THE RELEVANCE OF LANGUAGE IN THE PROCESS OF
INDIGENISING LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IN SOUTH
AFRICA: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Language is perhaps the single most important factor in educational efficiency and
highlights the long term consequences for academic achievement. Language enhances
positive academic achievement when one learns to read and write in a language he does
speak well. The article therefore seeks to highlight the importance of language in indi-
genizing life skills education. To this end the authors argue that effective teaching of life
skills education should firstly be characterised by the use of more suitable local lan-
guages, the use of sufficient teaching techniques, a culturally adequate curriculum content
and sufficient financial material resources.

Keywords: Language, indigenous knowledge, indigenisation, life skills educa-
tion, school social work.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multilingual society and endowed and embedded with rich
socio-cultural knowledge which could be transmitted through language. Utilisa-
tion of local languages (mother tongues) in life skills education could render the
learning to be educationally and culturally relevant and sustainable. This is
based on the rationale that African people in rural communities have a great deal
of experience and knowledge in African values, norms, traditions and customs in
addressing health and social pathologies. The knowledge, experience and the
insights gained over the years need to be tapped and utilised for the betterment
of the peoples’ conditions. At this crucial juncture, it is important to take a step
back in the face of the climate of innovation and experimentation to ask which of
this indigenous knowledge is more desirable in the longer term – for young
people, either in-school or out-of-school youth, educators, school social workers,
parents and other relevant stakeholders in the field of life skills education. For
the purpose of this article, the focus will be on youth-in-school.

These rooted African values and practices, which amongst others, are commu-
nity commitment and development, mutual dependence, cooperation, giving,
sharing, generosity, respect, family and community care, hard work for the
benefit of the whole, and respect for self and others, are very different from the
ones now in vogue and actively promoted by Western donors, institutions and
consultants who provide aid to Africans in various areas such as education,
and Marais, 2007: 813; Robinson, 2001: 176; Silavwe, 1995; Daniels, 2001: 304; Brock-Utne, 2003: 42; Waller in Saleebey, 2006: 52 and Assie-Lumumba, 2006: 98). This implies that there is a dire need to re-claim African values which have sustained African people time immemorial. These values, customs, norms and practices have been transmitted through life skills education. African life skills education was not recorded and documented anywhere but passed from generation to generation orally. Re-claiming these African values and practices would enable practitioners in the field of life skills education to be in touch with the people they serve. This is confirmed by William Makgoba who indicated that lawyers, doctors and similarly social workers and life skills educators who are out of touch with the society that they serve, can not serve that society well. To address this situation he states that:

"education has to be contextualised and for the majority population this means the removal of the dominant and alienating Eurocentric philosophy to the humanistic Afrocentric philosophy" (Makgoba, 1996: 178).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There are many changes, challenges and problems facing the South African young people of the 21st Century due to urbanisation, migration, globalisation, explosion of information through the print and electronic media, misinterpretation of human rights, poor character formation and glorification of youth behaviour and life styles. Notwithstanding the above, young people are expected to learn to prepare for their full adult roles and responsibilities in society against the backdrop of these large-scale socio-political and socio-economic changes, developments, challenges and problems that affect and influence how they are socialised and to conduct themselves.

In South Africa, the practice of school social work is only visible and available to private schools which in the past were referred to as Model C schools. The rationale being that these schools are able to pay the salaries of social workers. These school social workers work within the school system and they are part of the management and also involved in programme planning together with educators. Other social workers who work in programmes that interface with the schools (school-linked services) are referred to as Social Workers-in-Schools. Social workers-in-school are employed by the Department of Social Development and render services to the Department of Education. However, only the Free State Department of Education has introduced Socio-pedagogues who are social workers rendering social services to learners in schools but placed at the district offices of the Department of Education.

Schools are central crossroads of life for most learners; they are a major venue for learning, experimentation and socialization. The school is one of the critical agents of socialisation in preparing learners for future realities and challenges (Kasiram, 1994: 371). The school is recognised as one of the social institutions that can play a significant role in the moulding of socially acceptable behaviour, reconstruction of the eroded values, proper development and encouraging social
integration within the society (Kotze, 1995: 183). School social workers are ideally situated to take a comprehensive view of the developmental trajectory of learners who are attending school (Zastrow, 2000: 372). A school social worker works at the nexus of the systems of home, school and the community. In schools, social workers often serve as the link between learners’ families and the school, working with parents, guardians, educators and other school officials to ensure the learners reach their academic and personal goals, needs and potentials. In addition, school social workers address health and social problems and advice educators on how to cope with difficult learners. Hence, in South Africa social workers who are employed by the Department of Social Development render full-basket services to families which if need be include learners at school. Amongst other professionals in service with learners, social workers present life skills education to learners.

