

Gender and minority issues in planning literacy education in Botswana

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This empirical paper demonstrates that in spite of being a multiethnic society, literacy education in Botswana has ignored gender and cultural diversity. It demonstrates how planners endorsed a technocratic view of planning, emphasizing their curriculum expertise instead of learners' realities. The article argues that planners systematically ignored gender and minority issues through assuming that learners shared common concerns and that they are passive consumers. The planners reinforced their dominance by using one national language in a multilingual community, arguing that it is a natural choice and nobody objected to its use. Finally, the paper suggests that in order to address gender and minority issues, the programme should use the mother tongue and adopt participatory approaches in curriculum planning.

Introduction

Over the past two decades the Botswana government has promoted literacy education through the Botswana National Literacy Programme (BNLP) to facilitate personal and national development. The provision of literacy is centralized and there is limited involvement of stakeholders such as women and minorities communities in planning the curriculum for the programme. This is in spite of the fact that these categories constitute a majority in the programme. Literacy teachers have had a minimal influence on what is taught, the choice of texts and the language of instruction. The programme competes unfavourably for resources with other sectors such as formal and vocational education. Problems of underfunding, a highly centralized programme and poorly trained teachers results in lack of innovation and failure of the programme to address the needs of women and minorities in the BNLP (Maruatona 2002). This paper argues that the state organized an apolitical literacy programme geared towards achieving political goals such as unity and contributing towards national development without taking into account the needs of women and minorities. Chand (2003) contends that decades after the historic Jomtein declaration, adult men and women, underprivileged groups and ethnic minorities are struggling to gain access to basic education and lifelong learning.

What is not clear however, is how programme planning facilitates this exclusion and this paper attempts to fill that gap. First, the paper presents two conflicting views of literacy, arguing that the government organized a conventional literacy

programme designed to exclude the interests of women and members of minority ethnic groups. It argues that senior planners viewed literacy planning as a technical process and assumed that all categories of learners shared common concerns. Learners were treated as passive consumers and the planned programme did not respond to the felt needs of women and minorities (Maruatona 2002). Finally, the paper suggests that there is a need to adopt inclusive participatory approaches to improve the responsiveness of the programme to the needs of different social categories. Conventional and transformative views of literacy are contrasted in the next section, to highlight their different purposes in literacy education.

Conventional *versus* transformative literacy

Conventional literacy proceeds from the assumption that the governments can engage in planned development change, equating growth with efficiency. The programme is often centralized and, though a stated goal, literacy is not treated with urgency. The curriculum is carefully defined in terms of what is to be taught; the methods and materials to be used are centrally developed. Literacy is treated as if it is independent of the social contexts and learning occurs independent of the learner's culture (Guy 1998). The programme is carried out in accordance with demands for social accountability and the assumed needs of individuals and the nation (Weber 1999). For example, in Kenya the major objective of the literacy programme is to increase people's participation in development. It enables adults to read development information in agriculture, health, co-operatives, his or her party and the government. The goal of the state is to use conventional literacy to facilitate orderly personal and national development that permits it to meet the broader goals of society. The curriculum is pre-packaged and not provided in collaboration with participants. Programme development in this regard depends on the will of the state and the expertise of curriculum developers (Gee 1996). The planners assume that needs of individual learners are reconcilable with national political goals – namely, that literacy contributes to personal improvement and mobility, social progress, better health and cognitive development.

Furthermore, literacy is an indispensable component of social and economic development (Gough 1995). Gough contends that texts have independent meanings and readers can be separated from the society that gives meaning to what they read. In his view literacy should be separated from politics. He argues, 'we whose central interest is literacy, not politics, should stay clear of the latter in our work' (1996: 82). The goal of the curriculum in such conventional literacy programmes is often to nurture the *status quo* by confining learners only to decontextualized reading and writing skills, and rarely does it lead to social transformation. This approach contrasts with transformative literacy, which engages learners in social action (Giroux 1995; Gee 2003).

