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San Junior Secondary Students' Home–School Literacy Disconnection: A Case Study of a Remote Area Dweller School in Botswana

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The study investigated how San students of Botswana, in a junior community secondary school, understood literacy in school and at home. A qualitative, narrative case study approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of what students value and understand by literacy from co-participants' and informants' perspectives. Findings across participants' stories revealed that they saw literacy as those things that had value to them, and these influenced how they read the word and the world. Storytelling, games, and singing were perceived as literacy by the 6 participants in the study and the 2 San informants. Knowledge of different plants, basket weaving, and sculpting were viewed as literacy to some of the participants. The conclusion is that the participants' ways of reading and knowing the word and the world need to be included in the school curriculum for the benefit of San and non-San Batswana students alike. Also, appropriate pedagogic strategies need to be adopted in San classrooms for San formal schooling success.

The San peoples of southern Africa, like Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, experience very low educational attainment and low levels of literacy. Although San children have had access to school in their respective countries for about 30 years, research indicates that dropout rates for San students are very high, and only a very few of them have made it to tertiary education (Hays & Siegrühn-Mars, 2005; Le Roux, 1999). A comprehensive regional study carried out by Le Roux among the San in southern Africa reveals that education is still a problem, and acculturation is taking place among the San across the region. Le Roux (1999) and Wagner (2006) both reported that San children have multiple problems that hinder access to their education, including cultural, linguistic, and material problems. The low levels of education, in turn, mean that literacy levels among San, especially in English, are much lower than the general population. Batibo (2004) argued that the lack of mother-tongue instruction for San children in Botswana is at the root of their literacy problems.

In light of the current problematic situation with San literacy and formal education, I conducted research in a junior secondary school with a high percentage of San to learn more about their educational experiences and understandings of literacy. I focused on a small group of students from the humanities and science subjects at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary

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School (the school name is a pseudonym). This article describes findings related to cultural differences between home and school and conceptions of literacy.

BACKGROUND: EDUCATION IN BOTSWANA

To address the educational disenfranchisement of San in Botswana, the government initiated what is known as the Rural Area Development Program (RADP) in 1974 to "uplift" the San (Pridmore, 1995). Under the RADP, San children are transported to "remote area dweller" (RAD) schools in trucks, where they live in hostels for a school term. During the school holidays, they are transported back to visit their families in their settlements. In the RAD schools, the San children meet with other San and other minorities who face poverty like them. Although the intent is to increase educational participation, the RAD schools and hostels have been blamed, among other things, for separating children from their parents and creating conditions for bullying and sexual abuse and, ultimately, for the high San school dropout rate. In the context of Botswana, there has been a shift from the conventional understanding in which *literacy* was simplistically defined as "the ability to read and write with understanding, in Setswana, English or both: and the ability to carry out simple computations in everyday life" (Gaborone, Mutanyatta, & Youngman, 1987, p. 2). The country adopted a wider understanding of literacy and numeracy that acknowledges the diversity and complexity in the possibilities of these concepts. Thus, for the purpose of the 2003 national survey, literacy was defined as follows:

> A responsive and context specific multidimensional lifelong learning process designed to equip beneficiaries with specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques to independently engage in practices and genres involving listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, technical functioning and critical thinking required in real life. (Hanemann, 2005, p. 8)

Currently, the literature is silent on San Indigenous literacy, as it might inform their education to better meet their needs. Indigenous literacy practices and unique ways of reading the world are ignored in formal education in Botswana. Hence, it was my aim to kick-start research that is culturally appropriate and relevant to the San child and San communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

In researching the San students at Letsatsi and how they understood literacy and made meaning, my intention was to focus on the participants' lived experiences. Following Connelly and Clandinin (1990), I took the perspective that human beings are, by nature, storytellers; and the lives we lead are storied lives, individually and socially. I took a narrative inquiry approach, gathering peoples' stories, lived and told. As Bruner (2002) pointed out, stories portray life, and they always have a message. A narrative inquiry approach further recognizes that, although people are individuals, they must be understood in relation to other peoples or within their social context. This aspect echoes the *Botho* philosophy in Botswana, summed up in the phrase, "*Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe*" ("A person can only be a person through others"). Botho is also commonly known as *Ubuntu* from the Zulu. In addition to being a philosophical base, the approach of Ubuntu or Botho has practical and ethical aspects as well, as it emphasizes equality and respect

toward the "researched." This was necessary if I was to have any chance of San students speaking with me without fear.