Life skills education was introduced in schools in order to guide and prepare learners for life and its possibilities. Specifically, life skills education equips learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society. The rationale for introducing life skills education was to address health and social pathologies by developing skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that empower learners to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions regarding their health, social, personal and physical development and orientation to the world of work (Department of Education, 2002: 4). However, it is worrying that the teaching of life skills education has not successfully reduced the health and social pathologies facing the young people in South Africa as proven by the high rate of HIV and AIDS, criminal activities involving learners, violence in schools, substance abuse, rape, cultural and gender based violence, suicide and teenage pregnancy and the list is endless. As a result of that challenge, a need aroused to infuse socio-cultural knowledge, values, customs and practices in life skills education which is indigenisation of life skills education to make it relevant and meaningful to the circumstances and problems assailing the young people in school.

Having discussed the background, it is necessary to understand what is meant by indigenisation.

WHAT IS INDIGENISATION?

The question of indigenising, contextualising or Africanising life skills education was, and still is, a paramount question in the social science, educational and behavioural fraternities. Debates about the significance of Africanisation, Afro-centric identity, cultural relevance and indigenising life skills education represent some of the key issues in the social science, behavioural and educational debate. An analysis of some of these important issues, as they pertain to improve the social functioning of learners and to address health and social pathologies, as they are the current discourse inside and outside the education sphere, suggests that there is a fundamental need to re-define and understand the current situations affecting learners and assist in indigenising life skills education.
According to Osei-Hwedie (1996: 215), indigenisation is concerned with the ‘appropriateness of theories and practice, as well as values, norms, and philosophies which underlie practice’. In the search for an appropriate indigenisation of life skills education, cognizance needs to be taken not only of the values, norms and philosophies which underlie its practice and those of the client groups which it services, but also of the very ‘cultural milieu of the society in which it is evolved and practiced’. This therefore means that indigenising life skills education must be based on values, norms, traditions and customs of people in a particular cultural environment and this is also echoed by (Osei-Hwedie, 1996: 217).

Yang (2004: 3) advocates that indigenisation means to integrate one’s reflections on the local culture of a particular society and history into one’s approaches in practice. Generally speaking, indigenisation is a process of self-reflection with regard to cultural values, norms and practices in response to long-term western cultural domination. For an example, through indigenisation, a school social work practitioner, as an observer and a participant simultaneously, with firsthand cultural and historical experience, will be able to express an empathetic understanding of the world in which he lives and work. It is through indigenisation that cultural sensitivity in concepts, topics and methods could be highlighted and increased (Adair and Diaz-Loving, 1999: 398). Adair (1999: 405) agrees that there has been confusion about the meaning of indigenisation, and attempted to sort out this confusion by analysing a number of the definitions that had been proposed by different authors. He identified four “threads” underlying the set of definitions, namely: that knowledge should; (a) arise from within the culture, (b) reflect local behaviours, (c) be interpreted within a local frame of reference and (d) yield results that are locally relevant. He describes the above-mentioned definitions as “levels” of indigenisation.

In consolidating the above definitions, the authors see the meaning of indigenisation as twofold: one as resisting western domination and secondly as striving for linguist-cultural independence which has epistemological significance. This implies that domination of western ethos and values in expense of African ethos should be limited and that provision of life skills education should be conveyed using the local languages and recognizing local cultural values, customs and practices, among others. Furthermore, with regard to epistemological significance, life skills education has theoretical frameworks and knowledge base which have to be adopted and applied into local contexts. One major problem in the international mutual borrowing of social science knowledge is that current mainstream theoretical conceptions and methods are exclusively rooted in western experiences. Such international and western knowledge is fairly universal rather than parochial. Western social theories cause serious problems in their application to other societies/cultures as indigenisation stresses local relevance. Instead of building up a system that is thoroughly different from the existing western social sciences, indigenisation problematises the universal application of knowledge and support integration of local experience and knowledge by means of exposing and reflecting on the past and neglected indigenous knowledge (Yang, 2004: 2). It is a rather complicated process, as any experience cannot be practically handled without the assistance of existing knowledge,
and understanding one’s own experience must be aided by the experience of others. This is supported by Xitsonga old adage which says *rhavi le ritswha ri tiya hi le ra khale* when translated it means revitalising indigenous knowledge and infuse it with western knowledge in lieu of discarding western knowledge brought during colonialism and apartheid periods.

