DEMOCRACY AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF BOTSWANA: TOWARDS LINGUISTIC PLURALISM

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Abstract
The importance of languages in education and in the other important sectors of human interaction and development does not seem to have been an issue in the definition and practice of democracy in Botswana. Although the country claims to be democratic and hosts over twenty five ethnic languages, it does not see the need to accord them official recognition, let alone introduce them in education even as evidence of giving its citizenry democratic (human) rights. Only English (the official language) and Setswana (the national language) are used in education and government business. In the education sector, these two languages are and have been used as the sole languages of school even in areas predominant with learners from non-Setswana or English speaking communities. Apart from disadvantaging learners educationally and creating problems related to cognitive development, this denies learners whose languages are unacceptable certain human rights. For these, the ideals of democracy appear rather lofty and superficial at best or irrelevant at worst. This paper examines this question of languages of education and how the ideals of democracy are made ineffective when it comes to educational provisions.

Keywords: education, democracy, linguistic pluralism, nation building, curriculum, teacher training, mother tongue

Introduction

Education policies in any country are put in place to provide a judicious management of learning or appropriation of knowledge particularly by citizen learners. Such education policies act as laws and should as much as possible reflect the highest possible democratic, legal and progressive ideals that a nation espouses. At the time of independence in 1966, the education practice in Botswana perpetuated the colonial education provisions that declared English as the language of learning and the medium of instruction from higher primary school to the remaining levels of education. The modification which was made on this colonial legacy was that Setswana was adopted as the only indigenous language of education alongside English, albeit functioning in a lesser role than the latter. The use of the other indigenous languages as mediums of instruction at the lower primary school level and other literacy forums like adult education in regions where they were spoken was terminated. The premise of this termination was the constitutional stipulation that English was now the official language and Setswana the national language. Education practitioners in schools also complied with the new, albeit
divisive, declaration. Thus no considerations were made of the problems that this introduced at the elementary school level, particularly for groups whose mother tongue languages were rejected in the school system. However, it could be rightly suspected that introducing developing children into elementary classes furnished only with languages in which they were not competent would be a serious handicap.

As if this language problem was not real, in 1977, ten years later, the Report of the National Commission on Education (RNCE), called *Education for Kagisano* (i.e. Education for national/social harmony), reconfirmed the assumption that the country was officially bilingual in English and Setswana. It further assumed that of the two, English would be the prestigious language of education and government. The other indigenous languages were simply ignored and marginalised. A tacit recognition of them was made in 1993 the RNCE contained a minority position paper which indicated that the question of languages in education was important. However, the White Paper on the report, which constituted the response of the government, indicated that this matter was not critical and that the status quo would perpetuate. The compromise, however, was that a third language would be introduced in schools. Since the publication of the White Paper in 1994, the debate on mother tongue has continued to be topical. Non-Governmental Organizations have been in the forefront in advocacy for mother tongue education. A consultancy on third language was also appointed, and it recommended the introduction of local languages in areas where they are predominantly spoken to meet the requirement of a third language. This introduction would nevertheless be done at junior secondary school level.

With these conditions of learning at primary school level this paper chronicles the question of language policy in Botswana. It examines its shortcomings and its negative effects on the development of languages which have been marginalized. It argues that the question of minority languages in Botswana will require not just amendments of the language in education policy, but also a modernization of the Constitution to integrate language and ethnic identity as human rights and rights to self-actualization, self-development and enjoyment of national identity. The paper will further argue that, among other things, the following will be critical for mother tongue education, particularly at primary school level: the training of teachers in indigenous languages; a curriculum that is sensitive to the cultures of the various ethnic groups in the country; textbook development in indigenous languages; and the use of indigenous languages as languages of learning and teaching at least during the first four (4) years of primary school.

**Theoretical Framework**

The current debates in socio-political circles seem to bring to the fore the fact that, amongst other things, issues of languages in education in Botswana as they currently stand are deficient. The negligence and marginalization of other languages in education is inimical to the fulfillment of justice and equality in society. With regard to the major issues of democracy and education: equality,
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equity, and democratic education (Mannathoko, 1998; Nyati-Ramahobo, 1998), Botswana comes off in a weak position in that language in education is not accorded democratic consideration, and the manner in which it is addressed creates and has great potential to create (a) problem(s) of the linkage between education and development. Thus the interaction between education and democracy appears to be at a rather abstract level, and does not respond to the issue of curriculum practice/content and marginalized ethnic communities.

