

Rights in Education and Self-Identity: Education and Language of Instruction in Namibia

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Abstract

In 1992, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Namibia created a new language policy for schools that presented the possibility of using English as the sole medium of instruction for students starting in Grade 1. The resulting increase in schools that offer only English instruction has been detrimental to education. In order to improve the quality of education available to students in Namibia, the implementation of the language policy must be revisited so that students have the opportunity to first learn in their mother tongues and develop the necessary skills that they will need to be successful.

Keywords: rights in education, language policy, education, development

1. Introduction

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all people everywhere have the right to an education that is “directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN General Assembly, 1948). In order for education to accomplish these objectives it must be accessible, available, acceptable, and adaptable, and geared towards achieving both instrumental and intrinsic values. Additionally, the chosen language of instruction plays a crucial role in the ability of education to succeed in fulfilling its objectives and helping students to realize their human rights. Namibia’s recent independence has led to changes in the way the education system operates, particularly in terms of language instruction. The current emphasis on English instruction in the implementation of Namibia’s educational language policy is inhibiting students from meeting their full potential in terms of personal development and professional success. There are several challenges that have made it difficult for the language policy to positively serve the students of Namibia, such as negative societal attitudes toward African languages, inadequate teacher training, and the influence of international organizations. The paradigm that has been created by society must be revisited in order to transform education and empower the youth of the country to reach their potential by embracing their cultural identity.

2. History

Namibia is a country in southwestern Africa that was under German rule from 1884 to 1915. Following World War I, South Africa invaded Namibia for Britain, and later took control of the country in 1920. At this time, the official language of Namibia switched from German to Afrikaans and English, with Afrikaans as the main language of instruction used in schools (Frydman, 2011). The people of Namibia were severely oppressed by South Africa’s apartheid regime, and the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) began to lead a liberation movement in the country. In preparation for their independence, they felt it was necessary to replace the language of their oppressors, which was Afrikaans, because it “undermined the self- concept and cognitive growth of the African language speakers” (Wolfaardt, 2005, p. 2357). SWAPO formed a policy naming English as the only official language of Namibia in 1981; however, Namibia did not become an independent country until 1990, nearly thirty years after most other African countries.

Namibia has one of the least dense populations in the world, with a little over 2 million people living in an area that covers nearly 320,000 square miles. Many cultures and languages exist within this small population; scholars have divided the country into roughly nine ethnic groups, with each group speaking at least one distinct language. There are thirteen nationally recognized languages in Namibia, among which are ten African

languages and three European languages (Frydman, 2011). Despite this diversity, the Constitution of Namibia that was created when the country gained independence mandated that, in accordance with the SWAPO language policy, English was to be the only official language of the country, and the means of all communication for every branch of the government, from the federal to local level. The new government wanted to move away from Afrikaans, the “language of the oppressor,” and create unity (Frydman, 2011, p. 182). This decision was made in spite of the fact that, according to the most recent census data at the time, 0.8% of the Namibian population spoke English as a mother tongue (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001). It is important to note that pressure from donors, particularly those from Britain, also influenced this language policy (Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Africa, 1985; Skutnabb-Kangas, & Phillipson, 1985).

3. Language in Education

When Namibia became independent, the Ministry of Education and Culture felt that it was necessary to formulate a new language policy for schools. This policy was detailed in a document entitled *The language policy for schools: 1992-1996 and beyond* (MEC, 1993). This policy instructed that students should be taught primarily in their home language in Grades 1-3, with further instruction in these languages being provided throughout their formal education; additionally, English was to be a compulsory subject starting in Grade 1, and then become the main medium of instruction from Grade 4 and onward. The goals of this policy were to utilize education as a tool to enhance students’ language and cultural identity, and to help students become competent in English by the end of their seven-year primary education cycle (MEC, 1993).

Despite the policy’s focus on home language learning in the early primary years, with continued instruction in these languages throughout formal education, the Ministry of Education and Culture interprets the official language policy within the same document by saying that “Grades 1-3 will be taught either through the Home Language, a local language, or English” (MEC, 1993, p. 9). This gives schools the option to disregard the aforementioned policy and begin full instruction in English in Grade 1. Some officials, even within the Ministry of Education, believe that the policy was meant to promote instruction in English over local languages; as one such official stated, “The policy is not supporting multilingualism as was historically the case in Namibia. Traditionally, Namibians were multilingual but the policy is working against this” (quoted in Holmarsdottir, 2000, p. 15). The ambiguity of the policy has led to many schools opting to forego formal instruction in students’ mother tongues and starting English-only instruction as early as Grade 1.