The transformative approach frames literacy as intended for critical reflection and problem solving facilitated by dialogue between teachers and learners (Freire 1990). Foley (1999) challenges providers to recognize that learning is an aspect of human life as it occurs on a life-wide basis. Education is shaped by forces beyond the participants' immediate control. Emancipatory learning is a possibility but it is contested and needs providers to act strategically. Participants are to critique 'discourse maps' of society in order to transform it (Posner 1998). This

approach assumes that literacy should empower and transform learners and raise their consciousness; it unearths hidden assumptions that govern society and assumes that knowledge and understanding are forms of inequality (Apple 1999; Palestini 2003). Transformative literacy often adopts a campaign approach, since such states often need to foster transition after a revolutionary war. Bholá (1999) observes that states treat campaigns as a priority undertaking. Lind and Johnston (1996) argue, for instance, that with decolonization, nascent states view literacy as a tool in economic growth and social cohesion, and also as an instrument for empowerment. The transformative approach also uses multiple languages and consultative strategies. For instance, in Tanzania, the programme was built into the cultural life of the people through art and craft and the use of locally relevant materials.

In Nicaragua, the state made literacy a priority to achieve the missions of eradicating illiteracy and relieve the society of exploitation. The focus of locally produced materials was on dialogue and debate to involve people in democratic practice. Setting priorities in such countries emphasizes individual, community and social empowerment (Rassool 1999). These different views or conceptions of literacy have implications for how literacy is planned and implemented in different countries. While both types of programmes are sponsored and controlled by governments, the purposes for literacy education in each case are different (Youngman 1997; Torres 1998). In the next section, a brief historical overview of the BNLP is provided to illustrate that it fits the characteristics of a conventional literacy programme perfectly.

The study context

Botswana has implemented a conventional literacy programme and minimal changes have been made for the past two decades. The programme is sponsored and controlled by the government. It is treated as part of the national development efforts intended to enable individuals to experience personal growth and to take part in national development (Townsend-Coles 1988). Launched in 1981, the Botswana National Literacy Programme (BNLP) is the largest state-sponsored non-formal education provision since Independence.

In 1972, the government rejected a proposal for a work-based literacy campaign by a UNESCO consultant, under the pretext that extension staff could not participate in the campaign because they had other priorities (Gaborone *et al.* 1987). While it is granted that the state had other commitments, the decision not to involve staff in a campaign demonstrated that it largely did not view a campaign as a priority and had a hidden desire to implement a conventional programme. For example, in 1976, the first National Commission on Education was set up to look into the country's educational problems and how they could be addressed. The Commission submitted its report in 1977. In spite of a request for the commissioners to suggest how non-formal education could be carried out, the report did not have any specific recommendation on literacy. It only stated that 'A fully literate population is an important long term objective if Botswana's other national development objectives are to be met' (Ministry of Education 1977: 167). However, the rhetoric on the potential role of literacy was not backed by practical suggestions. Consequently, the state later sponsored a conventional

literacy education programme when the BNLP was implemented (Maruatona 2001).

The initial objectives of the current programme were stipulated in the National Initiative Consultation Document (Ministry of Education 1979) as follows:

To enable 250,000 presently illiterate men, women and youth to become literate in Setswana and numerate over six years 1980–85.

The teaching to be understood in the context of development issues relevant to the respective Districts and Nation.

The term 'literacy' to be interpreted to imply that a person can comprehend those written communications and simple computations which are part of their daily life. (Ministry of Education 1979: 1–2)

The Department of Non-Formal-Education could not complete the task of eradicating illiteracy in six years as envisaged in the above objectives due of a number of reasons, such as limited resource allocation which came primarily from foreign donors, poor teacher training and ossified curriculum materials. Contrary to the spirit of collaboration between the headquarters of the department and the districts anticipated in these objectives, planning decisions were restricted to the headquarters. For example, this initial document proposed the formation of committees on language, development of teaching materials and research and evaluation. However, there is no evidence that such committees were enacted in practice (Maruatona 2001). The redefined objectives of the programme were stated in National Development Plan 6 (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1985: 138) as follows:

To help the learning needs of communities in the rural and remote areas for adults who never had a chance to go to school ... and for children who are living in villages without schools.

The Department will expand its non-formal activities beyond reading, writing and numeracy. The needs of rural communities in terms of skills required for income generating activities to form the basis for expansion.

In 1987, the programme was evaluated and it was recommended that the material in the primers be reinvigorated to make them more responsive to the needs of learners (Gaborone *et al.* 1987). Over the years, the Department of Non-Formal-Education (DNFE) has taken a number of initiatives to improve its delivery system and sustain the programme. For example, DNFE collaborated with the National Library Services to operate Village Reading Rooms (VRRs). They encouraged the promotion of income-generating projects by neo-literates and have started teaching English. The Department also operates a work-based literacy project in some organizations, which seems to attract male participants who often do not participate in the regular programme.

