

OVERHAULING OF BOTSWANA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNT FROM OTHER COUNTRIES?

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Abstract

Botswana attained its independence from the British colonial administration in 1966, and to date the country has made significant strides in its effort to increase access to basic education for all children. In the more than fifty years that the country has been independent, there has been implementation of a series of government policies. These policies articulate goals and strategies that need to be pursued to ensure access to education and the provision of the resources and materials required for quality education to be realised. In this article we argue that while government has invested heavily in the current education system to enable an increase in the number of students into basic education, the education provided has been predominantly academic. The system which is a legacy of mission and colonial education is perceived as benefiting mainly the academically intelligent students, at the exclusion of students with high learning abilities in other fields of education such as technical or vocational. The article argues for an overhaul of the current education system due to its failure to cater for many children with different learning abilities and styles. Comparison is made between Botswana, and its two neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe and South Africa, whose education systems went through radical transformation following independence. It is therefore recommended that Botswana should, like the two neighbouring countries consider overhauling its education system in the interest of all students, including those who are not academically gifted.

Keywords: *Basic education; quality education; education system; colonial education; vocational education; Botswana.*

Introduction

Botswana attained its independence from the British colonial administration in 1966, and to date the country has made significant strides in its effort to increase access to basic education for all children. In the more than fifty years that the country has been independent, there has been implementation of a series of government policies that articulate goals and strategies to be pursued not only to ensure access but also to provide the needed resources and materials for quality education. The different education policies, notably Education for Kagisano of 1977 and the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 emphasised not just access, but also the need to enhance quality education (Republic of Botswana, 1977; 1994).

In this article it is argued that while education is desirable and government has invested heavily to enable an increase in the number of students into basic education, the education provided is mainly academic. The current system which is also a legacy of missionary and colonial education is beneficial to the academically gifted students, at the exclusion of students with high learning abilities in other fields of education such as technical or vocational. The nucleus of this discussion is that where education is found to be irrelevant and not to be serving the interest of the nation, in particular those of the learners, it should be replaced. The paper makes comparison of the development of education in Botswana with that of education systems in two neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The history of education in these two countries shares some common characteristics with that of Botswana, notably their pre-independence education systems which were a legacy of missionary and colonial education. An overview of the development of education in both countries is a case in point of discriminatory education systems that disadvantaged the majority of Black children (Msila, 2007). While pre-independence Zimbabwe and South Africa were dominated by racism which affected the education system, Dixey (1997) maintains that the education system in Bechuanaland was also neglected during the period of British involvement.

The paper shows in our submission the extent to which these countries overhauled these imposed systems of education soon after independence, in contrast to changes made to Botswana's education system which could be described as superficial and half-hearted. It is therefore, recommended that the system be replaced with one that is more diversified and takes into account the different learning abilities and interests of learners. Strengths and challenges experienced in both Zimbabwe and South Africa during the reform process could provide some valuable lessons from which Botswana can learn in the quest to replace its current education system.

Literature Review

Pre-colonial Education

Many African countries had their own traditional forms of education with its own values and norms in harmony with societal cultural practices. Many of such practices ceased to exist with the introduction of the western form of education which was imposed on indigenous people by missionaries and European colonial administration. Botswana, was no exception to this development of events, and like other colonised African countries, the country had its indigenous education replaced by a system imposed by missionaries and the colonial power, Britain (Mgadla, 2003). For instance, the traditional initiation ceremonies which were abandoned due to the influence of Christianity, created a gap in family life education (Schapera, 1971).

Botswana's pre-colonial education as in other sub-Saharan African societies was an indigenous form of education which guided the social, economic and political activities of the society. It was contextualised to societal needs and played a pivotal role in the socialisation of the youth into norms and values of the communities in which they lived (Bulawa & Tsayang, 2006), and differed from one ethnic group to another (Bulawa, 2011). This informal education was an opportunity for young people in society to learn a broad range of aspects of their traditional life by observing the deeds of the elders, including proper behaviour, and respect for the elders. Beside informal education, different communities in Botswana also practised some form of formal or tribal education which had pupils. These pupils were taught by teachers who were determined by the elders of society to mainly

teach oral instruction to young people who had reached puberty. This took place after every three to five years (Mgadla, 2003), and the pupils formally learnt such rules and norms of society as respect for elders, the laws of and proper conduct in society, and other societal practices (Tsayang & Bulawa, 2007).