Interviews with members of various ethnic communities across Namibia have revealed that the majority of students, teachers, and parents feel that English should be the main language of instruction from the first year of primary school because they believe that people who do not know English are unable to contribute to society, and they think that the earlier students are exposed to it, the more competent they will become in it (Pienaar-Louw, 1997; Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001). Therefore, despite the official guidelines given in the policy, many students are not receiving early primary instruction in their mother tongues due to the openness of the interpretation of the policy. In fact, in 2008 there were 243 schools in the country that had received permission from the Ministry of Education to offer instruction solely in English from Grade 1 and onward; more schools have since adopted an English-only policy, partly due to the increase in parents who are taking their children out of schools that offer mother tongue instruction and enrolling them in schools that use English as the sole language of instruction (Töttemeyer, 2010).

3.1 Rights to Education

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, article 11 states that every child has the right to an education directed towards “the promotion and development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and “the preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures” (OAU, 1999, p. 5). In order for students to experience the full development of their personality, education must provide opportunities for them to dream of a better future and acquire the knowledge and skills that they need to pursue it. Education ought to help students develop their human capabilities and empower them to stand up for their human rights. Therefore, students in Namibia should have the right to become everything that they are capable of being, which comes in part by having a strong cultural identity and taking pride in being African. Education can be a powerful tool in promoting these values, but this has not been the case in recent years in Namibia. A teacher in Keetmanshoop, where the majority of the students has the mother tongue of Khoekhoegowab but rarely study it in school, commented, “The young ones don’t want to speak their own language, they all want to be Americans. They watch TV and get all this American stuff. They want to be like Michael Jackson and look down on their own culture” (quoted in Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001, p. 197). This indicates a failing in society and the education system to instill children with pride in whom

they are and who they can become.

Part of the problem is the limited understanding of what constitutes the right to education. The right to education is fully explained in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNESCO, 2012). In this document, education is recognized as a tool of empowerment through which the economically and socially marginalized people of the world can overcome poverty, participate fully in their communities, be safeguarded against labor and sexual exploitation, realize other human rights, protect the environment, and control population growth (UNESCO, 2002). Additionally, it is recorded that education should increase each individual's "sense of dignity" and promote understanding among all ethnic groups, as well as nations and racial and religious groups (UNESCO, 2002). The two required features of education, as stated in article 13, are that it be "compulsory" and "available free to all" (UNESCO, 2002).

The right to education is extensive, but the descriptions of what education should be like are oftentimes too vague to be put into practice. For instance, article 13 states that measures should be taken to "ensure that education is culturally appropriate for minorities and indigenous peoples, and of good quality for all" (UNESCO, 2002, para 50). The article does not define what makes an education "culturally appropriate", nor does it expand upon what "good quality" really means. In order for a government to provide an education of good quality that is culturally appropriate for the students of its nation, that government must first understand precisely what those terms entail, and then know what steps need to be taken to implement a system that satisfies those demands. The problem with the extension of the right to education is that it generally focuses on availability and access, while undermining the importance of acceptability and adaptability.

3.2 Rights in Education

An education system functions properly only when it provides students with both rights to education and rights in education by providing the four key aspects of education, which are access, availability, acceptability, and adaptability (Tomasevski, 2003). Providing all four of these aspects will likely increase the future potential income of the students, as well as their ability to take advantage of countless other benefits. Even if some students' educations don't ultimately lead to an increased income, those students will still profit from "reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others and so on" (Sen, 1999, p. 294). Students who receive a quality education that meets all four requirements will have a great advantage in the future; they will be empowered to make a significant difference in their own lives, the lives of their families, and the wellbeing of their communities.

The most important difference between merely providing rights to education and allowing students to enjoy rights in education is that in the latter, "students are not just to accept or simply agree with what the teacher is saying" (Geo-JaJa, 2012, p. 25). Rather, students are encouraged to think for themselves and discover their own truths that will propel them to be successful in the future (Roberts, 2000). Students who have rights in education are able to be motivated from within without needing to be motivated by an outside source (Geo-JaJa, 2012). As a result, students start to develop their own being and their self-identity; this is a process of reflection, self-awareness, and self-understanding (Dewey, 1933). Ultimately, providing students with rights in education creates opportunities for their own self-discovery.

