approved" practice, unifies people, and eases teacher training (Lauglo, 1990). Centralized literacy has worked in some postrevolutionary situations where there was political will to facilitate people's involvement in community development, such as in Tanzania, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Ethiopia (Rassool, 1999).

Decentralization of state literacy provision

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority from high echelons of the state to geographically dispersed local government agents, which allows local staff to make decisions in their daily work. It enables them to learn more about the needs of local communities, which is important because literacy is embedded in social and cultural contexts

(Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The outcome is that the state renders more responsive services because staff members are informed about their local situation. Decentralization increases the "autonomy of the local professionals since they are natural experts" (Lauglo, 1990, p. 25). Street (1994) observed that the meaning and use of literacy practices are related to specific cultural contexts, and practices are always associated with relations of power and identity. Therefore, there is a need to avoid imposing the literacy conventions of one culture on the members of another. The exclusion deprives society of benefits that accrue when all members are able to fully participate in decision making (Coombs, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1994).

Learners should be allowed to participate in curriculum planning and the teaching-learning process. Teaching methods in literacy should not reduce learners to passive recipients of prepackaged knowledge. According to Kebathi (1985), "where planning and implementation is done at [the] national level, the local communities view the program as something from outside, and belonging to Government or the officers in charge" (p. 123). In Kenya, decentralization helped local staff attach appropriate emphasis to problems in their specific districts, and learners developed a sense of program ownership. Planners integrated the socioeconomic and cultural practices of the host community. The outcomes motivated and sustained the interests of learners in the program and enabled them to address their developmental and daily challenges. Consequently, learners engaged in meaningful discussions about issues affecting their lives as individuals and community members.

Decentralized literacy programs have been noted for providing locally relevant knowledge. Conbleth (1995) argued, "Questions of curriculum knowledge require contextualized social and political analysis. They are not amenable to technocratic analysis and prescriptions" (p. 182). Decentralized literacy facilitates the use of local languages, which encourages dialogue about local and national issues. The justification for decentralized literacy curricula is to avoid conflict between the central and the local contexts over the interpretation of literacy materials. Edwards (1991) argued that learner-centered programs "intend to transform every social and political practice, to help them challenge pre-existing structural relations of inequality"

(p. 86). For example, Stromquist (1999) argued that women view literacy as a way out of the domestic sphere, yet program organizers often take the content back to the home, which further inscribes women with a domestic identity. Literacy should help women to challenge their subordinate status.

Bhola (1996) observed that contextualization of literacy leads to easier life transactions in the learners' cultural environment. The advantages of a decentralized state literacy program challenge Botswana to reorganize its literacy program. The major limit of decentralization is that it needs a lot of human and material resources that are often in short supply in Botswana. Consequently, Bhola (1999) noted that providing for learners' needs in practice can be complex. It is easy to talk about learners' autonomy and responsibility for their lives, yet it is difficult to engage them in democratically deciding what they learn.

Geopolitical and economic background

Botswana is at the center of southern Africa, bordering Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, and Zambia. The western part of the country is covered by the Kgalagadi Desert, and most of the population resides in the eastern part. About 72% of the population of 1.6 million speaks Setswana, which is Botswana's "national language." However, there are many linguistic minorities such as the Basarwa, Bakalanga, Baherero, Babirwa, Bayei, Hambukushu, and Basubiya. All these communities speak different, mutually exclusive languages. Botswana is a liberal democracy and holds elections every 5 years. However, the political regime has been characterized as an "authoritarian democracy" because power is concentrated in the presidency with minimal devolution and participation of the populace (Good, 1996).

Botswana's economy was one of Africa's weakest at Independence in 1966 but has boomed at an unprecedented rate since the 1970s. The growth can be attributed to the discovery and exploitation of minerals, especially diamonds. The Gross Domestic Product grew fourfold in real terms between 1966 and 2000. However, this growth has been accompanied by disturbingly high rates of income inequality and persistent poverty. The latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 1993/94 showed that the distribution of disposable income among persons was such that the poorest 40% earned 11.6% of the total national income, whilst the next 40% and the top 20% earned 29.1% and 59.3% of the national income, respectively (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1994). The top 20% of the population earned 24 times more than the bottom 20% (Fong, 1995). Jefferis (1997) observed that 47% of the population lived below the poverty datum line, with even more doing so in rural areas where 60% of the poor and 70% of the very poor households were.