My primary methodological approach was participant observation. I also gathered information through informal interviews with six co-participants (whom I regarded as active partners in the research process), four informants, and interviews with parents. In addition, I conducted classroom observations, innumerable informal observations, and collected students' photographs taken by my co-participants. In my research, I also shared myself. Sometimes San students asked questions about my schooling and upbringing, and I answered as honestly as I thought appropriate. My aim was not just to take information from them, but to give information as well. I cultivated a collaborative relationship and did not adopt the superior stance of one who assumes she is more educated.

Interviews were conducted in Setswana, a *lingua franca* for the informants, participants, and me. Before the interviews began, I gained students trust by getting to know them. I showed respect for the students by always honoring our appointments; and if I promised to bring them some toiletries, I did that. This helped me in establishing trust, based in Botho, with the students, who, in turn, were more willing to share stories of their lived experience. This is important, as formal interviewing is not culturally familiar in African settings, whereas sharing stories is. Following the advice of Batswana researchers Chilisa and Preece (2005), I sought to make individual interviews a conversation between myself and the student. In addition, I also conducted interviews with some of the students' parents. A group meeting was most appropriate because in Botswana, discussion is normally a family affair and rarely an individual's sole endeavor (Chilisa & Preece, 2005).

Pink (2006) suggested that, as researchers, we can make a lot of sense from visuals and photographs. Photographs help us to construct our lives and "are rich sources of field texts for the construction of social narratives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 115). I gave the six San participants disposable cameras to take pictures in their environment and school. I asked them to take pictures of the things that represented literacy or had meaning to them, and the students later explained to me what the picture meant to them and why they took it. As I looked at the students' pictures with them, I asked probing questions like, "What is going on in this picture?," and "Why did you take this picture?" The value of photography is that it allows for the visual image to be "read" according to a given culture and within a given historical context, thus providing a rich source of research information (Grbich, 2007).

Observations take place in a natural setting, and they represent a firsthand account of what transpired in the setting. I sat at the back of the classrooms and took descriptive notes of teacher and student talk and actions. Students in secondary schools in Botswana are used to having visitors in their classrooms as a result of the teaching practice supervised by teacher trainees from Colleges of Education, so I did not expect the students to feel anxious by my presence.

I also asked the participants and some of their San friends to give me test papers from their English and science classes. In total, I had 28 test and homework papers (English and science) from the six participants and San informants. In addition, I had 36 test papers and homework from other San students in the school. Outside classes, my role was that of participant observer again as I "hung around" the school observing on the goings on. In the staffroom, teachers and other members of staff freely discussed students (San and non-San) in my presence. This became another observation opportunity. For example, the Guidance and Counseling teacher went out of

her way to offer information that she deemed of importance to the research. She would seek me out in the staffroom and tell her stories about San students.

My research was guided by the following questions: What problems do San students have with learning English and Setswana in school?, What are San students' experiences with literacy in school?, What do San children value and find meaningful in their home and school environments?, and How does this relate to the possibilities for literacy learning?

Study Setting

I was granted permission to conduct this research from the Ministry of Education (although I was warned to stay away from politics "as the San people are highly politicized" and that I was being watched). It was then left to my discretion to select a school I wanted to conduct research at in the Kgatleng District. I contacted the school deputy principal of Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School about my desire to carry out research in his school, and he agreed. Letsatsi School is what is known as a RAD school (schools primarily for children from settlements far from villages in Botswana). I was certain of finding San students in the school. Lodging at the school was problematic, so I made the 1-hr commute each way, every day, including weekends.

