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Tonic Maruatona

University of Botswana, Botswana

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Participatory Approaches to the Planning of Literacy Education in Botswana

Tonic Maruatona
University of Botswana, Botswana

Abstract: This paper is a critique of planning in the Botswana National Literacy Program, it outlines activities of the program and demonstrates how it reproduces social inequality and suggests participatory strategies to strengthen literacy education in Botswana.

Introduction

The paper provides a critical analysis of planning in the Botswana National Literacy Program (BNLP), it concludes that the program reproduces social inequality and it is not transformative and suggests some participatory strategies that could be used to strengthen the practice of literacy education in Botswana. First it provides an overview of the conception and the process of planning literacy Botswana, discusses the country's socio-economic situation and the activities of the literacy program to demonstrate its limitations. The paper argues that as presently planned, the BNLP reproduces the status quo and does not represent the cultural context of the minorities, women and the poor who are its main participants. Finally, it suggests alternative participatory strategies such as decentralization of the planning process, mobilizing of communities to maximize the benefits of cultural diversity, and suggests using participatory rural appraisal technique for learners to experience participatory planning.

Background to Botswana

Botswana became independent from Britain in 1966. About 72% of its population of 1.6 million people speaks Setswana, the national Language. It is also the language of the main Tswana groups who are also included in the constitution namely; Bangwaketsi, Bangwato, Balete, Barolong, Bakwena, Bahurutshe, Bakgatla, Batlokwa and Batawana. In addition, there are some linguistic minorities such as the Basarwa, Bakalanga, OvaHerero, Babirwa, Bayei, Hambukushu, and Basubiya to name a few, who are classified as others according to sections 77, 78 and 79 of the Constitution. All these communities are scattered throughout the country in different geographical locations. Politically, the country is a democracy, holding "free and fair" elections every five years but since Independence, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party has won all the elections, which made it a *de facto* one party system. It created a ruling bloc made up of mainly people from the dominant Tswana culture and cattle owning aristocrats. The ruling bloc has concentrated on improving its status during mid 1970s, resulting in the expansion of its economic base thereby, advancing its economic interests, private enterprise system and foreign investment (Youngman, 1996; 2000). This is in spite of the fact the most minority groups especially, the indigenous Basarwa/San people remain culturally and economically disempowered.

Botswana's economy was one of the weakest in the 1960's but it boomed at unprecedented rate in the 1970s. The growth has been attributed to the discovery and exploitation of mineral wealth, especially diamonds. The Gross Domestic Product grew four fold in real terms between 1966 and 1991. This growth has been accompanied by disturbingly high rates of income inequalities and persistent poverty in rural areas. The 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. 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 rural areas are characterized by poverty, unemployment, inequality and lack of skills and rural people depend on government drought relief projects and do not participate in the planning of development projects (Youngman & Maruatona, 1998). Poverty is more prevalent in rural areas where 60% of the poor and 70% of the very poor who are mostly female households live (Jefferis, 1997). One of the legacies of this uneven development path has been that women were relegated to subordinated position in the division of labor and this was buttressed by the overarching nature of patriarchy in the society (Mafela, 1994). It is against this backdrop that I discuss various conceptions and the practice of planning literacy education in Botswana.

The Planning Process in Botswana

Planning as used in this context denotes both a blue print of what planners think should be done and the actual carrying out of that plan because that is what real life challenge demands. We cannot separate the two and understand what is going on in planning (Forester, 1993). Usually in developing nations such as Botswana, planning is left to those who are better informed to prescribe the needs of the less informed but affected majority (Jain, 1999). It has been observed that planning could be made participatory by enabling those who are affected to partake in the planning process in order to articulate issues for their own benefits (Deleon, 1997; Fishkin, 1995). This suggests that literacy planning could either be left to the whims of the bureaucrats or democratized. The outcome is that planning is caught in conflict between the reasoned judgment as to what it should do, and the exercise of political power of those who actually make decisions (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993; Jain, 1999). Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993) indicated that planning has to increasingly reflect the political rather than pedagogical ramifications of decisions made. Consequently, some scholars have argued that planning is invariably political (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Forester, 1989). Forester (1989) assumes that planners can mostly work to serve those in need and can work effectively if they work through recognizing that they work in the face of power but have the desire to work for an equity-based development process. He pointed out that planning is not a value free process, even in the most liberal democracy, not all voices are given equal weight in decision-making. He argues, “planners can anticipate problems and respond practically and effectively in ways that... nurture than neglect the democratic process” (Forester, 1989, p. 5). Planners according to this theory are expected to remember that in the course of their work, they do play certain decisions and uphold others. However, plausible these suggestions are, they fall short of demonstrating the role of participants as stakeholders in the planning of the programs it also seems to suggest that planners could be willing to risk the comfort of their jobs to act on behalf of the poor.

