

# **TOWARDS EQUITABLE DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION: MOVES TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT**

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The first part of this paper is a tentative sketch of one contribution to the growing process of a much-needed shift in our understanding of education in sub-Saharan Africa. It is primarily a response to the failure to meet the real needs of the majority of children through formal education. This sketch does not pretend to be complete and for the time being is at the level of polemical discourse rather than developed theory. The second part of the paper describes and analyses two projects in Namibia that were pragmatic responses to particular social contexts in which conventional formal education has not even partially succeeded and it is accepted that the conventions of formal education have to be diversified if equity and relevance are to be achievable in the long term. The final part of the paper points up some of the wider implications and challenges of these projects in the light of the theoretical framework of the first part.

Let us begin with a brief reminder of the history of formal education in Anglophone southern and eastern Africa. Formal education in the region came in through two channels: one was the activity of missionaries, at first preparing converts to continue the work of their denominations through basic literacy, numeracy and religious education, and to develop the skills of manual and domestic labour. This corresponded, to some extent, to the aims of church schools for lower classes in Britain but never became a universal system in Africa. The other channel was through the colonial administration, establishing schools for their own children and for the children of the elite-to-be, primarily on the model of upper-middle class education—the grammar school. Missionary schools were assimilated into this stratum. As a result, the examination by which only the top 12 percent in England and Wales were assessed—the GCE ‘O’ level exam, run by Examination Boards or Councils—became the standard by which every child in school in southern and eastern Africa was measured. The peculiar British system of Examination Boards was continued in African countries even after Independence, locking formal education into the system of an academic elite in Britain rather than one of education for the masses (which, in Britain, led to the Certificate of Secondary Education, or the Royal Society of Arts or City and Guilds certificates).

Whereas compared to the rest of Europe Britain did not have a modern national curriculum until quite late, African countries devised national curricula as part of nationhood building, on achieving Independence. Uniformity, as opposed to diversity, was built into the concept of nationhood. In Namibia and South Africa, diversity had been negatively exploited through apartheid, and the leaders of these new governments sought different ways of establishing national uniformity. The predominant curriculum style of the early independent states in Africa was one of heavily detailed prescribed content (Bernstein’s collection code in a strong classification model). Attempts to Africanise curricula after Independence failed at anything more than a superficial level, since the very form of education predetermined what cultural capital was valued and what content was relevant in relation to the examination (Hawes, 1979). Even when England and Wales, under the Labour governments, moved toward comprehensive education more akin to continental models and changed the examination to the G.C.S.E, education in Africa did not follow suit (Namibia was the first exception in 1993).

When Education for All was declared in 1990 at a worldwide conference on education held in Jomtien, Thailand, formal education was already failing dreadfully in Africa. During the 90s, it has

lagged even further behind. A universal system had been created which had minimal anchoring in African reality, hardly acknowledged African epistemology and cosmology, was irrelevant to the lives of the vast majority of the population, and yet had to be strongly signalled in political rhetoric (Fuller, 1991). The failure of Universal Primary Education in Tanzania, for example, was first and foremost a failure of relevance in terms of form and content. As long as formal education did not prepare children for the demands of life, parents found it better to take them out of school and let them learn what they needed to know in other ways. The expense of formal education also shows its origins: it grew up as—and still is—the education of an urban middle class rich enough to pay for it through taxes and private contributions. African countries quite simply cannot afford formal education for all, on the British, French, and Portuguese models.<sup>1</sup> Where governments have succeeded in raising school enrolment and completion rates, for example, in Zimbabwe, schooling has been meaningless for the majority. Because their education was not relevant to students' lives, tens of thousands of 'O' level successes have not lead to employment or further education, creating "diploma disease" and alienating a generation from other alternatives.

The failure of formal education, through its rigidity, lack of relevance, and expense, led to demands being made on non-formal education. The need to train or retrain adults in literacy, numeracy and skills has grown proportionately with the realisation that formal education is dysfunctional and has led to non-formal education being regarded as the poor relative of, and second best to formal education.

The dysfunction of formal education is also being felt in Europe. Formal education grew up partly to protect children from—and partly to prepare them for—work in an industrialised society. Only as the need for child labour was obviated by improved technology was it possible to reach universal primary schooling in Europe. With the shift to high technology, it is becoming less possible to train directly for work, even with the increase in the service industry sector. With increasing technology, the need for labour is being reduced. Where the Protestant work ethic once was the foundation of work and schooling and gave meaning to both, it no longer has any legitimacy. There is no value in education directly related to the labour market: instead, education must prepare children and young people in how to cope with time instead of work. In order to keep young people away from unemployment (the last throes of stigmatism based on the Protestant work ethic) formal education is extending to 12 compulsory years.