Sampling

The deputy principal had warned me in our first meeting that I might find it difficult to identify San students because they take Tswana names to blend in with the non-San Batswana. I employed snowball, chain, or network sampling to find the research participants (Merriam, 1998). The snowball began with two non-San students whom I met on my second day at the school in Mr. Selepe's classroom. First, I met Love, a confident girl who introduced me to a boy named Peace. In addition to helping me find San participants, Love and Peace agreed to tell me about their own observations of San students inside and outside the classroom. I told the participants that I was going to work with them closely by interviewing, observing, and listening to what they had to say about their past and present schooling experiences. This would help me to understand their views of literacy in and out of school. To provide anonymity, I have given them different names and, in many cases, ones that are English translations of their Setswana names.[1]

My non-San informants, Love and Peace, introduced me to Done and News, who agreed to work as San informants. Then, Done and News introduced me to Mr. President who agreed to be a participant. He, in turn, introduced me to his best friend, Knowledge, who agreed to participate. Later, Done and News introduced me to Happy, and I agreed to participate. Love and Peace told me some stories about Trust. That led to asking Trust to participate, and he agreed. Also, Love and Peace introduced me to Drought, who agreed to be a participant. After I interviewed Drought, she led me to Receiver. In sum, I collected data from two non-San informants (Love and Peace), two San informants (Done and News), and six San participants (Mr. President,

[1]In the Setswana naming culture, as with most other Bantu languages, names have meanings, like *Lerato* (Love) or *Kagiso* (Peace). These names are also frequently translated into their English equivalents and used as names. I have chosen here to use English equivalents of common Setswana names.

Knowledge, Happy, Trust, Drought, and Receiver). All were between the ages of 14 and 16, and in Grade 8 or 9.

FINDINGS

In the remainder of this article, I discuss some of my findings from this research, particularly those that relate to literacy, and differences between the home and school. Good (1999) reported that with a total of 77% illiteracy, the San are the least literate of all minorities in Botswana. This is largely attributed to their lack of participation in school. Many challenges confront them at schools, however; these include challenges learning the dominant langauges, and others related to poverty and stigma, as well as a disconnection between the home and school environment.

Setswana and English Learning Challenges

All six of the San participants in the study found English difficult (and, they reported, boring), and they performed poorly in it. This poor performance also meant that they failed subjects taught in English. They performed better in the class on Setswana language because it was taught in Setswana, and they told me that at home they speak Setswana. They especially found English vocabulary difficult to understand. According to Love and Peace, my non-San informants, they had observed that San students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School had resorted to "pretend reading." This is a perception that the non-San students generally had of San students.

All six San participants acknowledged the importance of English in understanding content area subjects. The paradox was that, although English was so difficult, it was held in very high regard by these students, and they had a longing to be able to use English to communicate in school. Knowing how to speak English well was also viewed as a sign of intelligence by the students. This is not very surprising, as English is the language of prestige and social mobility not only in Botswana, but Africa at large (Masendu, 2000; Olebile, 1999). One needs to be eloquent and literate in English to get a good job, and the participants all said that they hoped for good jobs one day. However, I observed that when they spoke English, other students laughed at them, and they became the silent students in class.

The San students in this study informed me that they did not speak their mother tongues because they do not know them. However, I had noticed during informal talks with them that they made errors speaking in Setswana, which led me to suspect that they might be speaking another language at home. Only Mr. President said that he understands the San language that his father and grandfather always spoke to him, but he does not speak the language. He lamented the fact that after the passing on of his grandfather and father, there was no one to speak the language to him.

According to Botswana's language policy, only Setswana and English may be used as languages of instruction in schools. One decade ago, Nyati-Ramahobo (1999) reported on confusion on the languages of literacy and learning to be used in schools in Botswana, suggesting that colonial influences were still very much in place. For students who have mother tongues other than Setswana, their languages are not taught in schools. Chebanne and Monaka (2005) pointed out

that the Setswana culture creates a huge barrier for San students. When children go to school, they are expected to learn in the unfamiliar languages taught in the school system.