Another essential step for providing students with rights in education is to instruct them in their native languages. Language is an essential part of culture. Every parent anxiously awaits the day that s/he can hear a child's first words. It creates a bond in the family. Likewise, it creates unity in a community. Local languages are a fundamental part of the identity of a nation. Also, students are capable of learning much more in their own tongue than they can in their second language (Babaci-Wilhite, Geo-JaJa, & Lou, 2012; Murray, 2007) In order for students to develop critical thinking skills in school, they need to use a language in which they are free to formulate and express thoughts beyond a superficial level. Additionally, the very existence of a language is dependent upon its use by the youth within the culture (Jensen, 1996). If the youth stop learning their native language, it could disappear, and that would contribute to the loss of these students' identities. It is also important to keep in mind that "language serves as a unique tool to expand other communal rights" (Babaci-Wilhite, Geo-JaJa, & Lou, 2012, p. 18). In order to fully utilize the tool of language in Namibia, it will be necessary that educational language planning be focused towards high levels of bilingualism or even multilingualism; monolingualism can no longer be regarded as something normal, desirable, and unavoidable (Pütz, 2004). Children must be taught to learn and love their native language, and they should never feel ashamed to use it because it is a part of their heritage. Education should protect language and culture and teach respect for them; this means that curriculum should "reflect local and indigenous knowledge systems, and local traditions must be taught with pride" (Babaci-Wilhite, Geo-JaJa, & Lou, 2012, p. 14).

4. Reasons for Language Policies in Education

There are several factors to be considered when devising and implementing a language policy for an education system. In Namibia, one of the main concerns was overcoming apartheid and the influence of the oppressive, Afrikaner government of South Africa (Harlech-Jones, 1998). Additionally, there are six issues that are generally debated regarding the influence of language on education, which are psychological, educational, linguistic, socioeconomic, political, and financial. Those who favor an emphasis on local languages in education generally view these issues in order of importance in the same order in which they are presented in the previous sentence; those who favor the use of a global language, such as English in Namibia, emphasize the aforementioned issues in the reverse order, placing financial and political issues as the most important (Larson, 1981). These contrasting priorities reflect the difference between the instrumental and intrinsic values of education.

4.1 Instrumental Values of Education

One essential factor to providing both rights to education and rights in education is to recognize the true objectives of an education system. In a world where many view money as a prerequisite to success, governments and policymakers have shaped education into a tool that can be used to help people get more money. The majority of governments and policymakers feel that the quality of an education can be measured by the degree to which learned “skills and knowledge... contribute (directly or indirectly) to expected economic productivity” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 73). This perspective is called the instrumental value of education.

Critics of instrumental education systems note that the focus of these systems is to pass a test, and that it denies students and teachers the opportunity to become involved with the more important aspects of education (Hursh, 2008; Higgins, Miller, & Wegann, 2006). Some scholars have gone so far as to say that this style of education prepares students to become “unquestioning capitalist workers” rather than capable human beings (Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011; Bauman, 2010; Hill, 2005).

However, there is merit to this system as well. Its focus on economics “can help a person to find a job, to be less vulnerable on the labor market, to be better informed as a consumer, to be more able to find information on economic opportunities, and so forth” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 71). The instrumental aspect of education helps students to turn their knowledge into personal income. Many people in Namibia believe that English is the optimal language of instruction because it will make students more employable in the future (Frydman, 2011). Few students choose to study African languages at higher education levels; as one student explained, they “feel that in order to get a job you must have a European language and that if you study African languages you have no employment opportunities” (quoted in Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001, p. 199). Namibians feel obligated to study English because of its function in their society; if they want to enter a scientific field, work for the government, or have any prestigious position, it is necessary that they become fluent in English (Frydman, 2011). Even though having a job and being productive in society is an important part of individual development, neglecting the legitimacy of a person’s own native language may disregard his or her identity as a human being. For that reason, schools must also focus on the intrinsic value of education in order to help people truly develop.