Cervero and Wilson (1994)’s theoretical model on the other hand, provides an analysis of the planning process and demonstrates how planning is influenced by contextual dynamics. They view planning as both a political and practical process. Cervero and Wilson (1994) note, “Planners know that they are not free agents able to translate their own interests directly into purpose, content and format of a program. Rather their planning is always conducted within complex set of personal, organizational and social relationships of power” (p. 4). Planners always negotiate between interests and unequal power relationships that overtly or covertly structure the planning process. The issue is that people represent a variety of interests but possess

asymmetrical power relationships in terms of influencing planning outcomes. Hence, Cervero and Wilson (1998) suggested that people's interests produce programs. However, in most cases those with the most power in the context will construct the plan according to their interests at the expense of others. As a result, the major limitation of the Cervero and Wilson's model is that though political, it does not clearly articulate the place of participants in the planning process.

Policy development and analysis in Botswana is part of the democratic culture that predates Western model of democracy imposed at Independence. Our version of democracy also has its roots in the traditional practice of the *Kgotla* or community meeting place. The assumption is that "*mafoka a kgotla mantle otlhe*," which means, all are free to raise issues at the *kgotla*. However, there is a sense of scrutiny in that the other proverb says "*mmua lebe o bua la gagwe gore monalente a tle a letswe*" translated to mean 'all must speak out to challenge those with the best ideas to articulate them.' The results are that we can use these enormously valuable contributions from those who are actually involved in deliberating the planning. In spite of that, decisions are made based on what is perceived to be public expediency by those who have power to influence decision-making at local and national levels. The traditional approach has been criticized for being a top-bottom approach since the leadership is the one that initiate the ideas and seek affirmation from the people through consultation (Youngman & Maruatona, 1998).

Planning at national level is done through Five to Seven year National Development Plans (NDPs), which serve as blue print for what the government intends to do over the next plan period. The planning of programs is based on the national principles of democracy, development, self-reliance, unity and 'botho' or humility. Since 1976 the state has conducted regular district development plans, which covered all sectors of rural development for five years. Extension staff consulted rural communities through *Kgotla* meetings (community meeting place). However, by the end of the 1970s, it was clear that there was rural underdevelopment characterized by poverty, unemployment and lack of infrastructural development. This suggested that even with consultation, planning was not viewed as a political process that required astuteness in involving the participants nor the need to genuinely negotiate with the rural communities (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). It could be argued that while planners in Botswana seemed to negotiate with the people, the latter only took part but did not participate in the development planning process. The state realized that the current approach does not address the needs of the rural communities and adopted a Community-Based Strategy for Rural Development. The strategy was aimed at increasing community participation and leadership of structured intended to identify rural development needs and formulate appropriate strategies to implement them (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1997). This lack of a proactive role in articulating the participants' aspirations for the literacy program to reflect their true needs has been manifested in the BNLP over the past twenty years of its existence. Hence, the need to establish mechanism for an effective way for all stakeholder in literacy education to participate and not only to take part in planning the program order for the outcomes to be beneficial to the targeted communities.

The Botswana National Literacy Program (BNLP).

In Botswana the adult literacy has involved provision of basic reading, writing and numeracy skills and other post-literacy activities designed to help neo-literates to not relapse into illiteracy. The BNLP is the largest state organized and operated literacy program since independence. Following the realization that the educational infrastructure was grossly neglected during the colonial era, the state recognized that literacy was essential to achieve other development efforts. The Report of the *National Commission on Education* (1977) noted, "A

fully literate population is an important long term objective if Botswana's other national objectives are to be met" (p. 167). Literacy provision is the portfolio responsibility of the Department of Non Formal Education. It implements the Botswana National Literacy Program, which started in 1980 with the following objectives:

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).

However, the Department of Non formal Education was unable to complete the eradication of illiteracy in six years as initially proposed. Therefore objectives of the National Literacy Program were re-defined in the *National Development Plan Six, 1985-1991*. They were to:

Help the learning needs of communities in the rural and remote areas for adult who never had a chance to go to school.

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 that would form the basis for expansion. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1985)

The program was evaluated in 1987. The evaluation indicated that there was a need to review the curriculum and reinvigorate the teaching and learning processes (Gaborone, Mutanyatta and Youngman, 1987). Another problem that persisted was that of dropouts and the general low morale of the staff, especially the Literacy Group Leaders who are program facilitators (Ministry of Education, 1994). Initially, the program focused attention on teaching and learning to the relative exclusion of the post-literacy activities but these were given some attention from the mid-1980s.

The Department of Non Formal Education also established Village Reading Rooms in conjunction with the Department of National Library Services. Also the DNFE offers the teaching of English as part of the program. The most recent innovation has been the provision of workplace literacy and the introduction of the adult basic education course (ABEC), which is still at a preliminary stage. It is intended to provide learners with qualification equivalent to Standard Seven in formal primary school. In spite of these innovations the state maintained a tight control of the planning process through the centralization of activities. First, it maintained controlled the planning process and defined it as an expert-driven process intended to create a sense of belonging and it was largely a routine exercise involving only the planners. Second, the state controlled the production of primers, post-literacy materials, literacy at workplace materials, and the imported ABEC materials from South Africa and imposed them on the learners. Planners ignored the concerns of literacy participants they treated learners as passive consumers, and largely ignored gender and minority issues (Maruatona, 2001). Planning did not involve the learner, curriculum development was a taken for granted non-problematic process, which could be left to the expertise of planners. It subjugated other knowledge systems and attempted to suppress the histories and life activities of women as participants in the program

(Alexander, 1994). The state seemed to be willing to provide funding for the literacy program for as long as it facilitated social control and maintained the status quo and reinforced the values of groups in power and their associates who planned the program (Crowther, Tett, & Gallaway, 1999). Planning literacy education ignored other ways of conceiving and utilizing literacy practices in the daily lives of the learners. Hence, the need to replace this exclusive dominant view of literacy with a pluralistic perspective rooted in the way literacy is used in everyday practices of the minorities, women and the poor in Botswana.