The literature shows that communities made their education system to be as relevant as possible to their needs and wants. It was therefore, significant that the curriculum should be tailor made to societal interests. In all these practices, dikgosi (chiefs) had an essential influence on how the system of education should work in their respective communities. In pre-independence period, some of these traditional leaders had organised their people to build their own schools without any external aid from either the colonial administration or missionaries. These community schools existed until independence when the role of dikgosi in education gradually faded out paving way for government full responsibility (Mgadla, 2003).

Missionary and Colonial Education

The history of the current education system in Botswana can be traced back to the early 1800s when the country was still known as Bechuanaland Protectorate. As it is argued in this article, education can only be a welcome development, provided it is relevant and of benefit to the learners and the larger society. It is maintained that missionary and colonial education was never meant to benefit African children but was instead deliberately designed to serve the interest of the colonial power. This was education whose main purpose was to replace indigenous education with its practices and replace it with one that was European culture oriented (Dixey, 1997; Tsayang & Bulawa, 2007). For instance, the core of the London Missionary Society curriculum as introduced by Dr David Livingstone and other missionaries were reading and writing skills, as well as the teaching of scripture (Mgadla, 2003). The missionaries perceived Christianity as reflective of a civilised culture superior to traditional religions worshipped by different ethnic groups (Tsayang & Bulawa, 2007).

With the passage of time, missionary education was replaced by the British colonial government type of education. As revealed by Mgadla (2003), the aim of the colonial government was to develop primary education curriculum. In so doing the government set out to purchase more books, training of teachers and the establishment of a general curriculum that provided skills that were needed in rural areas which included agriculture and carpentry. Between 1950 and 1965 the colonial government gave some attention to the development of secondary and vocational education (Mgadla, 2003). The major aim of British colonial education was to ensure that Africans received the barest minimal level of education that was for the purpose of administrative capabilities of traditional leaders (Bolt & Bezemer, 2009). Tragically, the colonial education did not address the needs of Botswana seeing colonial culture as superior to that of indigenous cultures. Further reflective of the British colonial government failure to address the needs of Botswana such as the provision of tertiary education, was its reluctance to spend money in building teacher training institutions preferring to send students to such institutions as Tiger Kloof and Fort Hare in apartheid South Africa, and other institutions in Rhodesia which is present day Zimbabwe (Major & Tiro, 2012). The lack of development of education in Bechuanaland as described by Dixey (2007) could be “in terms of purely administrative mishandling, lack of funds, lack of sensitivity to the aspirations of the local population and poor decision-making” (p. 33).

State of Education in Zimbabwe before Independence

Before independence public education offered to black children in Rhodesia, present day Zimbabwe was very poor in comparison to what was offered to their white counterparts. The literature mirrors various colonial education acts which were the corner stone of the colonial society. The core of these acts was their resolve to define the subservient role African people had to play, which denied them equal access and opportunity to education, thus limiting their academic and professional development. These racist educational acts defined the position of Africans in the larger society as just servants and labourers of the Rhodesian white colonisers (Richards & Govere, 2003). This situation bears a resemblance to that of its neighbouring country, Botswana where the education provided was not in the interest of the country's economic development but intended to train them to be loyal, obedient, and respectful to the colonial power (Tabulawa & Pansiri, 2013).

Typical of British colonies, missionaries in Rhodesia had a major role to play in the education of Africans. Evidence of this was the 1899 education legislation which was set up to create two separate systems of education, one for the whites and the other for blacks. Not out of their own choice, the African education which was specifically devoted to industrial training was left in the hands of Christian missionaries. Industrial training was very important for whites because it was intended for the African to become a better worker and become a more useful servant to the whites (Zvobgo, 1981).