4.2 Intrinsic Value of Education

The intrinsic value of education is that a student “may value learning something simply for the sake of this knowledge” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 70). Some people enjoy learning about history, while others find fulfillment through learning to play new musical instruments. The knowledge that these people acquire in such pursuits may not help them in their careers, but it can add a rich dimension to their lives, making them happier and more satisfied than they would be otherwise.

Additionally, an intrinsic education system “helps students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their cultural community, nation state and region and in the global community” (Banks, 2008, p. 129). In order to accomplish this, education cannot discriminate against cultures, languages, or religions, and it should allow students to be heavily involved in their own educations by granting them the opportunity to choose their own goals and their own path towards those goals (Banks, 2008; Rogers, 1980). The intrinsic aspect of education guides students toward discovering their human capabilities. It also prepares students for the many opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences of adult life, such as applying for jobs, participating in judicial systems, seeking ownership of property, taking care of children, dealing with illness, forming relationships, and so on (Best, 2000).

This type of education leads to “reengineering or restructuring capitalist economies, while at the same time informs the need for an endogenous curriculum from deep down society, which will produce citizens who will not be out of place in development” (Geo-JaJa, 2012, p. 20). As the individual students change, they will develop

the capacities to change their societies; that changed society will offer more opportunities for an increased number of people to thrive, and the nation will reach new levels of development that will assist even more people to rise above the clutches of poverty.

5. Challenges of the Language Policy

The goals of intrinsic education cannot be accomplished when students are instructed in a language that they do not fully understand; an investigative examination at a school in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, revealed that 22.4% of students in Grade 8 were not functionally literate in English, and that 49.2% of the students had numeracy skills below a Grade 7 level. All of the students that tested below the required level came from primary schools where English was used as the language of instruction from Grade 1 rather than a mother tongue (Wolfaardt, 2005). Additionally, many educators in Namibia complain that students depend on thoughtless memorization of subject matter, which they merely repeat back on examinations without fully understanding (Murray, 2007). In order for education to help students develop their capabilities, it must be presented through a language medium that students fully understand, and through which they can competently and confidently express themselves.

When children are literate in their mother tongue, they are able to establish a set of skills that will then transfer over when they learn a new language. Research has shown that “there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning English, and that the degree of children’s native language proficiency is a strong predictor of their English language development” (Murray, 2007, p. 69). That is why Namibia’s language policy that provides for instruction in the mother tongue for at least Grades 1-3 is crucial to student success. Unfortunately, there are a few key issues that have made it difficult for this policy to have its intended effect.

Part of the problem is that teachers are not sufficiently trained to teach the African languages, mostly due to the negative way in which society has come to view these languages. One Namibian reported that “the status for teachers is much higher if they teach history, for example, than if they teach in the African languages” (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001, p. 296). A primary school teacher added that “there is a general understanding in their community that Oshindonga teachers are less educated and therefore sometimes regarded as incompetent teachers while those who know English are regarded as the highest qualified ones” (quoted in Legere, 1995, p. 10). Therefore, with little motivation to study these languages, there are few teachers qualified to offer instruction in mother tongues. Additionally, the heterogeneous nature of most schools in Namibia makes it difficult to provide mother tongue instruction for all students (Murray, 2007). The combination of a lack of qualified teachers and a diverse student body that would require instruction in several different languages has made it difficult for Namibian schools to follow the official language policy.

Despite the higher status of English teachers, a recent test performed by the government indicated that 98% of teachers in Namibia are not sufficiently proficient in basic English; in fact, over 70% of the teachers in senior secondary schools cannot read and write basic English (Kisting, 2012). The majority of teachers went through the schooling system before English was made the official language of instruction. Their lack of skills and proficiency in the language has led to the further marginalization of disadvantaged students who are expected to learn material in a language that their teachers do not adequately speak (MBESC, 2003). In 2010, nearly 50% of 16-year-olds failed the junior secondary school certificate (Kisting, 2012). This is evidence that the education system is not adequately preparing students for future success.