A large body of research attests to the fact that students instructed in their mother tongue do much better in school than if they are instructed first in a foreign language. Researchers—many of whom are inspired by the father of sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes (1964)—continue to point to the fact that cognitive development occurs effectively only through a language that the learner knows very well; for example, a mother tongue or a first language (Gatsha, 2005; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Mooko, 2006; Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999; Pang, 1990). For the learner to understand, organize, and select information, it is crucial that they are proficient in the language of instruction. Furthermore, this is also good for second and third language acquisitions.

For the San of Botswana, English is a third language, and they are expected to use it as a language of instruction before they have mastered it. For many children, language is one of the seemingly insurmountable problems in schools, which results in a high school dropout rate. Research points to the fact that many school dropouts cannot read in their mother tongue or in an international language, such as English (Muthwii, 2004). Muthwii (2002, p. 4) suggested that there is a misconception that English comes "naturally" for children from multilingual backgrounds. At Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School, the teachers expected all students, including the San, to be eloquent in the English language, and did nothing extra to assist them as they failed not only English, but all school subjects. The participants, on the other hand, *wanted* to learn English.

Although English was revered, the six participants in the study preferred to read Setswana books to English ones. This was because of the difficulty of English and their familiarity of Setswana. However, their preference for Setswana over English did not mean that they excelled in it. On the contrary, all six participants reported failing Setswana. Love and Peace, my two non-San informants, had observed that "these students" had problems with Setswana, as well as English. This means that they are not fully competent in *either* of the langauges of instruction used in Botswana's schools. Furthermore, school materials reflect Setswana culture and ignore other cultures, especially the San (Chebanne & Monaka, 2005; Hays, 2002). This presents another serious disadvantage to students such as the San.

San Students' Experiences at School and the Hostel

In addition to the language issues described earlier, many other obstacles face San children at the school. Students at Letsatsi Junior Secondary School have to leave their parents and move to a school some 20 to 40 km away. Mazonde (2002) noted that, in RAD settlements, San children live in low-quality hostels, usually sleeping on the ground; there have also been reports of sexual harassment of female San pupils in the hostels by males who come from outside the school. This fact is known within government; the National Development Plan 7 noted that "the prevailing hostel conditions and modes of operation often make San and other minority parents reluctant to enroll their children in primary school and often contribute to student dropout" (Botswana Government, 1991–1997, p. 66; see also, Botswana Government, 1994). Parents also complain of being separated from their children when they go to live in hostels, as this leads to cultural loss. This is especially difficult for the younger children.

Name-calling and verbal abuse at school by non-San students is reported to be very common throughout Botswana. People call them "dirty, backward and primitive" (Le Roux, 1999, p. 83).

This history of abuse among the San peoples can perhaps be traced to their lives of serfdom in Botswana; traditionally, the San were cattle-herders for the Tswana. Only 2 or 3 decades ago it was "unheard of" in Botswana for a San child to go to school or learn how to read and write (Le Roux, 1999, p. 83). To avoid bad treatment, San children have been reported to change their names. In this study, all six participants at Letsatsi School complained of being called names. For this and other reasons, the school considered to be a hostile environment. This made it an especially difficult place for San students, whose culture favors non-agressive behavior and generally values peace, respect for individuals, and social harmony (Le Roux, 1999; Shostak, 1981, 2000; Wagner, 2006).

Extreme poverty also made the San children stand out significantly from other students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. They never had enough toiletries. During my visits on Saturdays, I observed how San students wore the same clothes Saturday after Saturday. I found that clothes were important to their identity and feelings of belonging. Five of the participants told me that their parents did not work and, as a result, they had no money to buy them new clothes and toiletries. This was in direct contrast to other students in school, especially those from the city of Gaborone and surrounding areas. My non-San informants told me how San students ran errands for them in exchange for the food that their parents had brought them. San parents said they were very concerned about the poverty of the San people and saw this as a hindrance to their children getting a good education.