European schools in Rhodesia were funded by the government to cover such school needs as salaries of the principal and teachers as well as equipment, while African schools did not receive such grants (Zvobgo, 1981). Studies show that in the 1960s, the ruling Rhodesian Front government spent 12 times more per primary school pupil in the European system in comparison to the African system, while at secondary level the disparity was about three times more per pupil (Dorsey, 1989). It was segregation in general, including the discriminatory type of education in Rhodesia that compelled many black people to join the liberation movements to fight for a free and democratic Zimbabwe (Castles, van Rensburg & Richer, 1982).

State of Education in South Africa before Independence

The South African education situation exhibits similar features of what prevailed in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and many other African countries. It was a British education system set up to separate people on the basis of race, and created divisions and inequalities in society at large. This education that was intended to spread the British Empire across the world is traced back to the colonial period in South Africa and other African countries (Msila, 2007). The consolidation of this racially-segregated system of schooling started in the 1950s into four main racially-segregated and unequally financed education for African, Indian, Coloured and White children (Chisholm, 2012). Some salient features of the education system before independence were its fragmentation and inequality (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). The education system set up by the British was used to spread their traditions including language in South Africa and other parts of Africa. Comparison with pre-independence education in Botswana can also be made since missionaries and the colonial administration were again influential in the introduction of western education as in South Africa, with English imposed as the official language, in such institutions as the church, government offices and schools (Msila, 2007). In Botswana, English was and remains the official language used in various public institutions including schools, health, parliament and mass media (Tabulawa & Pansiri, 2013). Mission education in Rhodesia was introduced with the specific purpose to spread western style of life among Africans who were considered backward and were supposed to be taught accepted work

values. This system of education's mission was to turn Africans into docile and tamed people using the Christian philosophy. During this period many people perceived the curriculum as irrelevant in the sense it was deliberately designed to serve and strengthen the citizenship of the white race over others (Msila, 2007).

According to Chisholm (2012), education was intended to purposely maintain the supremacy and dominance of the Whites in the economy as well as the running of the state. Furthermore, revealing the ills of segregated education in South Africa and its effect on schools for the African children, Chisholm points to a broad-range of legacies of apartheid that included inequalities in such areas as infrastructure, learning and teaching resources. African children were also exposed to poor quality of schooling as reflected in teachers who were unequally schooled, qualified and trained. Union in 1910, of English and Afrikaans-speakers did not help the already segregated situation as it "effectively excluded Africans from a life as citizens in the polity and economy" (p. 84).

Chisholm's (2012) study reveals some deep differences when South Africa attained independence, as reflected in its inheritance of a country with major disparities between education provided to Blacks and Whites in respect of access to technical and higher education, the quality of teachers, and post-school and employment opportunities. Sayed and Kanjee (2013) also point to the substantial distinction in the provision of education in the different departments which were segregated. This segregated system of education depicted evidence of resources which were disproportionately shared with the largest share going to departments that served minority white children, and leaving African departments grossly underfunded. Although racism was not as pronounced and entrenched in Bechuanaland the way it was in Rhodesia and South Africa, both Chisholm's (2012) and Sayed's and Kanjee's (2013) viewpoints on the state of education pre-independence period, to some extent draw comparisons to what transpired in Botswana during the colonial administration.

Education Transformation at Independence

When independence came, most African countries had to change their colonial education systems and replaced them with systems that were more contextualised to the needs of their new independent nations. At independence in 1984 Zimbabwe, the new government inherited a legacy of inequality from the colonial white minority government. The government engaged in an introspection of this system which was characterised by a legacy that had encompassed different aspects of life, including an education system which was segregated on the basis of racial criteria (Dorsey, 1989). Subsequent to this introspection Zimbabwe began the development of its own educational legislation and policies which took into account the principle of education for all children regardless of the colour of their skin (Richards & Govere, 2003).

In transforming the education system, the new government ensured that education was not only provided free of charge, but was also declared compulsory at both primary and secondary level. Emphasis was also on the expansion of university education, the establishment of an institute of technology, provision of pre-schooling and adult education. This transformation was imperative in view of the need to adhere to fundamental human rights, and the ideology and principles of socialism. A major government reform, the new Education Act of 1987 emphasised the urgency to introduce a differentiated curriculum after form two. The implementation of this new curriculum was such that fewer academic pupils would take more vocational subjects. This system has been hailed for the considerable milestone it made toward the creation of a system that was responsive to among other

things, the provision of a quality education that could potentially meet the intellectual and technical needs of the Zimbabwean society (Dorsey, 1989).

