

IMPROVING RETENTION OF RURAL ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF BOTSWANA EDUCATION POLICY

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Abstract

Drawing on the theories of ethnocentrism and social reproduction, this paper uses critical discourse analysis to elucidate the implications of the Botswana's educational policy for retention of rural ethnic minority children in basic education. It reflects on the development of the international attention to the issue of access and retention, showing how 'retention' emerged as a critical challenge for policy and practice in Botswana. The Botswana education policy is critically analysed in terms of its contribution or otherwise to retention of rural ethnic minorities in the basic education programmes.

1.0 Introduction

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Jomtein – Thailand revealed that 'more than 100 million children and countless adults fail to complete basic education programmes' (WCEFA, 1990:41). The conference identified problems of access and retention as some of the major challenges constraining the education sectors. It recommended, among others, Education for All (EFA) goal No. 2, which was translated in 2000 by the Dakar World Education Forum into Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No. 2. The goal aims at 'Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory education of good quality' (UNESCO, 2003:27). Since then, access and retention have become global policy agenda issues for the education sector, especially in low-income countries.

The first study on the performance of the Botswana education system reveals that 15% of the 7-13 year olds were not in school system (Kann et al, 1989). The 1991 population census revealed that 17% of primary school going age population was out of school. Majority of the missing children was from the rural ethnic minorities found in the west of the country. It was revealed that the problem of access and retention in basic education was worst in Ngamiland in the North West district and South and Kweneng West districts (Republic of Botswana, 1993). These locations are predominantly inhabited by the rural ethnic minorities.

Since 1994, Botswana's education policy is being implemented to, *inter alia*, reduce the growing percentages of non-enrolled school going age children; that is, increasing access and improving retention. Despite the government's efforts, Bangale (1995), Koketso (2001), Letshabo et al (2002) and Pansiri (2008) have reveal the persistence of high dropout and repetition rates as well as poor academic performance in rural ethnic minority schools. According to the 2003 Ministry of Education - Primary Education Statistics, dropout rate is higher at lower grades. For example, Standard Ones alone account for 24% of the children who dropped out in 2003. The statistics show that the dropout rate is higher for boys than for girls (Republic

of Botswana, 2004). This background suggests that although access is open to all, school retention is a major challenge, hence the need for this analysis.

2.0 Socio-political Context

Botswana, a former British colony, gained independence in 1966. Its constitution allows the dual system of governance, of a National Assembly and a traditional structure of the Ntlo ya Dokgosi (House of Chiefs). The country adopted a constitutional classification of ethnic, cultural and linguistic stratifications of its people into major and minor tribal groupings. Consequently, the eight major tribes in Botswana are Bangwato, Bangwaketse, Bakgatla, Balete, Batlokwa, Batawana, Barolong and Bakwena (Republic of Botswana, 1965). All these tribes have Setswana as their language. The ethnic minority tribes include Basarwa, Bakgalagadi, Babirwa, Batswapong, Bakalanga, Bakhurutshe, Bayeyi, Baherero, Basubiya and Bambukushu. These use languages different from Setswana. However, following the minorities' dissatisfaction with this constitutional minoritisation – majoritisation of tribes and its consequent stereotyping and prejudicial nature of othering the minorities, the constitution had to be amended to expand the Ntlo ya Dokgosi from being a principal house of eight major tribes to include more representation of minority people by areas and regions (Republic of Botswana, 2005). Following the 2005 Constitutional Amendment, the Ntlo ya Dikgosi became a national assembly advisory body made up of traditional leaders/chiefs that represent not less than 33 and not more than 35 tribal and regional groups and or areas (Republic of Botswana, 2005). Members of the Ntlo ya Dikgosi are therefore the chiefs or their representatives.

At independence, the government adopted four national principles namely unity, democracy, development and self-reliance, to guide the building of Botswana as a nation-state. Under the principle of unity, Setswana became a national language and English an official language. These are the only two languages used in the country's education system. It is on the basis of this context that the theories of ethnocentrism and social reproduction are used in this paper to interrogate the Botswana education policy in relation to retention of learners in rural ethnic minority schools.