In 1993, the government published the findings of the Second National Commission on Education. The report had a chapter devoted to out-of-school education, with specific recommendations for the Department of Non-Formal-Education. The

Department was to provide education for out-of-school children in both urban and rural areas, in addition to adult literacy. It was also to review the terms and conditions of service for literacy teachers (Ministry of Education 1994). Based on the findings of this commission, comprehensive objectives of the programme were articulated in National Development Plan 8 (1998–2001) which, among others, were to:

Strengthen inter-agency materials production and publication of stories for its neo-literate and people with low reading abilities;

address the learning needs of disadvantaged groups with emphasis on women, girls, and remote area dwellers and;

expand non-formal education to include training for work and self-employment. (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997: 373)

The above objectives demonstrate how the government strives to control what should be planned and implemented in the programme, clearly confining it to the conventional view of literacy. Youngman (1997) noted that the programme needed to be decentralized and diversified in its decision-making, in order to involve district and local staff with regard to the call for social action, cultural diversity and gender awareness. Hence this paper, which is part of a larger doctoral study, documents how the planning of the current programme ignored gender and socio-cultural issues of the minorities in Botswana.

Study design and procedures

The purpose of this study was to understand how planning literacy in the BNLP addressed issues of gender and the minorities. The study was driven by the following overarching qualitative questions:

- (i) How did the planning of literacy education address competing choices based on language, content, and instructional design?
- (ii) How did the planning of literacy education address issues of gender and ethnicity in Botswana?

Design

The qualitative study employed a combination of approaches. A purposeful sampling approach was used where participants were chosen and interviewed because of their extensive experience in planning literacy in Botswana. The study also used the networking technique to identify participants. After interviewing each person, the researcher asked the participants to identify someone who could be interviewed, based on their experience. One criterion for participation was that individuals had served in the Department of Non-Formal-Education in an administrative position – such as being a Literacy Coordinator, Regional Adult Basic Education Officer or District Adult Basic Education Officer – and had served for a period of ten or more years, which is long enough for one to have gained useful experience.

The study therefore presents the views of these sixteen participants who were interviewed because of their lengthy involvement with planning literacy education in Botswana. Two participants were heavily involved in the experimental literacy projects of the 1970s. One was among the pioneers of the current programme. Thirteen others are still with the programme, either working at headquarters or as field supervisors. The thirteen comprised of two senior officers from headquarters, three regional adult education officers, five senior district adult education officers and three adult basic education officers. At department headquarters, only two officials met the selection criteria.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the subject, the researcher assured the participants that their real identities would be handled confidentially. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to interview participants at district, regional and headquarters levels in order to determine how planning engineered the exclusion of the interests of women and minorities. In addition to the interviews, the researcher had access to records on student performance, materials used in the teaching and other documents. As Woods (1999: 4) notes, 'qualitative researchers are interested in how meanings are framed, negotiated ... how curriculum works out, how policy is formulated and implemented'. Data were collected through intensive interviews with all of the participants, at their homes or offices.

Data collection

Data were obtained through interviews and from archival documents from former and current literacy education planners. The researcher used in-depth semi-structured interview schedules with open-ended questions, which were intended to start the discussion and give the dialogue some structure. He took notes during the course of the interview, rephrased issues and probed for clarification as the interview proceeded. This enabled the researcher to obtain relevant information from participants and to enable them to elaborate on issues raised. The notes formed part of the memos and reflections on the research experience (Miles & Huberman 1994). The interview guides were validated through being given to colleagues in the department of Adult Education who were familiar with the content, in order to ask them to determine which of the questions reflected the purpose and research questions guiding the study.

Participants were also asked to comment on the preliminary analysis of the data as the process of data analysis unfolded, and they provided helpful feedback. Participants used English because they were mostly senior government officers, though they had a choice of using Setswana. I did not want to hinder their communication by imposing one language. On average, interviews lasted from 45 minutes with junior officers to two hours with senior officials. Finally, each of the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed, and read several times to facilitate an in-depth understanding of emergent issues before conducting the final analysis and write up (Wolcott 1994). Documents were used as a second major source of data in the study. Access to these sources enabled me to look for consistencies or inconsistencies between our discussions and what I read in the documents.