In spite of the grim income distribution picture, some resources have been transferred to essential education and health services in both rural and urban areas (Youngman, 1997). Economic growth has allowed for an expansion of both formal and nonformal education. About 83% of primary-school-age children are in school, and a large-scale national adult literacy program has been in operation since 1980. In 1997 a national household literacy survey reported that the overall literacy rate was 68.9%, with 66.9% for men and 70.3% for women (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1997). However, in spite of this record, the government has been criticized for failing to integrate the literacy program with national development efforts. Literacy has mostly been sponsored by foreign agencies, and there is no political commitment (Meissenhelder, 1992).

This overview indicates that Botswana society is diverse in its sociolinguistic composition and has massive income disparities. An effective nationwide literacy program should take cultural and social diversity into account. The current literacy program uses a single language, and its content does not reflect the varied geographical, cultural, and social differences.

The Botswana National Literacy Program

After Independence, Botswana, like other African states, recognized the need for education if the country's other development objectives were to be achieved. In 1976 the government appointed a commission to assess the state of education in the country and suggest what could be done to improve it. The National Commission on Education observed that "A fully literate population is an important long term objective if Botswana's other national objectives are to be met...literacy should

not be pursued in isolation from other development programs" (Ministry of Education, 1977, p. 67). However, the contention that literacy was crucial for national development was just rhetoric without any practical suggestions. This was borne out by the report on the National Commission on Education, which did not have a single concrete recommendation on literacy. It was only in the accompanying White Paper that the government suggested that a separate paper would be developed in which "consideration will be given to literacy programs" (Ministry of Education, 1977, p. 12). Unfortunately, such a paper never materialized. This left the area of adult literacy without a comprehensive policy, which testified to the government's lack of political commitment.

Initial efforts to develop literacy materials were made in 1977 and 1978 by the Botswana Extension College. Researchers there believed that literacy should not be provided for its own sake; rather, it should raise people's consciousness and creative abilities. However, the college was not given the mandate to operate the program. The researchers worked closely with people in a district near the capital city and chose some "generative words and themes" for future discussions in literacy classes. This seemingly promising approach that involved local people in developing materials was ignored when the new Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE) took responsibility for adult literacy in late 1978.

The newly established DNFE did a small-scale "need assessment" survey in eastern Botswana to generate nationwide literacy primers (Townsend-Coles, 1988). Consequently, a consultation document was prepared to form a basis for a national literacy provision by the state. The BNLP was launched in 1981 and became the first and largest state-sponsored literacy program since Independence. Its objectives as stipulated in the National Initiative Consultation Document of 1979 were these:

> To enable 250,000 presently illiterate men, women and youth to become literate in Setswana and numerate over six years 1980–85. The teaching to be understood in the context of development issues relevant to the respective Districts and Nation. The term "literacy" to be interpreted to imply that a person can comprehend those written communications

and simple computations which are part of their daily life. (Ministry of Education, 1979, pp. 1–2)

These objectives suggest that the literacy program was intended to be responsive to the needs of learners at local, regional, and national levels and to enable them to comprehend written communications that are part of their daily life. However, as indicated earlier, no effort was made to incorporate those needs. The Department of Non-Formal Education could not complete the task of eradicating illiteracy in 6 years as envisaged for a number of reasons, such as limited resource allocation, low staff morale, and failure of the content to respond to local conditions (Meissenhelder, 1992). The objectives of the program were therefore redefined, and the BNLP was linked to primary education for school-age children and to the provision of functional skills for adult participants during the Sixth National Development Plan, 1985–1991. The redefined objectives were as follows:

> To help the learning needs of communities in the rural and remote areas for adults who never had a chance to go to school...and for children who are living in villages without schools.

> The Department will expand its non-formal activities beyond reading, writing and numeracy. The needs of rural communities in terms of skills required for income generating activities will form the basis for expansion. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1985, p. 138)

Those objectives demonstrate the government's commitment to impart productive skills to adults. The emphasis was on the potential of former literacy participants to increase productivity as a direct result of the learning process. However, training for practical skills was not integral to the program. Literacy Group Leaders (teachers) taught learners skills such as weaving, sewing, and poultry raising on an ad hoc basis.