Many schools that wish to offer mother tongue instruction do not have the resources to do so. The choice of languages offered by a school is often made for financial rather than pedagogical reasons, as there are more materials available in English than in the African languages (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001). The availability of these resources is heavily influenced by the support of international donors, and in most cases these donors tend to favor instruction in global languages. A report from the World Bank (1980) indicated that “emphasis on local languages can diminish an individual’s chances for further education and limit access of specific groups or countries to the international body of knowledge” (p. 20). This lack of support in providing African materials has led to children in poorer regions not having access to the same opportunities in education as students in areas with greater resources. It is important to recognize this disparity, because acting as if all schools in the country are equal “is to disadvantage those groups with fewer resources and thereby extend into the future the inequalities of the past” (MEC, 1992, p. 5). Many Namibians recognize this problem and desire a change. They wish that donors would give aid in African languages rather than English, so that all the languages of Namibia could have equal treatment and status in society. As one Namibian noted, “If the languages were made languages of instruction right through primary school they would become languages of learning. More

books would be published in the languages. More publishing of school books would also make for more general titles in the languages” (Brock-Utne, 2000, p. 185).

6. Challenges of the Language Policy

In order for Namibia to progress as a nation, all children must be granted their right to a quality education that fulfills both instrumental and intrinsic values. After the country had gained independence, President Sam Nujoma declared, “Access to education should not be limited to a select elite, but should be open to all those who need it – especially children and those adults who previously had no opportunity to gain education” (MEC, 1993, pp. i-ii). However, merely granting students’ access to education does not fulfill their human rights. If they are to develop their full human personality and strengthen their cultural identity, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, they need to be granted the opportunity to study in an acceptable and adaptable education system that improves their understanding of who they are and who they can be, rather than making them feel shame for their heritage and teaching them to desire to be someone else. The unfortunate truth about the way that the language policy is being carried out in most areas is that it fails to contribute to either the instrumental or intrinsic values of education; furthermore, by not offering children “instruction in their mother tongue in lower Primary, the school is actually excluding a part of the Namibian citizens from learning” (Lund, 1995, p. 65).

There are not easy answers as to how to transform the education system in Namibia so that language can be used to empower students rather than impede their progress. However, it is clear that changes must be made, as the current model is not extending students the human rights to which they are entitled. It will be important for the government to find ways to incentivize teachers to study local languages so that they can be qualified to teach them to students. A higher quality of instruction in these languages may help society to change its attitudes about their inferiority and help Namibians see the beauty in them. It is also crucial that schools be provided with the materials that they need in African languages so that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, have the opportunity to study and become proficient in their mother tongues. Additionally, if English is to be kept as the official language of Namibia, then teachers who instruct in English must become proficient in the language in order to help students succeed in it as well.

7. Conclusion

Diversity is an important part of Namibia’s culture that should be celebrated rather than suppressed. According to Dr. Diaz, a former Director of Culture in the country,

Namibia has the skin of a leopard. The skin of a leopard is so beautiful. It has this diversity of colours. If you look at the skin of a leopard through a microscope, you can find that also the black spots have some white in them, the white spots some black. The lion is strong, but the African kings – Zulu kings, Swasi kings, Setswana kings all wanted to adorn themselves with the skin of a leopard. We must keep this diversity, the multitude of colours, traditions, languages we have (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001, p. 295).

The native languages of Namibia are an integral part of the culture of the individuals who speak them. The government of Namibia, along with the support of international donors, must find ways to change the way that the language policy is implemented so that students across the country have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongues and take pride in doing so. In this way, Namibians will gain a stronger sense of their cultural identity and have the opportunity to fully develop their human personalities.

Parents and members of society sometimes disregard native languages as potential languages of instruction because they feel that they have little practical application or that English is the key for success (Brock-Utne, 2012). However, this is a paradigm that has been created within the society and that can be changed by that same society. If Namibians can find ways to celebrate the value of their cultural heritage and native tongues, they can seek the elevation of the national usage of their languages. This will, in turn, allow them to take advantage of more human rights that they are currently being denied due to the country’s language policy. One of these rights, as stated in Article 21, is that “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country” (UN General Assembly, 1948). However, as all government proceedings in Namibia are transacted in English, the majority of the population is excluded from participation. Likewise, Article 23 states that everyone has the right to work without discrimination, but teachers of local languages are discriminated against as being ignorant and less valuable to society. Multilingual policies alone will not change this degrading paradigm; however, when accompanied by adjustments in society that empower individuals to embrace their culture and self-identity, the nation will be transformed in such a way that the people of Namibia will begin to fully enjoy their human rights.

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