Data analysis involved constant coding, categorizing the data and laying out the key similarities and differences between issues. It enabled me to make substantive descriptions of responses from different officers, namely those in the higher

echelons of management to Adult Education Assistants in the fields. Then I generated themes based on revealed regularities and inconsistencies, as opposed to imposing pre-formulated categories, which set the stage for data representation and conclusions (Bogdan & Biklen 1998). Each theme was substantiated by a combination of sources such as interviews, field notes, and documents. Paying attention to categories was a critical step towards identifying themes because they helped to reveal the views of participants on how planning addressed the issues of gender and minorities.

Respondent characteristics

The study involved conducting intensive interviews with sixteen participants; eight men and eight women. The first three interviewees were former planners who had been deeply involved in the initial planning of the programme in the 1970s. The first two were white expatriates males who conducted the experimental literacy project of the 1970s under the auspices of the Botswana Extension College. One of these was one of the primary architects of the current programme. All these interviews were intended to give a historical overview. I also interviewed two senior management team members in the capital because district level planners suggested that they were responsible for the current state of the programme. Senior management officers at headquarters were also interviewed because district and regional officers referred to their key role in the planning, and to contrast the views of these officers on how literacy education impacted on the welfare of women and the minorities. Three Regional Adult Education Officers in the northern, southern and western regions were also interviewed because they coordinated the implementation of literacy education. In addition, three District Adult Education Officers in southern and northern regions and two District Adult Education Officers in the western region were interviewed to gain the insights of local and district staff. These three regions were selected out of the five national regions because they represented the cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity in the country. An analysis of these interviews revealed that senior management and district staff differed on the perceived purpose of planning literacy education, yet they agreed on the fact that women and minorities were excluded in decision-making.

Findings

An analysis of the participants' responses to issues of gender and minorities clearly revealed the Botswana National Literacy Programme failed to respond to the needs of women and the ethnic minorities in the BNLP. The participants agreed that the current literacy programme reinforced the subordination of women and facilitated the exclusion of cultural and geographical minorities from effective decision-making at all stages of the programme. The exclusion was sustained through contradictory assumptions held by planners at different levels of the bureaucracy. The senior management staff argued that literacy participants shared common concerns, they were treated as passive consumers of this expert designed programme and, consequently, the programme failed to respond to the needs of women, failed to take into account the cultural and geographical contexts of the

minority learners, and inevitably used a single language in a multilingual society. Finally, it is suggested that in order to plan and implement a more responsive programme, planners have to employ responsive approaches such as the 'real literacies approach' espoused by Alan Rogers (1999) in order for the programme to be more sensitive to gender and minority concerns in Botswana. This section summarizes the basic assumptions about literacy planning and implementation held by the planners, in order to demonstrate how, contrary to the national policy rhetoric about inclusion, planning reinforced the exclusion of certain groups because of their gender and ethnic affiliation.

Planning a decontextualized literacy programme

The planning of literacy education in Botswana excluded the felt interests of the participants because it included the input of officers from different levels on the national departmental structure of the DNFE. This included the input of cluster level to those at headquarters. The point is that there is no convincing evidence that the ultimate beneficiaries were effectively involved in decision-making at any level. The participants observed that the plans were based on the district officers' occasional visits, which are very sporadic because of lack of transport. Interviewees held different views on planning; senior management felt that it created a sense of belonging and inclusion. District staff on the other hand, felt that planning routinely ignored innovative ideas in favour of routine activities, under the pretext that there were no funds for proposed projects.

All participants agreed that on the surface the process is seemingly fair and democratic, involving local staff at sub-district and village levels who are expected to develop their own plans, and their input is built into both the district-wide and the regional plans. Johnson, a District Adult Education Officer emphasized, 'In each case, there should be an input from the cluster into the district plan before it is forwarded for inclusion in the regional and national annual departmental plan'. Mmad from senior management reported, 'Regions hold consultation meetings on a regular basis. When they plan for a year, they sit down together ... You will find that in that approach, there is a feeling of belonging'. This, according to senior management, enhances a sense of trust and signifies a common voice from the regions.