The BNLP was evaluated in 1987, mainly through a test administered to a representative sample of literacy participants. This evaluation revealed that about 81% of the respondents scored at an equivalent of Grade 4 in the formal school. The test comprised mainly recall questions that required limited application of knowledge. Its aim was to record learners' ability to memorize items.

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The outcome did not demonstrate success because the learners did not show how they could apply the skills in their daily lives. Consequently, in spite of the "impressive" performance, the evaluators acknowledged that the content needed to be reviewed and that the curriculum, teaching, and learning needed to be reinvigorated (Gaborone, Mutanyatta, & Youngman, 1988). This was never done; thus the curriculum in 2001 is the same as it was in 1980.

Problems of centralization in the BNLP

Recent studies on the Botswana National Literacy Program have identified problems arising from the centralized nature of the curriculum. One study revealed three major problems. First, it indicated that contrary to the national policy of using only Setswana (the national language) teachers used their own languages in class. Second, learners unanimously agreed that they did not use the skills from the program for community activities. Third, learners reported that they were not taught any income-generating skills that they could use upon completion of the program (Maruatona, 1998). Reimer (1997) reported that the Botswana Christian Council, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Etsha (a remote settlement in northern Botswana), taught adults using their mother tongue. The organization translated the five primers used across the country. The case suggests that in spite of the NGO staff's innovative efforts, they were limited by government control over the curriculum, which restricted their production of materials.

Some of the major problems in the program related to centralization are lack of learner participation, gender bias in the curriculum, and the use of a single language in a multilingual society.

Lack of learner participation. The previous discussion demonstrates that in spite of a lack of direct evidence linking all the problems to centralization of the BNLP, it could be inferred that it accounted for most of the program's limitations. It has been demonstrated that the participatory approach advocated by the Botswana Extension College was frozen or not effectively used when the BNLP was developed and implemented. Teaching materials were apparently based on the perceptions of "ex-

perts," there being no substantive evidence that themes were generated by participants. Over the years, the contents ossified because of lack of review and reinvigoration. As a result, the project has failed because learners cannot immediately use the acquired skills to improve their socio-economic conditions.

The learners in the BNLP are not sensitized to political and cultural issues affecting their lives. The teaching and learning does not effectively use group discussions to enable learners to practice collective decision-making skills for resolving community challenges (Gee, 1996). The program was also premised on a single national curriculum, which stressed the contribution of "experts" in curriculum development and excluded other stakeholders. Hence, it does not reflect the local and cultural realities of different ethnic communities. It uses similar content in different geographical locations. Those involved in the organization of literacy activities in Botswana failed to recognize that literacy meanings are context specific. The process of literacy curriculum development was not based on working with the learners to discover their needs and encourage them to share their experiences (Posner, 1998). Consequently, Foley (1999) challenged providers to recognize that learning as an aspect of human life occurs in many forms; education should be shaped by participants' political contexts.

Gender bias in the program. The literacy program has the problem of not responding to the needs of male and female participants. The majority of program participants are women. The five primers teach mainly about domestic activities such as women fetching wood, drawing water, and taking care of children. The content reinforces gender stereotypes by portraying such activities as women's work, but it does not help female learners to question these assumptions or put them in the broader context of private versus public spheres (Ntseane, 1999). The prescribed content does not enable women to question their realities in order to move from the domestic sphere to the public one. The topics ingrain women with the print of domestic identity (Street, 1994).

The learners have reported that the curriculum does not help them to engage in any community activities. Women reported that they learn to

administer medication to family members and write letters, while men use their literacy skills at work (Reimer, 1997). The "domesticating" nature of a centralized literacy program in Botswana was also reported in another study on home economics programs that taught women to care for, nurture, and maintain male partners. Such programs give women limited opportunity for self-empowerment (Mafela, 1994). The argument is that learner participation and the input of local female teachers would have helped generate materials to enable women to question their subordination. The argument is that even when materials production is decentralized, care should be taken to ensure that there is no gender bias against women by involving them in curriculum decision making.

The use of a single language. The issue of which language to use in education is at times taken for granted. Language in that respect is perceived to be a neutral medium of instruction. However, Gunn (1997) argued that language is a maker of self-identification and dominant groups use it as a political resource to dominate others as part of the process of social and cultural control. Some scholars observe that languages of socially disadvantaged groups are not used in spite of their psychological, cultural, and pedagogical values (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986; Tollefson, 1994). Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) observed that "the choice of language is central to people's definition of themselves in relation to their national and social environment" (p. 4).