The decision by Zimbabwe to overhaul the imperial education system that segregated society on the basis of the colour of their skin, was in line with the action of the new government in South Africa. After 1994, the educational transformation in the new South Africa had to overhaul the old and segregated education system which gave very little educational opportunities to African children (Chisholm, 2012; Msila, 2007).

The state of education in 1994 compelled the South African government to opt for the introduction of radical changes to the school curriculum. They replaced it with one that was based on principles of constructivism instead of that founded on prescriptive principles. Imbedded in this new outcomes-based curriculum were pathways to skills and employment (Chisholm, 2012). While in South Africa and Zimbabwe they saw the need to overhaul their education systems and replace them with those that did not segregate learners, Botswana maintained a more conservative approach. The government retained major elements of the foundation laid by the missionaries and colonial administration, with very minimal changes to the academic oriented colonial curriculum. The main weakness of this curriculum is its emphasis on one-off theory based examinations, which are not differentiated in the interest of students' diverse learning abilities.

It must be noted that the furious speed at which the South African government moved to introduce this new curriculum had its own implications. These include the need for highly-qualified teachers and well-resourced schools for its intended purpose to be effectively achieved. Subsequent to its implementation, the curriculum has been periodically reviewed to determine, among other things, whether to maintain the principles of the transformation intact, and reform the processes that supported its implementation, or to specifically assess and evaluate skills development and set up a skills development system. A review of the outcomes-based curriculum in 2000, considered as the starting point for change to be the rote-learning that was prevalent in township and rural areas (Chisholm, 2012). The South African situation presents Botswana with valuable information about the importance of implementing change when there is need to do so, as well as the need for constant review of any reform to determine what could be changed or maintained to improve its effectiveness.

It is the position of this article that at independence in 1966 the new government in Botswana missed a great opportunity to assess the existing education system and overhaul it. There were several factors that warranted the need for the new government to overhaul the country's education. These include the fact that it was an education system that was predominantly based on a model from the colonising power Britain, with the curriculum that retained strong European origins. Furthermore, was that the colonial power's institutions and culture were inevitably entrenched in the education system (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000; Bulawa, 2011). Instead of a radical transformation, government's efforts in 1968 and 1969 were mainly to develop the syllabuses, with the aim to develop a balanced education system that took into account some elements of the culture of Botswana, while retaining what was considered the useful foreign cultural practices (Republic of Botswana, 1977; Bulawa, 2011).

The government's reluctance to make a radical change in its education system was reflected in its determination to retain subjects that were seen as serving mainly the interest of the colonialists. For instance, Dixey (1997) reveals that Missionaries established Western-style schools in Bechuanaland, "so that converts could read the Bible" (p. 34). During the early years after independence the government resolved to retain subjects such as religious education which was

introduced and taught in secondary schools initially from the context of Christianity to perpetuate the legacy of the Western Missionaries (Matemba, 2009; Sealey, 1993; Chirenje, 1976). Another subject that has dominated classroom instruction in Botswana is English (Setati & Adler, 2000). It has been retained as a subject and also given a status as the country's official language and medium of instruction at all levels of education (Arthur, 1997; Batsalelwang & Kamwendo, 2013) at the expense of most local languages. As revealed by Nyati-Ramahobo (2000) at independence there was no policy in place pertaining to the medium of instruction in schools, except for a general understanding among government officials that English would occupy that position. The consequence however, was that given teachers' low qualifications and lack of proficiency in communicating in English at the time, the use of Setswana had to be used in lower grades. Nyati-Ramahobo (2000) further indicates that teachers were essentially compelled to switch between the use of Setswana and English not only in higher grades at primary school level but also at secondary schools.