At the same time, fundamental questions are being raised about the theoretical foundations of formal education (Gardner, 1991). Research on intelligence, child development, curriculum and class, race and gender, and the way formal systems create their own dysfunction, combine with parents' responses to the inadequacy of education for their children. Although the critical research has yet to be brought together as a new paradigm for education, movements such as home schooling and the flexi-curriculum are operationalising alternative forms of education in a pragmatic way. For the time being, however, these are largely the prerogatives of well-resourced middle-class families (Meighan, 1996).

The dysfunction of formal education in Africa bears certain superficial resemblance to the situation in Europe, such as the inability of education to prepare all children for employment, when full employment opportunities do not exist. Yet at the same time, the discourse on education for

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<sup>1</sup> It is an interesting exercise to surmise what would have been the result had formal education in Africa been modelled on the Scandinavian systems. Until as recently as one generation ago, there were differences between town and country schools, and teaching was only three days a week in many areas. School holidays were placed to correspond to the agricultural or fishing year so that children could assist in the work. The Scandinavian systems are the most equitable and "examination free" in Europe today. Curricula styles have tended to open frameworks rather than detailed content.

employment remains widely used as an argument for pre-vocational skills in the curriculum or even as a justification for sending children to school at all. At a deeper level, the appropriateness to Africa of accepted European paradigms and theories of intelligence, knowledge, learning, and curriculum is doubtful, but little evidence of the critical research is seen in terms of results in curriculum development or at universities in Africa. On the other hand, critical pedagogy has imbued non-formal education, especially adult literacy training, to a much greater extent.

At the same time, the context and reasons for the dysfunction of formal education in Africa are different from those in Europe. There are new challenges to face in Africa. Quite possibly the most urgent is the impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems. As noted, a formal education system is highly resource-intensive. The impact of AIDS is already becoming evident in terms of human resources: the attrition rate amongst teachers and education administrators is increasing. As young and middle-generation adults become ill and die, so does the capacity to resource education from home contributions and through the fiscal base. The role of children changes. Many more become orphans earlier, and the breakdown of supportive extended family structures leads to children taking over the role of adults and caregivers at young ages. Girls in particular have to take on adult roles earlier—as providers and sexual partners or mothers.

Yet formal education predicated the complementary role set of teacher and pupil, whereby the teacher is an adult and the pupil is a child. In many parts of Africa, this no longer applies. Similarly, the world of the child-adult is increasingly becoming one of the critical provision of food and of health care, which means a very different type of knowledge than what is taught in the formal curriculum and a very different utilisation of time and space than a classroom and a timetable.

The globalisation process is reflected in increasing uniformity and conformity in education, where the similarities between the modern school in different countries are greater than the similarities between schools within each country (Melber, in Avenstrup, 1997). Although the globalisation process is not unproblematic in Europe either, the culture that it promotes grew out of the European context, whereas in Africa it is imposed. Through the marketplace that the whole sector approach is opening up, globalisation will be given an even greater impetus.