3.0 Theoretical Perspectives

3.1 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is drawn from the writing of William G. Sumner about the folkways of social situations (Sumner, 1906; Levine and Campbell, 1972; van der Dennen, 1987). Sumner illustrated his ideas by giving an example of a relationship between groups; and argues that each group must regard every other group as a possible enemy which must be viewed with suspicion and distrust. He emphasized the superiority-delusional aspect of ethnocentrism which he described in terms of perceiving things from one's own group, as the center of everything, with pride and vanity, and boasting of superiority (van der Dennen, 1987).

Following Sumner's ideas, Gillborn (1990:10) defines ethnocentrism as the 'tendency to evaluate other ethnic groups from [the] stand point of one's own ethnic group and experience'. Ethnocentrism has since been re-conceptualized in the context of power-relations in the political and socio-economic control. It reflects the manner in which dominant groups express their perceptions over those that are dominated, marginalized, excluded and disadvantaged. The theory illustrates the notion and expression of cultural

hierarchical differences that classifies and distinguishes the ethnic groups according to the 'haves' against 'have not' or the economically and politically 'powerful against the powerless' or 'strong against the weak'.

Gillborn's argument that ethnocentrism is 'a useful analytic tool which allows [critical thinkers] to examine some of the more complex ways...' (p. 10) is useful. It has been argued that policy making premised on the ideologies and cultures of the dominant groups is elitist and corporatist and therefore does not accommodate the interest of the pluralists or diverse groups in the society (Ham and Hill, 1984; Lukes, 1993). It is against this view that the theory of ethnocentrism applies in analyzing the relationship between the major and minority tribes in Botswana. As Livine and Campbell (1972, p.1) indicate, the theory describes attitudes and emotions, cultural symbols, and ideologies of one group against the other. They refer to the dominant groups as 'in-group', and in the case of Botswana, these are the eight major tribes. The dominated ones are the 'out-group', or the minority tribes, as per the Botswana Constitution. In their development of the theory, Livine and Campbell developed some facets to illustrate 'ethnocentrism'. On one hand the in-groups are virtuous, superior; their value is universal and intrinsically true; have customs that are original and centrally human; are strong, cooperative, willing and capable to fight and die for their in-group values. On the other hand are the out-groups/dominated and these are contemptible, immoral, inferior and weak; are at social distance, full of hate, do not cooperate, unwilling, disobedient, fearful and distrustful. These characterizations underscore how people differentiate and position themselves in a society. Issues of identity building, construction of nation-state and policies for social development are associated with such positioning. They also influence ways in which social policies are formulated.

4.0 Education and Reproduction

I also draw my critical thinking from Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Harker, 1990) analysis on the role of school. Bourdieu argues that a school can either change the social inequalities or reproduce the social inequalities. In this view, a school is either a dynamic or conservative institution. The conservatism function is drawn from the idea that a school preserves and helps learners to experience knowledge which is already there. It re-produces that which already exists. On the dynamism role, a school generates new knowledge. Bourdieu sees this as the production function of the school.

Bourdieu argues that the society is a pluralistic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic arrangement characterized by classes of the dominant and the dominated groups. The social relationships of groups create culture of hierarchical structure. In this argument, the dominant group has the cultural capital. Their culture controls the economic, political and social resources that make a school. The dominant groups are taken to be more natural or original than the minority. The elites and the dominant majority such as the eight major tribes, in the case of Botswana, are closer to the school than the poor and less educated, such as the rural ethnic minority groups, who do not have the cultural capital. This confirms Bourdieu's and the ethnocentric view that schools and education policies are a reflection of the habitus of the dominant group (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Consequently, children are homogenized and exposed to national and standardized education systems, which cherish the policies of assimilation and sameness that are translated and enforced through the school curriculum (Molefe et al, 2005).