**LANGUAGE AS A PROBLEM, A RIGHT OR A RESOURCE**

In 1953, UNESCO released a report on ‘The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education’. The report specifies that African countries have been trying to find an effective approach that would allow them to progress from an education system inherited from the colonial period to a more transformative and culturally relevant education. This effective approach should recognise African values, practices and languages, people’s socio-cultural and linguistic background as well as their educational needs. It has been indicated that such a pertinent, effective education approach should be characterised, first of all, by the use of a more suitable local language, the use of sufficient teaching techniques, the use of culturally adequate curriculum content and sufficient financial and material resources (Association for the Development of Education in Africa’s – ADEA Report, 2005: 5).

Though the authors’ focus is not on indigenising the whole education system, the authors feel strongly that indigenising life skills education should be viewed along the same lines as indicated in the UNESCO report of 2005. If life skills education is aimed at improving the psychosocial wellbeing and competencies of learners, language becomes more relevant and central to allow for better understanding of life skills education presented in foreign languages.

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2005: 5) encouraged African countries to strive for relevance of education by adjusting the curricula and using African languages in teaching and training. The issue of own language was also espoused by Education for All in the use of Mother Tongue Education (MTE). It has been argued that the use of mother tongue or the use of an African language familiar to the children upon school entry will facilitate effective learning. It is further argued that the use of MTE as a medium of instruction throughout schooling will improve the teaching and learning of the foreign language as a subject of learning and will ultimately make it a better medium of specialised learning wherever appropriate.

As a result of Africa’s past colonial history and contemporary neo-colonial relationship, language predominantly became a sensitive issue. The former colonial powers like Britain, France and Portugal, and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and some African elites still persuade to promote the merging and utilisation of the colonial languages in Africa, as a result, they pay no attention to the necessity of indigenisation of the whole system of education through languages (ADEA Report, 2005: 8). This is facilitated by the fact that most African countries relied on former colonial powers and multilateral agencies to fund developmental programmes. This situation creates
challenges for African countries to use their indigenous languages for education as that will jeopardise their funding.

Vilela (2002: 307) states that in the countries controlled by colonial powers, language policies established were more supportive for the development and growth of foreign languages, whether they be English, French, Portuguese or Spanish. After independence of the colonised countries, these languages were preserved and sustained as official languages. It was believed that these languages would allow those independent countries wider accessibility to the world without hindrance of language in communication. As a result of this, the ‘official languages’ of the colonisers always existed alongside local indigenous languages which of course were not valued by the colonisers.

To counteract subordination of African languages, in consideration of these complications, linguistic factors should precede any educational plan in Africa. This means that postcolonial language preparation has to be familiar with the harmonization of languages which exists in African communities and to take cognisance of the multilingual nature of Africa, especially in the area of education (Vilela, 2002: 306, 309). This highlights the researcher’s argument against teaching of life skills education in a foreign language. If life skills education prepares and forms the foundation for the promotion of well being in social, mental and health spheres of human beings, it goes without saying that expression of feelings, interaction, behaviour and self-disclosure may take priority. Expression of feelings and self-disclosure may be easily done in own language than in foreign language. Teaching in own language and use of own language by learners facilitate active participation and further influence the way people feel about themselves and others. This is supported by an evaluation study of Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) project in Ghana using participant observation to study the implementation of the language policy in Ghananian primary schools. The study found that pupils participated more actively when Ghanaian language was used as the language of instruction (ADEA Report, 2005: 131).