The Education policy of Botswana is documented in the White Papers of the 1977 and the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994, and the various Curriculum Blueprints (each level of education has its own) that emanated from the submissions of various commissions. Since independence, education has taken a central role in national development. This has been evident through the substantial increase in the national budget allocation for expenditures related to education (cf. NDPs 5, 6, 7, 8). Also, the savings from the (diamond) mining industry translated itself into free education for all citizens. This achievement has been spectacular. Perhaps, it is appropriate to rejoice at this state of affairs. But the other side of it is that the great means that are put at the disposal of education do not guarantee the equitable and quality nature of the system (McCarthy, 1999). These appear to and in fact do translate merely into mass provision of educational amenities without so much as looking into issues that make the education system a quality and equitable one. This factor makes language in education policy in Botswana encounter difficulties in its contribution towards implementing democracy.

Policies on education in Botswana have not been informed and inspired by the important and fundamental factors derived from the social context to determine curricula content and their outcomes. This means that the quality and value as well as the developmental contribution of education to some of the recipients become vague, superficial and rather abstract, as their cultures and languages are excluded both as information and information carriers. The obvious lack of equality and equity espoused in this state of affairs expose contradiction with democratic ideals.

**Democracy and Education in Botswana**

Botswana is internationally recognised as a shining example of democracy in which political multi-partyism has flourished for many years. Since independence from British rule in 1966, ‘...the rule of law has been respected; good governance has been practiced...’ and ‘democratic norms set by the constitution have been legally and politically observed’ (Jotia, 2006:6). In the education sector, the realisation of democracy, as envisioned by the first president of the country, Sir Seretse Khama, would come through *Education for Kagisano* (education for social harmony) (RNCE, 1977), which stipulated that a united and democratic Botswana, whose main objective would be to promote social harmony, would be birthed through the four pillars of Unity, Democracy, Self-Reliance, Development as well as
Botho (humanness) (cf. Education for Kagisano, 1977). The pillars were defined as follows:

- **Unity (Kagisano):** education would promote social harmony and unity among the citizen of the country by affording them equality in education and social development;
- **Democracy (Puso ya batho ka batho):** a republican governance system where citizens equally stand the chance to accede into positions of government and have fairness in social development;
- **Self Reliance (Boipelego):** a social order where citizens strive to make an effort to contribute to their development by making necessary personal sacrifices to meet the efforts of the government half-way;
- **Development (Tlhabologo):** a process that entails improved social and cultural lives of citizens, and that make them enjoy the benefits of their social progress;
- **Botho (Humanness):** a social state of being kind and generous; respectful and tolerant.

On paper, these are admirable ideals. However, the government has been very unwilling to promote and develop these ideals in schools in matters concerning the incorporation of languages.

**Democracy, Nation Building and Languages (in education) in Botswana**

**Democracy**

It follows logically that Education for Kagisano could only be effective if the education system was committed to the realization of the pillars upon which both it and democracy were hinged. Jotia (2006:2) points out that ‘in order for Botswana to be deemed a truly democratic country, its education system should be seen to be advancing deep democratic ideals.’ He further notes that the product of a genuine practice of democracy in the education system of the country could be ‘transformative’ intellectuals capable of perpetuating the ideals of democracy (Jotia, 2006), as indeed democracy is a transformative ideal (Green, 1999). The RNCE of 1977 which led to the formation of Education for Kagisano regarded education as central to the life of a nation as it noted that:

Education is close to the centre of any society’s life and concerns, being intimately involved with its culture and values, its political system and its economic arrangements. For this reason a fundamental review of education cannot simply concern itself with the internal working of the schools and such matters as teachers qualifications, the school syllabus or examination results, important as these matters are. One must look more broadly at the role of education in society and its potential contribution to social welfare and national development (RNCE, 1977:9).
Accordingly, the Ten Year Basic Education Program also sought to promote an informed citizenry. And this would be done by according learners access to basic education and fostering the intellectual development of pupils. The intention of the program was also to develop ‘cultural identity, self esteem and good citizenship; (and) prepare citizens to participate actively to further develop the country’s democracy and their own lives in the 21st century’ (Curriculum Blueprint, 1995:2). It appears that apart from the fact that such a development was intended to fulfil the United Nations goal of Education for All, education was seen as a channel through which sustainable democracy could be cultivated in Botswana.

However, Botswana still insists on (undemocratic) bilingual education although it has a multilingual society. Education democracy requires responding to individual learning ideals. These ideals mean that the individual is empowered to learn and relate to knowledge in a way that is culturally and cognitively relevant or meaningful to him or her.

**Nation Building**

*Education for Kagisano* (social harmony) was intended to bring about a ‘gradual evolution of a nation state’ that President Sir Seretse Khama was building (Nyati-Ramahobo (2002:19), probably as communicated by the pillar ‘Unity’ and the name ‘Social Harmony’. The leaders of the nation envisaged one nation that was being built with one flag and one language (Setswana) (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004), except it would not be stated that this Social Harmony was intended to be realised at the cost of (linguistic and cultural) diversity that characterised the country.