Hegemonic control in Botswana is facilitated through a centralized literacy program that uses one "unitary" language. The curriculum exposes learners to content derived from the history and culture of the ruling elite. It marginalizes cultural experiences of minorities, thereby rendering them invisible. In Botswana, the use of Setswana as the "national language" in the BNLP gives it an epistemological prominence over other languages, which are not supposed to be used in the literacy classes (Ministry of Education, 1993). The use of Setswana as the sole medium of instruction is problematic for those who have a different mother tongue. The policy also promotes Setswana as the second language of commerce following English, which has come to be the unquestionable symbol of social and economic advancement.

Some NGOs have used the languages of the local communities in which they operated literacy classes. For example, in Da'Kar, NGOs teach Basarwa (indigenous people) using Naro, one of their languages. In the northwest, literacy was organized in Thimbukushu, the mother tongue of the Hambukushu people (Chebane, Nyati-Ramahobo, & Youngman, 2000; Reimer, 1997). The choice of mother tongue would enable learners to retain cultural identity. Individuals with expertise in these languages should be writing materials in them. One possible avenue for such languages would be to adapt materials from Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe where such languages are already in use. The bottom line is to make efforts to work with learners to codify and produce written scripts in their languages. Learners could proceed to learn Setswana once they are able to read and write in their own languages. Linguistic minority participants in the BNLP noted the need to learn in their languages but viewed Setswana and English as languages of political and economic advancement (Maruatona, 1998).

The non–Setswana speakers are not able to express themselves as fluently in class as they would if they used their mother tongue. This makes the selection of Setswana as the sole medium of instruction problematic because it does not accommodate cultural diversity. Language enables the ruling elite to distribute its cultural capital in Botswana, which perpetuates relations of power and cultural inequality (Youngman, 2000). The minorities and their teachers have resisted by using their languages to explain issues in class. Youngman (1997) observed that there is an urgent need to review the program to make it responsive to multiple realities and literacies in society. Curriculum development and teaching should reflect prevalent historical circumstances.

The above points demonstrate that a centralized literacy program in Botswana faces numerous problems such as lack of learner participation in curriculum decision making. Its contents are gender biased largely because women are not active participants in generating content. Finally, the use of one national literacy curriculum presents a major challenge for the literacy program because it does not help learners to effectively redress their individual, local, and national challenges. While these concerns are noted, some scholars believe

that it is not literacy but its implementation that has failed (Acher & Cottingham, 1996). It is therefore argued that a monolithic program such as the BNLP cannot sufficiently respond to all of these diverse sociocultural needs. Hence, there is a need to decentralize some key aspects of the literacy program in order to redress the situation.

The case for decentralization

The Botswana National Literacy Program is highly centralized and provides limited opportunity for local variations. However, it has been reported that practitioners take initiatives to get the process to respond to the needs of learners in their contexts (Reimer, 1997). This is counterhegemonic because practitioners do not follow the policy blindly (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1995). The BNLP curriculum (at the time of writing) is not committed to the recognition of local initiatives, but fortunately teachers somehow incorporate the realities of their learners. There is a need to change the policy framework and allow for greater autonomy at district and village levels in order to facilitate legitimate community participation. Consideration should also be given to forging a partnership between the state and NGOs involved with literacy activities in Botswana to gain more from the latter's experiences. Youngman (1997) concluded, "I believe the BNLP as presently conceived and implemented has reached the limit of its effectiveness and it needs to be re-conceptualized and revitalized" (p. 13). Unfortunately, the provision of literacy in Botswana is still a prerogative of government and has undergone minimal changes since its inception in the early 1980s.

I therefore propose ways in which the current program could be revitalized through decentralizing its activities. Decentralization would give different cultural, political, and social groups an opportunity to express their views and thereby influence the educational policy process in Botswana (Gleegers & Wesseligngh, 1995). A decentralized program has advantages because learners are able to identify with it as being their own. I suggest that these problems of centralization could be tackled in the following four ways: accommodating cultural diversification, networking with learners, collaboration with NGOs, and learning from other countries' experiences.