However, most district officers did not think that planning literacy was that democratic. They viewed it as a routine exercise, which systematically excluded innovative ideas. Victoria, a District Adult Education Officer aptly noted, 'We do plan for our activities, especially training and other things we do on a yearly basis ... Most of the time the plan is pretty much what I would call routine. ... The thing is that funding is available mainly for routine plans otherwise we are told that there is no money for extra things that we propose'. She further argued 'When we think of doing something innovative, its like opening a can of worms, we get told endless stories about lack of funds'. It could be argued that planning for such matters outside the usual routine meets resistance from management, who are being accused of failing to be receptive to new ideas outside the regular itineraries such as training of Literacy Group Leaders. This is partly because planning literacy education is confined to experts and excludes contributions of beneficiaries in decision-making. Unfortunately, experts believed that learners shared common concerns and viewed

planning literacy education as a technical process, which enabled them to unilaterally decide on what the learners needed to learn without consulting them. In the process it enabled experts to take controversial issues based on gender, language and minority status off the planning table. Consequently, plans in the BNLP are very standard throughout the country and clearly do not respond to the felt needs of the different categories of learners such as women and the minorities, who are presumed to have common concerns and share similar realities.

Learners sharing common concerns

Participants agreed that the planning process did not differentiate between learners on the basis of their gender or ethnic affiliations. The programme was planned almost exclusively on the basis of the experiences of experts and not those of the different categories of the learners. Planners premised the curriculum content on what they thought were common concerns of illiterate people. Christina, a District Adult Education Officer observed, 'We did not make any effort to involve the learners ... officers identified common problems in their area and included those in training LGLs hoping that they would include them in teaching learners'. Notably, the experts seemed to have focused largely on the social context of communities in south and eastern Botswana, where the preliminary needs assessment surveys were conducted in the 1970s. Prospective learners from other ethnic groups were not sufficiently consulted. The planners did not constantly check on the changing needs and circumstances of the learners, resulting in the programme failing to take the needs of learners into consideration. This was confirmed by Grace, a District Adult Education Officer who emphasized, 'The primers teach them things that do not readily apply to their context'. Learners in this regard were treated as passive consumers who were not involved in deciding on what kind of literacy they needed. The programme is planned *for* the learners and not *with* them as adult education practice would dictate, because learners in this context are treated as passive consumers.

Learners as passive consumers

Lack of learner involvement in planning led to problems such as learner dropout and high turnover rates each year. As Tana, a Regional Adult Education Officer indicated, 'I wouldn't say the planning took the needs of the learners into account ... what we are giving them is not what they want ... if they were consulted, maybe, we could have different "literacies" throughout the country'. The learners in eastern Botswana were involved in a very limited way when they tried the newly developed materials. They were not necessarily consulted on what was to be included in the primers. According to participants, the programme loses learners among the minorities in western Botswana because it fails to meet their needs. Therefore, this creates a need for a programme that would be relevant to all sections of society.

The problem of lack of learner involvement in planning was succinctly articulated by Nono, a District Adult Education Officer, thus, 'Overall, learners are not involved in the planning and implementation of the programme, they are just passive consumers'. It could be concluded that the literacy education materials were

decontextualized and mostly failed to respond to the needs of the learners resulting in dramatic decreases in enrolment rates. For example, in 1997, 17,588 learners enrolled; this figure dropped to 9399 in 2001. This was partly because of the failure of learners to use what they learn to improve their conditions (Maruatona 2001). The decline in enrolment is a significant manifestation that the programme is decontextualized and fails to respond to gender and minority issues.

Gender and literacy provision in Botswana

The participants differed when asked how literacy responded to gender and cultural and contextual differences among the learners in the programme. When I asked how the programme responded to the needs of women, since they are the majority in the programme, it was noted that their needs are not prioritized. In effect, the programme reinforces their subordination. Moiplai, a District Adult Education Officer commented, 'We do not talk about things that are immediately relevant to the lives of women in the programme'. According to participants, women were not culturally given equal chances to go to school as men and were most likely to be withdrawn to be married. Nono observed, 'You see, in the past, most people who could not gain access to educational opportunities were women. Some of them were withdrawn from school to be married away to men who came from South African mines'. The national literacy programme was accused of not being responsive to the needs of women because it is a generic programme not targeted to any specific social category in society. Mothibedi, a District Adult Education Officer illustrated, 'The [topics] on women are about their domestic roles such as fetching firewood, cooking and giving children medication ... what worries me is that in the discussions, these issues are not raised to challenge our gender beliefs and values that are potentially oppressive to women'.