Home–School Disconnection

The San experience a culture clash in formal education in Botswana in part because, traditionally, San education is informal and incorporated into the everyday lives of the children (Hays, 2007; Le Roux, 2002; Wagner, 2006). At the school, literacy practices and materials are unfamiliar and not rewarding to them; hence, they do not experience *ownership* of literacy at school. Similar findings have been made for Indigenous peoples in the United States (Au, 2006). However, Indigenous students often show ownership of the home and community literacy, although not at school (Au, 2006). Multicultural education encourages the use of materials and literature that Indigenous students can relate to (Au, 2006).

It is well-known that failing to include the literacy understandings and practices of students can put students at a severe disadvantage—this can also be very frustrating to learners. For example, Drought informed me that she likes English a lot, but finds it very difficult. I asked her what was difficult, and she explained, "Sometimes when the teacher asks a question I fail to understand, and then I keep quiet and wait for other students to respond." She further explained that after other students answer, she understands a bit and makes an attempt to respond, but the teacher never points at her. She likes mathematics because when other students explain concepts to her, she understands quickly. However, she is underperforming in all school subjects.

The non-San students also perceive the San students to be poor in language and reading. A non-San informant, Love, reported in an interview with me that her San roommate, Happy, had problems in understanding English. "She can't read English. She does not know English," explained Love. She reported that she has seen Happy holding her notebooks, but she is doubtful if she is doing any serious reading. As the library monitor, she has never seen Happy borrow a book from the library, and this confirms her impressions.

Role of Teachers in San Students' School Experience

All six San participants preferred primary school to junior secondary school because they had many friends there and did not face as much abuse. Also, they performed much better at primary school, and their teachers were more understanding. Junior secondary school was described as "boring" by Drought, Receiver, and Happy. This could be due, in part, to the language problems described earlier (if students cannot understand, the course will certainly not be interesting). It also has to do with the attitudes of the teachers. Much research suggests that teachers from dominant ethnic groups, who do not recognize or value Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge, add to the frustrations that Indigenous students experience in institutions of formal education (Lopez, 1999; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999).

When teachers have low expectations of students, it often translates into lower student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Irvine, 1990; Lopez, 1999). In many Indigenous communities throughout the world, children are taught by teachers from mainstream societies, who know very little about their home culture (Brock-Utne, 2002; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). At Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School, most of the teachers and administrators are not in touch with San students' ways of knowing. Wagner (2006) reported that San parents generally feel that quality education is reserved for non-San Batswana. They feel the "Blacks" (as San people refer to non-San Batswana; see Mazonde, 2002) are more privileged than them. Le Roux (1999) identified the paradox: San people are aware that school literacy would help them to regain their power; however, they strongly feel that formal education is used to prevent them from regaining power and education.

Relation Between Home Environment and the School

The participants in this study understood literacy in forms that were meaningful to them (Ketsitlile, 2009). What do San children value and find meaningful in their home and school environments? How does this relate to the possibilities for literacy learning? Initially, when talking to the participants and informants (San and non-San), they equated literacy with school success: getting high grades. However, with further questioning, the meaning of literacy extended to their home cultural environment. Looking across the stories of the participants and informants, I found that literacy is generally viewed as anything that conveys an important message. The students shared with me interesting stories told by their parents and grandparents, and they found value in these stories.

Shostak (1981, 2000), who lived among the !Kung in northwestern Botswana, reported that San people love to tell stories (see also Biesele, 1993). The message in the stories taught them how to survive, good morals, importance of honesty, and respect. Singing and dancing was considered to be literacy to all six participants. The songs are important for the messages they convey.

The photos that students took also were revealing. For example, Mr. President explained a photograph he had taken of some very green plants. To me, they looked like ordinary plants, but he explained that the plant is very important in hunting. For a successful hunt, one needs to burn the root of the plant and then tie it to some branches to trap small animals, like rabbits.

Trust's view of literacy included knowledge of the different plants. He showed me a photograph he took of a plant called *Lerete la ga Rangkurunyane*. The plant is used medicinally to

protect a newborn baby from harm (the plant is ground into powder and given to the baby in liquid form, and some of the powder is applied on the baby's head).