Accommodating cultural diversification. The process of deciding on what is to be taught in literacy should be based on the needs of different cultural communities in various districts of Botswana. The production of literacy materials for different groups will have to shift to local and district levels. The district should use available expertise to generate learning materials to be forwarded to the headquarters of the Department of Non-Formal Education for editing, printing, and distribution. The language chosen should be the most prevalent at local and district levels. The production of materials would not have serious cost implications because most materials would be relevant to learners' needs and that would increase the likelihood of their use. At the moment, the program faces a huge challenge: Materials are not used because they are inappropriate in some districts.

Diversification would enable the end product to reflect the local, district, and national agenda in the provision of literacy. It is assumed that this would enhance chances for use of the acquired skills in different contexts (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Rogers (1993a, 1993b) noted that participation in curriculum development is rare but possible when participants are given a chance to decide on what is to be taught. Participation makes the process, content, and product responsive to the felt needs of the learners, which makes literacy part of the broader practice of constructing knowledge.

Networking with learners. The design and implementation of the curricula should be based on networking with learners, potential learners, the private sector, and the government across the various geopolitical and social contexts in order to make it customer driven. DNFE officers charged with the responsibility of developing the curriculum should establish networks in all categories of society to collectively determine learners' needs across the country. This necessitates collaboration between the various communities in the evolution of the literacy program. The exercise would qualify such a curriculum to be a construct based on the social existence of the community rather than an expert-based technical exercise (Christie, 1990). Learner involvement could combat problems of dropouts and material irrelevance currently reported in the BNLP. The program has to be learner centered in order to enable the learners to transform

their economic, social, and political practices. Networking would facilitate learner participation; a participatory literacy program would empower learners to challenge preexisting structural inequality.

Collaboration with NGOs. The state needs to clarify its legislative position on working with nongovernmental organizations such as the Botswana Council of Churches and the World Lutheran Federation in the development of literacy curriculum. NGOs have considerable experience in literacy work among rural communities and can help to generate responsive materials. For example, the World Lutheran Federation in Sehitwa used the local language of Thimbukushu that gave learners more pedagogic freedom. NGOs have a more versatile capacity to help communities redress their needs (Reimer, 1997). They also have their own agenda and can work with literacy personnel at the local level to ensure the use of materials that enable learners to operate beyond their immediate social setting. The materials could be translated into Setswana and English in order to facilitate cross-cultural sharing of experiences in the country. The issue is that all audiences should directly negotiate what constitutes the curriculum. The program personnel can also benefit by cautiously learning from experiences that worked well in other contexts.

Learning from other countries' experiences. Although it is important to avoid a naive transfer of experiences, Botswana can learn something from the experiences of the Regenerated Freirean Literacy Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT). This is an NGO program that used the integrative and participatory approaches of Freirean dialogue and the visual technique of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to generate literacy programs with very positive outcomes among communities in Bangladesh, El Salvador, and Uganda between 1993 and 1995. In Africa REFLECT has recently expanded its activities to Somalia, Mozambique, and South Africa. PRA enabled the "illiterates" to participate in the analysis of development problems in their contexts and then moved to find some possible ways of resolving those problems. The pioneers of the approach realized that centralized literacy programs failed to harmonize literacy with other socioeconomic development issues. The approach then linked basic reading and writing with broader developmental issues in a giv-

en context. Teaching materials were developed jointly by teachers and learners and did not rely on packaged primers (Acher & Cottingham, 1996).

The REFLECT experiments have been done on a small scale, and the implications for a wider program still have to be established (Youngman, 1997). The point, however, is that REFLECT's principles could be applicable in rural Botswana where people are familiar with democracy and consultation. The other implication is that the principles of REFLECT could be adapted to literacy activities in Botswana where the context seems similar to other rural situations such as in Uganda, where the technique has worked. The adoption of the technique should be contingent upon the longstanding tradition of democratic consultation and participation and upon the adaptability of the approach to local contexts in Botswana.

To sum up

In this article I have contended that the planning and implementation of the Botswana National Literacy Program is heavily centralized. My brief overview of the socioeconomic situation in Botswana was given to demonstrate the correlation between poverty and illiteracy. The BNLP has problems such as lack of learner participation, gender bias, and the use of a single language in a multicultural society. I suggest that the program should be decentralized to accommodate cultural and ethnic diversity, that language policy should be reformed to permit the use of other languages, and that curriculum developers should network with learners in the production of materials. Government should work with NGOs in order to gain from their immense experiences dealing with communities. The program could also learn from experiences of other countries with effective adaptation of participatory techniques to the Botswana context.

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