Participants were generally in agreement that, in the programme, teaching does not reflect gender concerns, and the topics taught emphasize such cultural practices as marriage and are viewed as what should happen to every woman; not getting married is not taken to be a choice a woman can make. The programme attracts men at workplaces but it fails to address workplace issues. Mothibedi observed 'If we had people who were innovative, they would have wanted to do different contents for workers ... and not to teach workers the same content for someone who sells oranges at the railway station'. Upon being asked to describe what could be done about this situation, Johnson argued for the provision of 'multiple literacies', which would address the needs of all categories of men and women in the programme. 'We should expose learners to skills they will apply in their life contexts'. In addition to the lack of response to the needs of men and women, participants agreed that the programme failed to address the need of the minorities through adopting policies that were not encompassing, thereby reinforcing cultural stereotypes and exclusion.

Literacy and the minorities

Participants observed that minority issues were not taken into account in the programme; their needs were subsumed under those of the mainstream Setswana-speaking communities. The content failed to address the contextual needs of

learners from minority communities. As Johnson explained, 'Primers do not include issues related to specific life situation of the minority groups ... It looks like their topics are built around the life conditions of Setswana speaking groups'. Quite clearly, judging from the contents of the primers, one cannot tell that there are many ethnic groups in Botswana. The planning of the literacy programme seemed to have been intended to either ignore the cultures of other ethnic groups, such as the Basarwa/San, or to attempt to integrate them into mainstream society.

The exclusion of the minorities was facilitated partly through the use of Setswana (the national language) – a language with which some communities are not familiar. Planners argued that the choice of Setswana was natural because it was used in other institutions and there was no significant objection to its use as a medium of instruction in the programme. However, there is no recorded evidence that the government made any efforts to include other languages. In the 1970s, other languages were used to conduct drama and, according to Rossy, one of the former officers, there was no criticism of the use of Ikalanga language to facilitate literacy in northern Botswana. As he put it, 'no one criticized us for running a whole performance in a minority language'. However, participants felt that other languages were deliberately excluded because Setswana was used in pursuit of the principle of national unity. Mossy, a former senior officer, deliberated 'You should also understand that one of the leading principles is (*popagano ya sechaba*) national unity ... we should understand that our role is to teach the national language to contribute to it'. It was assumed that if people across the whole country can read and write Setswana, it is going to promote nation-building and national unity. Others felt that the imposition of Setswana showed lack of democracy and consultation. Grace observed, 'It demonstrates a lack of consultation with other communities in making key decisions'.

One participant felt that some people thought the introduction of other languages would bring chaos. Johnson observed 'Including other languages would create room for chaos that might lead to social turmoil and secessionism'. The other argument raised by senior officials was that there was no resistance to the use of Setswana, and some individuals wanted to indulge in an academic exercise. Mossy indicated, 'No, this was an intellectual exercise from academia, those who were going through the process [teaching-learning] actually never showed any kind of resistance'. Mmad agreed and narrated, 'They would not have wanted to learn in their mother tongue. They wanted to learn the national language so that they could be able to communicate with other people'.

In spite of the lack of resistance to its use, there was a consensus among the participants that minority learners faced challenges because of their poor command of Setswana. Mossy observed, 'Minority learners might have some problems/hurdles because of language. They might take a little longer but they will learn the content just as well as the Setswana-speakers'. Others noted that learners faced problems in engaging in discussions because of Setswana. Mpho, a District Adult Education Officer, acknowledged that 'it is a pity that it is assumed that learners are to engage in a discussion because there is not much for them to discuss in a language that is foreign to them'. He further pointed out, 'discussion in classes among the minority is conspicuous by its absence in teaching and learning interactions'. The language problem does not only affect learners but minority teachers also have profound problems with Setswana, especially in the use of idioms, proverbs and other expressions. Unfortunately, the powers that be are aware of all these communication problems but are not willing to address them. Selgado, a Regional Adult Education

Officer recalled, 'They do not know what the concepts are ... They cannot engage in a comprehensive discussion of such concepts or issues'. Ultimately, minority learners engage in rote learning, where they learn to recognize words and symbols but do not understand their meanings.