In the case of Botswana, the habitus of the dominant capital translates into the acceptable social structure. It justifies the origin of the eight major tribes as the advantaged and the rural ethnic minorities as

the disadvantaged. The education policy and indeed the school systems simply naturalize this origin. Children with cultural capital, that is, from the dominant groups and/or elites are reinforced with success. They have access to information, develop high expectation and are more motivated. They make informed decisions and choices and do better in their academic engagement and acquire the educational capital such as qualification and certificates, which Bourdieu call the symbolic power. This power becomes the symbolic capital, translating into political power that again enhances the productivity of the educational capital.

In Bourdieu's view, the major negative factor that characterizes children from the dominated ethnic minorities is that they lack the cultural capital. That is, their culture is not close to the school system. The school systems reinforce intrinsic handicap and diminish their linguistic and cultural identity, reduce their human dignity and relegate them to the margins of silence. In the final analysis, the children are culturally marginalized, politically excluded and economically disadvantaged and socially underprivileged. However, Bourdieu says that through extremes of struggle, some children may acquire the educational capital. He observed that in the majority of cases, those children who succeed 'tend to make choices which do not capitalize on initial success' (Harker, 1990:91), that is, due to lack of proper information they make wrong choices. He also argues that success in school, for example, in cases where children are assimilated into the habitus of the dominant culture, means that the 'individuals reject their social origins' (p. 91). Some of them reject the school system as they resist the process of assimilation and leave early, that is, before they complete educational programmes. Some of them are pushed out of the school system because they are subjected to educational programmes that do not address their needs. Summer's and Bourdieu's theories, are relevant theoretical frames for viewing any education policy. I therefore apply them to how the Botswana education policy was formulated and its impact on improving retention for the rural ethnic minorities.

5.0 Critical Discourse Analysis of the RNPE

According to Olssen et al (2004) and Janks, (1997) Norman Fairclough developed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) model with three processes applicable to policy analysis. First there must be an object of analysis or a text. Secondly, the analysis involves looking at the processes through which the object was produced. This addresses the manner in which the policy is produced by discussing the approaches involved in the consultation and formulation of the policy. Finally, the analysis deals with the socio-historical conditions that govern the three stage processes. Drawing from the policy document, I will pick on only three discourses of relevance to the issue of 'retention' and link the policy to the ideologies that informed its formulations.

The Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) is the object of analysis. This is one of Botswana's public policy documents, whose key object is to guide the education system. It is called Botswana Government White Paper No 2 of 1994. The document outlines the recommendations of a Report of the National Commission on Education of 1993. The commissioners were the elites made up of politicians, bureaucrats, business people, and academics. During their work, the commissioners visited and consulted with people in towns, major villages and toured the Western countries to learn from their systems. The visits to the West allowed the commissioners an opportunity to learn and borrow ideas and experiences for purposes of linking the local education system to the global norm. This approach confirms the argument about mechanisms of globalization in policy making raised by Dale (1999). There are no indications of

similar visits to local rural ethnic minority settlements or to countries with similar issues such as Australia to learn about education of the Aborigines. The membership of the commission did not include any one from the non-elites ethnic minorities in the country. In its formation, nature and outlook, the Commission was too bureaucratic and elitist to serve the interest of the rural ethnic minorities. It has been argued that elitist policies privilege the visions, values and interest of the dominant groups (Ball, 1990; Taylor et al., 1997). Therefore the outcome of the commission would be expected to represent the visions, values and interests of the elites and corporatists more than those of the pluralists including the minorities.

The first discourse is drawn from the RNPE philosophy. The statement of the philosophy says Botswana is moving from the ‘traditional agro-based economy to industrial economy’. In the ‘terms of reference’ for the commission, out of seven objectives, four were emphasizing transformation from ‘traditional agro-based economy to industrial economy’. The first instruction directed commissioners to take note of the context of Botswana’s changing and complex economy. The second and fourth instructions, asked them to be conscious of the issue of universal access to basic education and vocationalization of the curriculum. The third instruction encouraged them to ensure attention on manpower needs. This philosophical shift from ‘traditional agro-based economy to industrial economy’ influenced the Commission to give priority to economic ideologies of globalization and industrialization at the expense of Botswana’s rural economy of subsistence agriculture dominant among the rural areas.