**Languages in Education**

In spite of the objectives of *Education for Kagisano*, (RNCE, 1977) to promote social harmony through the school system, it is rather disturbing to note that the languages of the people of Botswana (and their associated cultures), are not recognized and incorporated into the educational system. Such a situation alienates people from their culture, the very means with which they build their self-esteem and identity. This certainly has a negative bearing on the building of a democratic society. People who are denied the very means with which they can express themselves cannot have unrestricted participation in the society, and such a society cannot therefore be deemed to be democratic. This is a potentially seriously risky situation. Education for social harmony cannot be achieved in an environment that creates conditions that may result in the production and the aggravation of conflicts. Education must be democratic to equally and equitably develop the society. There is therefore an urgent need to democratize education in Botswana. The education planners need to appreciate the fact that learners need their varied and unique cultures and languages to learn, and recognise that in spite of such diversity they can still live together in harmony. Thus unity and harmony are still achievable aspirations even within a society with diverse cultures and
languages and not through sacrificing these diverse cultures on the altar of sameness. This is a point that Jotia (2006:13) makes:

...a deep democracy is the one that values deliberative interaction/consultation by all citizens. (Be that as it may), it could be argued that an education system that does not create a platform for the exercise of expression of difference, is probably an ailing system that doesn’t reflect elements of ‘peopleness’ which are of paramount importance in a democracy.

The well documented language-in-education system of Botswana (cf. Nyatiramahobo, 1987, 1991, 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Mooko, 2006; Chebanne, 2004; Batibo, 2004; Monaka, 2005; Mphinyane, 2002; Monaka, 2006; Lukusa, 2000), in stipulating that English and Setswana are the only permissible languages of the school, deprives learners who speak other languages opportunities to participate fully in school debates. Ironically, debate is one of the very skills that democracy seeks to develop through the school system in readiness for wider debates on national issues. The learners are also denied the opportunity to gain knowledge through the only medium they (the learners) are competent in, and this runs counter to the intentions of the ten-year basic education program which seek to make knowledge accessible to all as part of creating an informed transformative citizenry, capable of sustaining democracy. Jotia (2006:31) argues that ‘Democracy has to affirm diversity in schools.’ The National Vision 2016, with its pronouncement of no discrimination for any Motswana in the education system because of language and culture can be very transformative if implemented. It can work towards ensuring an informed nation, amongst other things.

The Challenges of Language Teacher Training in Botswana.

The Curriculum Development and the Teacher Training Departments should constitute themselves into research based departments. This will make them to face the challenges of education with responses derived from researched and objective facts. As it is, the training of teachers, especially for indigenous languages in Botswana, and the associated development of materials, is anchored within the pronouncements of the Constitution that recognizes only two languages. Speakers of other languages are trained to teach languages that they speak as second or third or even fourth languages, and are expected to then teach these languages in schools. This situation has embedded within it lots of problems. A democratic system should seek to promote the teaching of languages by mother tongue speakers, since they are not only naturally endowed with competence in the language but are also experts in the nuances and other ways in which their languages can be exploited to communicate. Also, it goes without saying that the approach of training and using non-mother tongue speakers of a language to teach it is costly in many ways including monetarily, drop out of learners and loss of linguistic (and cultural) diversity. Thus teacher training in Botswana needs to be revised and modernized to be considerate and inclusive of other languages in the
country. Similarly, the development of materials for teaching indigenous languages also needs to include these marginalized languages.

Conclusion

The language in education framework presented above leads to the conclusion that education cannot be viewed solely as the successful provision of generally available or majority amenities. It should concern itself with the totality of concerns and rights of citizens. Educational values are not abstract and should of necessity come from the positive learning experiences of the citizens and this can only happen when education responds to social aspirations and affirms cultural values, amongst other things. In this regard education could contribute significantly to an equitable system of democracy.

Much still remains to be seen whether these pronouncements (e.g. the 1994 White Paper; Vision 2016) will lead to language pluralism in education. The neglect of the past, the uneasiness of the present (cf. the problem of allowing other languages on radio waves), and the uncertainties of the future, may not provide the faith to believe that hurdles will not persist and complicate the issues of democratization in education. As it has been alluded to, the laws and policies are conservatively monolithic, and diversity in language has been viewed and continues to be viewed with suspicion. An overhaul of laws and educational policies should come first to lay a democratic foundation for transformation – linguistic pluralism in education. Not only that, committing resources to these issues needs to be given serious consideration too. As yet, there is nothing that constrains the Government to develop any other culture or language other than Setswana. Some language communities lack motivation to develop their own languages so much so that without a deliberate provision of resources by the Government to their development, they may well be on their way to extinction.

Works Cited