Civil servants do not want to act against the regulations governing their work. They would not instruct the literacy teachers to use their mother tongue or other languages not prescribed by the national policy on language. As Selgado puts it 'The point is that Setswana is the national language and if you were to deviate from that and say they could use other alternatives, it would be viewed as challenging government'. It could be argued that the exclusion of men and women from a comprehensive decision-making process to decide on the curriculum of the literacy programme served to reinforce their social subordination. For the minorities, failure to object to the use of Setswana led to their lack of effective participation in class discussions and use of rote learning as opposed to creative and discursive learning. The programme therefore perpetuated a form of gender and cultural deprivation and failed to address the real needs of men and women and minority learners in the programme.

Discussion

The study demonstrated that literacy education in Botswana focussed on basic reading and writing skills without taking the needs of different categories of learners into consideration. The most crucial point was that participants felt that planning did not address competing choices based on gender, language and ethnic differences among the learners. Senior management staff viewed planning as intending to facilitate a sense of belonging and gave everybody a voice because all were involved in the annual plans of the programme. District level participants on the other hand, clearly viewed planning as a routine exercise that failed to address the needs of different social categories such as women and the minorities. Each time a district officer proposed something innovative and popular with the learners it was dismissed on the grounds that there were no funds. This is part of a pattern among providers of conventional literacy.

According to Quigley (1997), planning literacy education is not driven by popularly identified needs but the dictates and priorities of the state, and literacy education is out-competed by other agencies. Planning literacy in Botswana was viewed as an objectified and technical process geared towards building consensus among officers about what should constitute the curriculum, but not involving the learners in all aspects of decision-making. Participants felt that the curriculum was intended to transmit an intellectualized culture, which is viewed as beneficial in governmental quarters, and knowledge is structured almost exclusively to cognitive competencies (Pratt 1994). The outcome of planning as framed in the BNLP is to reproduce and legitimate the dominant culture, knowledge, values and language of the elite (Youngman 1997). Planners planned *for* and not *with* the learners and presumed that they knew what women and learners from minority communities needed.

Participants felt that literacy planning was marginally influenced by the social and cultural contexts of men, women and the minorities. This is not unique to Botswana because members of the dominant culture always attempt to use the curriculum to assimilate minorities. As Blackledge (2000) indicated, planners assume they can

provide information which could be used in different contexts, in spite of the situated nature of knowledge. Giroux (1997) stated that in general, state programmes do not only exclude certain categories but such materials impede critical thinking and such texts are stripped of any critical edge. In a similar vein, Delon (1997) observed that the powerful few prescribe for the less-informed but affected majority. The point is that in nascent democracies such as Botswana, programmes are driven mostly by powers and interests of bureaucrats and not the interests of the people *per se*. This situation was manifest in the way women and the minorities were excluded in planning literacy education in Botswana. As Christina, a District Adult Education Officer put it, 'We do not make any effort to involve the learners; officers identify what that they thought were common problems'.

The participants observed that while women are in the majority in the programme, its planning has consistently failed to meet their needs, thereby indicating that even if women participate in a literacy education programme their aspirations do not drive such a programme (Limage 1993; Mafela 1994; Stromquist 1999). According to these scholars, literacy focuses on teaching women about reproductive and not productive activities. For example, Stromquist (1999) concluded that in Brazil, literacy education programmes did not address women's particular concerns but were centred on conventional roles such as nutrition, health, childcare and family planning – all of which renders them powerless in society. The poverty and inequality of women is attributable to their lack of opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to resolve their needs and enhance their experiences (Sleeter 1999).

In addition to its failure to address gender issues, the programme maintained the *status quo* by using a single language in a multilingual society. This leaves other groups under-represented and at the risk of losing their self-identity through integration into the mainstream culture (Blackledge 2000). Participants had conflicting views regarding the use of one language. Senior management staff stressed that it was necessary to use Setswana because, although it was a pedagogic hurdle for minorities, it was a natural choice for it to be the medium of instruction in the programme. The use of one imposed language is not unique to developing nations; in developed countries it serves to assimilate minorities. Blackledge (2000: 13) observed, 'in some cases reading and writing are of secondary importance but rather it is to create a shared socio-cultural world view'. Language is a crucial marker of self-identity but it is often used as a political resource by dominant sociocultural groups to bring cohesion to a state (Gunn 1997).