Participatory Approaches to Planning Literacy Education

The need for a participatory approach stems from the fact that participation demonstrates that adults are capable of being active participants in a democratic society. This requires their involvement in decision making to enable their voices to be heard in the process allowing them to individually and collectively define their responsibilities. In order for these to be achieved, literacy planning in Botswana has to be both decentralized and it should evoke a combination of participatory approaches and methods, which would shift the ownership of the outcomes of planning to the participants in their local contexts.

Decentralization of Literacy Planning

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority from high echelons of the state to geographically dispersed local government agents, thereby strengthening local staff to make decisions on their daily work. The outcome is that the state would render more responsive services because staff members are informed about the local situation. It increases the “autonomy of the local professionals since they are natural experts” (Lauglo, 1990, p. 25). The process of decentralization is already underway in Botswana because the state as indicated earlier, adopted the Community-Based Strategy for Rural Development. The strategy will have to be employed to address the planning of literacy at local contexts. It has been observed that decentralization can be achieved through accommodating diversity and creating networks (Maruatona, in press). Diversification would reflect the needs of different cultural communities in various districts of Botswana as a political process intended to shift the development of literacy materials to local levels. Over and above, planning the curricula should be based on networking with learners, potential learners, private sector and the Government across the various social contexts in order to negotiate a customer-driven experience (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). Also the state will have to adopt participatory techniques such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and its more expanded version of REFLECT, which combines the later with the Freirean approach.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and REFLECT

Participatory Rural Appraisal is combination of methods that enable communities to work with formal service providers to identify and analyze critical elements of their lives, plan, and carry out projects resulting in feasible changes (Bar-on & Prinsen, 1999). It proceeds from the assumption that local people should conduct their own appraisal and analysis of issues in their contexts in order to generate locally shared information to use as part of their local development efforts. It gives priority to local participation over outside intervention in developing communities. The approach has gradually been endorsed by international organizations because it focuses on self-sufficiency, democracy and redressing wicked problems such as poverty (Chambers, 1994; Mompoti & Prisen, 2000; World Bank, 1994). Another advantage of this approach is that it enhances our understanding of micro realities, appraises local organizational infrastructure and focuses on addressing poverty and other social maladies

(Bar-on & Prinsen, 1999). PRA has a relative advantage over top-down approach, which is currently used to plan literacy because it does not reproduce the status quo. It is therefore firmly believed that in spite of its weakness such as assuming that local communities know their problems and can solve them, PRA is viewed as a more effective tool for planning literacy education in Botswana. Closely related to it is the REFLECT approach.

REFLECT is radical new approach to adult literacy and empowerment developed through field experimentation. It is a structured participatory learning process, which facilitates people's critical analysis of their environment placing empowerment at the center of sustainable development. It has integrated 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 1993-1995 (Archer, 2000). Literacy cycles develop their own materials through construction of maps, matrixes, calendars, graphs, which depicts their daily realities and synthesizes their knowledge and promotes a detailed analysis of local issues. It resulted from the realization that centralized literacy programs failed to harmonize literacy with other socio-economic development issues. The approach then provides democratic space, constructs and interprets locally generated texts. People are enabled to analyze both local and national issues and realities. It reflects the power relationships at personal and public levels in that it gives the silenced the opportunity to be heard. Based on the interactive processes of action and reflection, people empower themselves to work for a more just and equitable society (Archer, 2000). Teaching materials were developed jointly by teachers and learners, and did not rely on pre-packaged primers (Archer & Cottingham, 1996). The REFLECT experiments have been done on a small scale and its implications for a wider program still has to be established (Youngman, 1997). The point however, is that its principles could be applicable in rural Botswana where people are familiarity with democracy and consultation, It is hoped this would take consultation to a more democratic level in planning literacy education.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the socio-economic and cultural situation in Botswana to demonstrate how it remains complex to achieved the planning goals in view of economic disparities and poverty that besets the majority of the rural and urban poor. It outlines the literacy planning process, and argued that it does not empower literacy learners to enable them to take control of their lives. It also critiques key critical planning theories to show that they are not inclusive and it proceeds from a participatory perspective to suggests how planning literacy can be made more responsive to the learners' socio-cultural contexts if the process could be decentralized in order to give local staff and communities the opportunity to make decisions. It also suggests that the use of participatory approaches such as PRA and REFLECT as strategies in planning would result in transformative experiences for to participants in literacy education in Botswana.

References are available from the author upon request from the author.