The second discourse is ‘access and equity’. In discussing this issue, problems of retention in rural areas are identified and singled out on page 2 of the policy document. The RNPE states that ‘Government considers access to basic education as a fundamental human right’ (Republic of Botswana, 1994:5). On the contrary, the overall objectives of national education, the policy is silent on ‘access and equity’. Instead, it raises cases of improving standards, science and technology, relevancy, partnership, life-long learning and control of examinations. Retention is not even mentioned despite being identified as a major problem in rural schools. It is only the twelfth and last aim of the RNPE that seeks ‘to improve the response of schools to the needs of different ethnic groups in the society’ (Republic of Botswana, 1994:6). Again, no mention or emphasis is given to ‘retention’. Under RNPE Recommendation 15, the policy advances strategies to improve ‘access and equity’. These are: the establishment of one to two teacher school; more special schools for the disabled; better supervision of primary school hostels; sensitising teachers to cultural differences; bursaries or destitute allowances to cover costs of school attendance for the very poor; and deferment of enactment of compulsory education until the above policy strategies fail to yield desired results. Low retention is record high in rural minority schools (Bangale, 1995; Koketso, 2001; Letshabo et al., 2002; Republic of Botswana, 2004), suggesting that the RNPE is not yielding desired results, but still there is no sign that government will consider enactment of compulsory education.

The third discourse is ‘medium of instruction in the school curriculum’. The RNPE, through Recommendation 18, allows only Setswana and English languages in the school curriculum. It says English should be used as a medium of instruction from Standard 2 and that Setswana should be taught as a compulsory subject to all citizens of Botswana throughout the primary school system. This policy rejects the realities of ethnic pluralistic and the multicultural nature of Botswana. It discriminates against the children from the non-Setswana ethnic tribes in the country. The medium of instruction has been reported, for example, as contributing to academic disengagement among the minorities in Botswana education system (Tshireletso, 1997; Polelo, 2005). Nyathi-Ramahobo (1994), observed that children from minority

ethnic villages perform more poorly than children from Setswana speaking areas in the Primary School Leaving Examination due to low achievement in Setswana. She argues that learning is more difficult when a child learns two second languages at the same time.

It has been argued that for some of the minority ethnic groups, colonization and independence means the end of recognition of their indigenous languages. Youngman (2003:152) quotes a Chief Education Officer in the Ministry of Education in Botswana saying ‘to achieve national unity, there had to be the submergence of local tribal languages...despite the fact that this seemed likely to decrease the motivation of some of the potential learners’. He argues that 20% of the Botswana population is non-Setswana speaking and their languages are discouraged, not used in state media and not reflected in the national census. Therefore the RNPE reflects a political ideology used in the modern nation-state construction, a clear disregard of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country - making states appear more important than their peoples (Altbach and Kelly, 1986; Green, 1997; Welch, 1999; Bray, 2003). Green (1997) and Price (2003) argue that the doctrine of nation-state leads to a philosophy of denial of cultural diversity and identity. In the ethnocentric view, the school places the minority at social distance, or as Bourdieu sees it, the policy handicaps the minorities. The language issue in nation-building cannot be ignored in assessing factors contributing to low retention in ethnic minority schools.

In the following paragraphs I apply the CDA to tease out the strengths and weaknesses of the policy. The RNPE was formulated within the duality framework of a traditional political system of chieftainship and Westminster parliamentary arrangement. The arrangement accommodates the constitutional ethnic stratifications of the major and minority tribal groupings. It is a political fashion whereby the habitus of the eight major tribes is made perfect, natural and original so much that the ethnic minorities have to be assimilated into them.

The shift from traditional to industrial economy, an ideology of globalization and industrialization championed by the elites and economic giants from the dominant groups, is a laudable move, but its weakness is that it does not address the needs of the rural population. The absence of policy commitment and attention to problems of retention of the rural ethnic minorities makes Botswana’s position on equality and equity unclear. The policy focused more on the national to international forms of modernization and industrialization and lacks attention on the local communities, where the ethnic minorities are found.