Another example is the study by Chekaraou Ibro who made a comprehensive study of two of the bilingual pilot schools in Niger using Hausa as the language of instruction in the early grades. Ibro confirmed that the use of Hausa language, being the local language of learners (mother tongue), facilitated active participation in class. The author explained how the entire class wanted to participate so much that they would stand up from their seats, move towards the teacher wanting to be called upon to answer questions (Chekaraou, 2004: 323). He further tells how the teaching in these schools through a language with which children were familiar fostered active teacher-student interaction which enabled learners to ‘develop their critical thinking skills which were transferable to all learning experiences’ (Chekaraou, 2004: 341). It could be conclusively indicated that teaching through a familiar language helps the cognitive development of the learners. Basically, native language use contributes to learners developing knowledge that they would not have obtained otherwise, when a foreign language is used. For example, the discussion of idioms related to body parts which carried metaphorical meanings and the proverbs that the teacher discussed with
his students were edifying examples which helped children to develop meta-
linguistic skills in their own language which contributed to enhancing their overall
cognitive potential (Chekaraou, 2004: 343). It is through the use of these idioms
and proverbs that facilitate traditional mechanisms for passing on indigenous
knowledge to young people. For instance, a Xitsonga proverb *ku tlula ka mhala
ku letela n’wana wa le ndzeni* holds true. Literally translated, it means a child
learns behaviour from his parents and that is only transferable through language
and that can be enhanced through indigenising life skills education.

It is therefore, a fact that the colonial experience and languages are currently not
easily irrevocable in Africa. Moreover, it is also irrefutable that there is a need to
exploit Africa’s rich cultural and linguistic heritage for sustainable development
and both for effective and efficient educational systems. As a result, Okombo
calls for “moderate re-indigenisation” of what have been predominantly handed
down until this day as “post- or neo-colonial educational systems” (Okombo,
2000: 42), whereas the ADEA Report (2005: 53) calls for the review of current
language policies in terms of general and public empowerment.

The review of language policies can lay the ground for the teaching of life skills
education in a local language. For instance, it will be unfair and irrelevant to
teach the value of *Ubuntu* through the use of a foreign language as it will seem
to reinforce the western ethos. For the realisation of African renaissance, in-
vestment in teaching life skills education to learners in a local language should
be considered. Learners should be regarded as the resource to help transmit
African values to the future generations. Through this exercise, internalisation of
local values and standards could lead to alleviating health and social pathologies.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The authors are of the view that since life skills education in South Africa is
taught in English and therefore Euro-centric, the use of foreign language in part
is contributing to the ineffectiveness of the subject and consequently rendering
the teaching and learning incomprehensible and difficult.

Another striking point is that in spite of life skills education being offered in
schools, it is conspicuous that current life skills education has not done much in
changing the attitudes and perceptions of young people towards health and
social pathologies. With this failure in mind, alternative strategies are called for.
One such strategy could be linked to indigenising life skills education where
learners are taught at an early stage to respect culture, traditions and socio-
cultural protocols that would sensitise them to respect for self and for others.
This is based on the rationale that indigenous knowledge has in the past pro-
tected lives and young people from behaving in an un-becoming manner. To
successfully indigenise life skills education, the involvement of parents, life skills
educators, social workers and traditional knowledge holders is important. Par-
ents and traditional knowledge holders should be regarded as vessels, custodi-
ans and holders of cultural values, beliefs, practices and traditions.
There should be a revival of family and community structures used in the past as their focus was to deal with health and social pathologies. Moral story telling where parents and grandparents sat with young people should be recalled. Social problems like bullying, assault and theft could possibly be addressed by indigenising life skills education as learners would be taught cultural values like *Ubuntu*, respect for oneself and others as well as communal responsibility.

There is an urgent need, as indicated above, to collaborate amongst various stakeholders as currently there is poor collaboration and partnership amongst various stakeholders such as parents, life skills educators, social workers and community leaders who have interest in the indigenous education of children. This will counteract the status quo of learners being subjected to western methods, paradigms, theories, perspectives and models of learning which are more edu-centric and Euro-centric. Emphasis on edu-centric and Euro-centric approaches contributed to poor documentation, storing, codifying, classification and recording of indigenous knowledge data for the purpose of preservation and easy referencing. This therefore calls for research in different aspects of indigenous knowledge in order to create reading materials to supplement the practical teaching of indigenous life skills education.

Authors further conclude that buying in of key government departments like Education and Social Development is considered necessary for the provision of financial and human resources. These departments are vital, as indigenising life skills education will require restructuring of the curriculum to suit different cultures specifically in rural areas. This is based on the general finding that life skills education needs to be taught in mother tongue and not be examinable.
REFERENCES