The closest Botswana introduced an education that was consistent with what this article advocates for as being more suitable for students across the education spectrum, was when Patrick van Rensburg introduced in a few schools, education with production. These were schools established by van Rensburg himself specifically for the purpose of offering such an education system (Castles, van Rensburg & Richer, 1982). The rationale for education with production was to ensure that schools prepared learners for working life by equipping them with basic technical and social skills, and that the plausible way to do it was to introduce production into the curriculum. Schools established were expected to be self-reliant, with students and teachers required to build schools themselves and produce food for their consumption (Castles, van Rensburg & Richer, 1982).

Schools envisaged and constructed in Botswana by Patrick van Rensburg were designed to train learners through productive work, which included a secondary school where manual work formed part of the curriculum, a self-financed vocational institution called "Brigades" to train young people in manual skills, and a co-operative to produce and sell locally-needed goods (van Rensburg, 1980). It is without any doubt that by adopting this multiple pathways form of education, van Rensburg had in mind a global perspective of education that would help Botswana achieve a diversified economy and be a competitive country in a global economy that has become more competitive (Tabulawa & Pansiri, 2013).

Education with production, though introduced fifty years ago, bears similarities to the Botswana's Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP), a reform of the government of Botswana in partnership with the European Union. This reform initiative is a step in the right direction given that it promotes among other things, a more differentiated curriculum at all levels of the country's basic education. Key features of this impending reform are curriculum initiatives that include outcomes-based education and the multiple pathways. These are aimed at giving students the leeway to pursue a diversified curriculum that offers a wide choice for learners based on what they can comprehend both intellectually and technically (Republic of Botswana, 2015).

The paper recognizes the existence of ETSSP and embraces its ideals which are consistent with those advocated in this article. While this government blueprint is commendable, it is however important to emphasise that the existence of a reform document alone is not good enough, unless it is implemented to the letter. It has been several years since ETSSP was rolled out, and the concern is that coherent information on implementation road map has not been forthcoming. Evidence of lack of implementation of what seems to be the most progressive reform since independence, is reflected in government's failure to promptly act on initiatives it has committed itself to achieve. As part of its

commitment to inclusive education, the government has made an undertaking to among other things, ensure the integration of disadvantaged vulnerable children (DVCs), and learners with special needs in the school system. Emphasis is on the achievement of an inclusive education system that would enable children, young people and adults to access relevant, high quality education and learn effectively, regardless of their life circumstances, which include health and disability. More importantly, is government's assurance that Inclusive Education is a mandatory training module for all pre-service training (PRESET) teacher trainees and all PRESET educators and PRESET providers that include the public, private and parastatal sectors (Republic of Botswana, 2015).

Although these government's intentions reflect a paradigm shift of the proportion never experienced before in Botswana education system, not much action has been taken to achieve these intended milestones. It is our concern for instance, that there is no implementation timeline; no detailed account of initiatives taken to prepare the human resource to drive the implementation process; and no comprehensive explanation of how implementation of ETSSP programmes and activities will be monitored and evaluated.

Against this background, this article recommends that priority be given to implementation of ETSSP, because it is a more radical reform with potential to comprehensively transform Botswana's education system especially in the interest of students' different learning abilities and talents. It is for example, vital that information about implementation timeline, and monitoring and evaluation processes is clearly articulated and made known to the public.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the need for Botswana's education system to be overhauled to adopt a multiple pathways type of education that takes into account the different learning abilities and interests of all learners. The position of this article is that the current system that has served this country since independence in 1966 is a legacy of missionary and colonial education which was designed to benefit the academically gifted students, at the exclusion of those whose interest was on other fields of education including technical or vocational. Education is herein regarded education as a change agent with an indispensable role of serving society. To achieve this, it should from time to time be reviewed and reformed than to remain a one-size-fits-all system as it is the case now in Botswana.

To illustrate the point, the article has presented the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa, two countries that saw the need to replace their education systems which were also inherited from the missionary and colonial government. It is argued that such transformation was imperative to eliminate education systems that had been neglected for many years and discriminated against the majority of Black students. It has also been shown through the comparative studies of these countries, that, while Botswana made some changes to its education system, such changes could be described as largely superficial and half-hearted. It is therefore, the contention of this paper that the education reform processes in Zimbabwe and South Africa provide valuable lessons from which Botswana can learn in its endeavour to transform the current education system.

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