While access and equity is a vital policy position, silence on attention and commitment to problems of retention contribute to low yield on universal access to basic education. Access without attention to ‘retention’ weakens the policy. For example, 88% of children in remote area schools who progress to from primary to junior secondary school have only obtained C and D pass grades (Pansiri, 2008) and these are at risk of early withdrawal due inter alia to their low acquisition of Setswana and English language skills (Maruatona, 1994; Nyathi-Ramahobo, 1994; 2005). In the final analysis, schooling and its consequent early withdrawals that affects largely the marginalized minorities (Bangale, 1995; Koketso, 2001; Letshabo et al., 2002; Republic of Botswana, 2004) widens the inequalities between the major/elites and the minority ethnic groups, hence Bourdieu’s view that education produces social inequalities.

The adoption of only two official languages is a step in a hidden policy of assimilation of the minority groups. Lessons can be drawn from the history of assimilation which was used for the absorption

of the Aborigines in Australia (Broome, 2004; Banton, 2004). Assimilation policies translated into strategies such as removing children from their parents into orphanages, training homes, apprenticeship and foster family care. Banton indicated that assimilation has been used to Americanize Africans and Asians and to Anglicize the same into the English culture. In the case of Botswana, the children of the rural ethnic minority groups are drawn into hostels, and fixed to a school curriculum that does not link them to their indigenous knowledge, language or culture. Yet studies in education, linguistic, anthropology and cognitive psychology indicate that children who get learning support in their indigenous language tend to perform significantly better in their academic activities (Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, 1992; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Van Den Berghe (1970:70) argues that 'a policy of cultural assimilation is a proof, not of liberation, but rather of ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance'. The RNPE, for example, can be seen to contribute towards elevating the children of the majority to social experiences of cultural superiority while those of the minority are reduced to inferior self-identities.

Conclusion

The RNPE is an important and indeed a very useful document for guiding not only educational, but also political and economic development. However, the policy is inadequate to help improve retention of learners in basic education, an issue known as critical in the rural ethnic minority schools. Retention of the rural ethnic minority children in the basic education programmes has not emerged as a critical priority in the education policy, despite the fact that the problem has been variously documented. My analysis show that the problem is not in the implementation of the policy, but rather in its formulation. Dale (1999) argues that national policies are affected and influenced by external forces, such as globalisation. He demonstrates, for example, how global mechanisms such as harmonisation, dissemination and standardisation influence policy formulations in some parts of the world. Chilisa (2002:22) has also noted that 'there is a close correspondence between a country's socio-political environment and the type of policy adopted'. In the context of Botswana, education policy formulation has been driven by political ideologies of assimilation and economic ideologies of industrialisation which privilege the visions and interests of the dominant ethnic tribes. These ideologies are informed by theories of nation-state and modernism, hence adopting ethnocentric strategies of assimilation and globalisation.

Studies have established that some teachers in rural ethnic minority communities contribute to early school withdrawals (Tshireletso, 1997; Letshabo et al., 2002; Polelo, 2005; Pansiri, 2008). Thus, an inclusive education policy is needed to demonstrate commitment to 'access and equity' through a specific focus on the issue of 'retention of the rural ethnic minorities'. The ideology of inclusion allows policy activities that encourage a society to move towards ensuring equal opportunity for all. Inclusion encourages groups with divergent or conflicting interests, predisposition and purpose to become part of collectivity, yet without compromising their differences or their identity (Assefa, 1996; Hannum, 1996; Cashmore, 2004). The ideology of inclusion encourages a shift from modernism to postmodernism, which gives rise to recognition of relativism, differences and contexts (Crossley, 2003). It accommodates diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism that characterize Botswana. In addition to policy review, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development should organize regular professional development activities to equip teachers with knowledge and skills for improving school retention, particularly in the rural ethnic minority communities.

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