Consequently, in spite of their differences on language choice, all participants agreed that the use of Setswana was a hurdle for the minority language speakers in that they resorted to rote learning because they did not understand the language and were incapable of engaging in any constructive dialogue in class. Le Roux (2000) indicated that the government of Botswana used education to facilitate total integration of all minorities into the Setswana culture. As Rassool (1999: 12) puts it, 'National language provides a means by which control is exercised over the topics and form of literacy that are legitimated in that social context'. The use of a single language demonstrated how the state controlled the planning of literacy education which, unfortunately, excluded men, women and minorities on the basis of their gender and culture. Below are some tentative suggestions on what could be done to redress these issues, to enable the BNLP to respond to the needs of all social categories.

The study has demonstrated the limitations of failing to involve all categories of learners in the planning programmes. In order to overcome instances of exclusion as demonstrated above, there is a need to adopt strategies that would involve learners in planning literacy programmes, in order to avert a situation where such excessive control of the planning process regulates rather than liberates learners and does not benefit them (Quigley 1997). It is therefore suggested that in order to develop effective and responsive materials for literacy, both teachers and learners should be involved to avert the development of inadequate materials. New approaches that involve learners effectively are rare, but one such approach is the participatory planning technique known as the Regenerated Freirean Literacy Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT). The other is the 'real literacies' approach, propounded by writer Alan Rogers. This is a programme that uses the integrative Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique and the Freirean approach to generate literacy programmes. It was used with very positive outcomes among communities in Bangladesh, El Salvador and Uganda between 1993 and 1995, and has since been tried in a number of African states by both governments and non-governmental organizations. Archer & Cottingham (1996: ii) indicated, 'as the participants construct their own materials, they take ownership of the issues that come up and are more likely to be involved to take local action, change their behavior and their attitudes'. The learners arrive independently at the solutions to their problems through their own analysis, which gives them great faith in the results. Newman (2004) indicated that REFLECT has been used in over 350 organizations in over 60 countries. It involved local people in developing nations to fight for their rights and good governance. It is against this background that it is suggested that this approach could be adapted to Botswana.

It is also suggested that in order to strengthen planning, planners should use relevant aspects of the real literacies approach. It should be noted that this method is applicable to the Botswana context because it does not depart radically from the current, conventional programme. The approach is close to the conventional literacy practice but, over and above this, real literacies involves people developing their skills of literacy and using these newly acquired skills to undertake their daily work in their surroundings – such as at work, home and/or in the community – to improve their quality of life. Such an approach is applicable in Botswana because people are already used to democracy and have been engaged in cattle rearing and other life activities they can draw from. It is concluded that developing materials using these learner-based participatory approaches among women and the minorities in Botswana would significantly address the limitations of the current literacy programme noted above. Participatory approaches would provide a considerable repertoire of experiences of women and minorities, to be used in planning the curriculum.

Another broad course of action to be explored is to study and document orthographies of all languages in the country and collectively decide, with the learners, which language they prefer for learning, in order to reduce the negative impact of using a single language in a multilingual society. It is suggested that, given a choice, minorities would choose to learn the national language when they know how to write their mother tongue. Ntiri (1998) observed that local languages instil pride in the learners, sustain their motivation to learn and prevent dropout because of failure to make any meaning from what they learn. The use of the mother tongue would preserve their culture and group identity but, more importantly, they would later

cope much better with learning the national language once they have acquired reading and writing skills in their own language.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated that planning literacy education in Botswana excluded sections of society from the decision-making process on the grounds of their gender and cultural affinity. Planning was reserved for experts who believed that learners shared common concerns and learners were perceived as passive consumers who needed to be planned *for* and not to be involved *in* the planning process. The consequence was that planners organized a programme that reinforced gender subordination as opposed to helping women challenge their social marginalization. Planners imposed one national language on the minorities in order to facilitate national unity. They argued that it was a natural choice partly because no one objected to its imposition, in spite of the learning hurdles minorities faced. Finally, it is suggested that genuine literacy education planning should involve all sections of society in order to address gender and cultural differences. This can be achieved through the use of the mother tongue among the minorities and engaging in participatory approaches such as REFLECT and/or the 'real literacies' approach in planning inclusive literacy education in Botswana.

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