For all six San participants, home knowledge is important; both Mr. President and Drought said it should be included in formal schooling. Drought, for example, strongly believes in traditional healing. Her mother has taught her the different plants that are used for healing small children. She does not know how to mix the herbs and administer healing, but her mother has taught one of her sisters. To her, literacy is knowledge of healing and how to use things in the environment. According to Drought, teachers should connect their teaching to what is happening in students' cultures. She regretted the fact that young people are losing their cultural ways of knowing and felt that this is compounded by the fact that they ignore the advice of elders. She also pointed out that traditional knowledge can benefit "transfer-in" students (from the city of Gaborone and neighboring villages), who have become separated from the environments in which they learn traditional knowledge. For example, such students do not know about *Lerufa,* an underground bulb that contains a lot of water. Such knowledge is important for survival, especially in the very hot Kalahari Desert.

Receiver found science difficult, as it does not remind her of her culture and, thus, has no meaning for her. On the other hand, she finds social studies useful and meaningful because it relates to her culture—there are references to the San in the social studies textbook.

Recommendations

San students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School face many challenges in their formal schooling endeavor. Recommendations based on my research are presented in the following in the areas of pedagogy, teacher preparation, curriculum content, and home–school connections.

Pedagogy. Freire (2003) strongly argued that classroom teaching should be married to students' background knowledge, experience, and environment. One way teachers of San students can do this is through using the games the San play to achieve curriculum objectives. Games have been found to have a galvanizing effect on student achievement (Omaggio, 1982; Rivers, 1983; Wright, Betteridge, & Bucky, 1979). Further study needs to be made of ways in which the games align with learning objectives. For example, teachers could teach students to play traditional games such as "*koi, morabaraba and diketo"* in English. This could have a positive impact on other subjects studied in school, and result in a possible reduction in the failure rate of San children. In addition, San students should be allowed to bring their Indigenous knowledge into formal classrooms, as they have great stories to tell. Through stories, the students learn about life in general. Adopting stories and the games they love in the curriculum will be a way of respecting the San people.

Teacher preparation. Culturally relevant pedagogy needs to be at the center in Botswana's teacher education programs. Batswana teachers need to acknowledge students' cultures and prior knowledge (Bulawa & Chalebgwa, 2000). A multicultural approach needs to be adopted in teacher education. Teachers need to have the skills and knowledge of teaching San students and also to appreciate their uniqueness inside and outside the classroom. They also need to appreciate the fact that San students have a unique way of reading the word and the world.

Curriculum. Allowing San students to bring their Indigenous knowledge into formal schooling will result in meaningful education. Teachers can modify the curriculum to include those things that represent San culture and ways of understanding. This kind of knowledge will also benefit non-San Batswana. In addition, the San students will have ownership on what and how it is taught in schools. Representation of San culture and ways of understanding in textbooks needs to be adopted.

Family–school connections. Excellent family–school connections have been found to be essential for students' school success (Brock-Utne, 2002; Valdes, 1996). Parents need to be encouraged and assisted to visit the school more; for example, the government trucks that frequent the settlements can transport the parents to school to discuss their children's progress. Schools need to be more accommodating to the parents and invite them to come to school. Teachers can invite parents into classrooms to share with all students their cultures and stories. These will make parents feel they have something to contribute to their children's formal schooling education (Valdes, 1996). Teachers need to spend time in the San communities and develop friendly relationships with the families of their students. If schools could hire a parent liaison who could be a go-between, this might facilitate better communication and understanding for all involved (parents, teachers, administrators, and students).

CONCLUSION

As formal education options exist today for them in Botswana, the San people are denied being San. Through formal education, they are forced to assimilate to the dominant culture of the non-San Tswana groups. However, this assimilation is not automatic, as I found out with the participants at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. Their languages and cultures are heavily compromised. Instruction in a foreign language, especially, is the number one barrier that stands in the path of these children's education, as is evidenced from the many examples in this study. In the absence of the option of mother-tongue education, however, incorporating the students' culture, knowledge, forms of literacy, and communities into the curriculum and school activities will be a big step forward. Ultimately, what is needed in Botswana is an education that educates to empower, liberate, transform, shape identities, and extend Botho toward the San and other marginalized groups in Botswana.

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