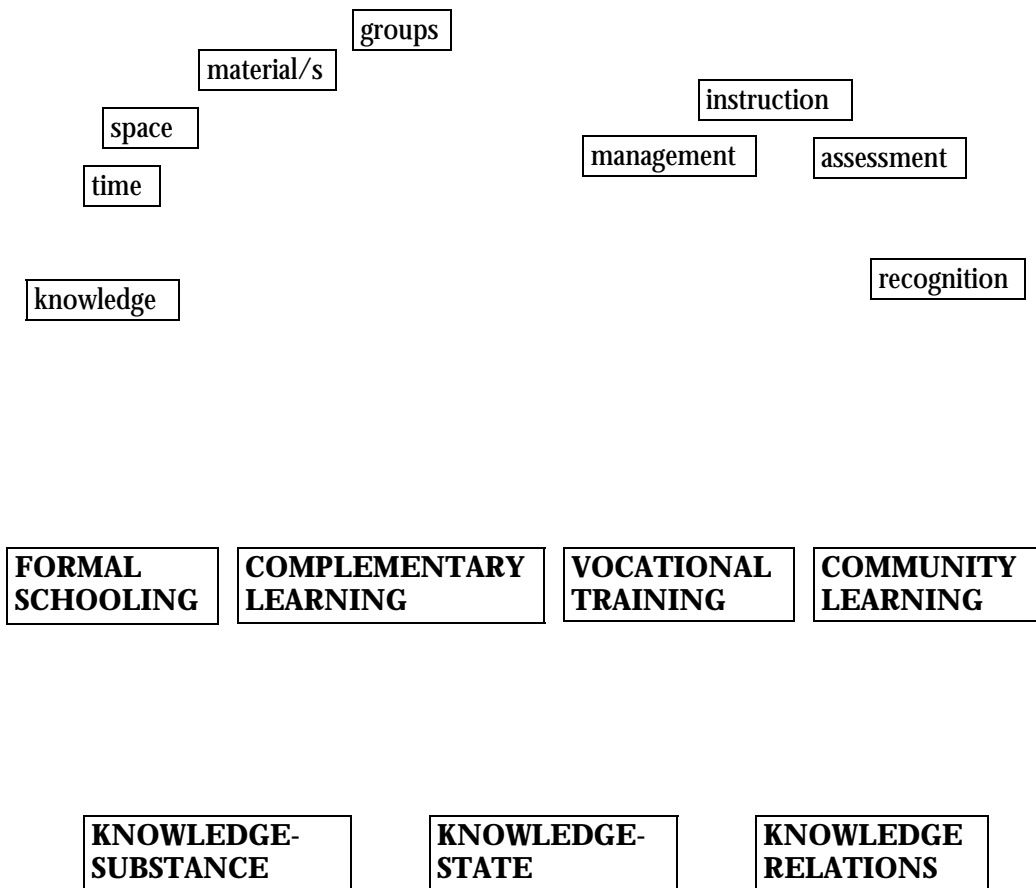
Different countries are trying in different ways to take account of some of these issues. Language policies in education are beginning slowly to change. Namibia has thirteen languages in education, and South Africa followed suit after democratisation. Mozambique and Zambia are entering on processes of acknowledging mother tongues in education. Zimbabwe will be taking greater account of mother tongues in its pending curriculum reform. Tanzania has long been looked up to for its Kiswahili policy, but that policy applies only to primary education. It has yet to change the language of examination, and hence of instruction, at the 'O' and 'A' levels from English to Kiswahili.

Some curriculum reforms are beginning to create space for local content (Avenstrup, 1997). In many countries, one hears that the national curriculum and syllabi are just a framework to be developed locally, but the overload of content and the lack of teacher training in curriculum development make this impossible. Mozambique is currently discussing whether the curriculum can be designed with an 80-20 weighting of national and local. South Africa has adopted and adapted the English/Australian curriculum model (and Zimbabwe will be going the same way) of outcomes-based education. The outcomes seem to be defined generically enough for a variety of contexts, but the curriculum begs the question of whose cultural capital and level of resources is presupposed for it to function optimally.

Dialogues are beginning between educators in formal and non-formal education, and the potential effectiveness of non-formal education raises many questions about which group of educators should learn from the other. One future stage will be the recognition of the worth of non-formal paths as

equal to that of the formal track and opening up of the possibility of movement between the two modes. Yet there are many issues to be explored. Can children learn better in non-formal modes, or do they need the formal grounding in order to be able to learn? If they need formal grounding, do they have to learn to learn because formal education is so contrived? Have the complex methodologies and organisational patterns of formal education been developed in order to invade and manipulate the child's world of time, space and wonder, and make it as palatable as possible? The psychological and structural violence needed to ensure control and surveillance in formal education is still very much in physical evidence in African classrooms.

In discussing the need for diversity in educational forms and for integrated diversity, we might miss some important opportunities if we only look at the relationship between formal and non-formal education. There are a variety of initiatives moving at the edges and sometimes nearer the core, of formal education, non-formal education, and what is sometimes referred to as "indigenous education." The simple sum of the best of these put into one system is not likely to be the solution, even if it were possible. Diversity, even integrated diversity, will not in itself guarantee equity: it may even promote disparities. We are in need of tools for analysis if each context is to develop its own form of diversity, which has at the same time the potential for becoming equitable. The following model is suggested as one such tool for analysis towards transformation (Avenstrup, in Brock-Utne, 1999):



The diagram aims to illustrate that within the diversity of different types of education, there are some common features, and if one is to work towards equitable, integrated diversity, one must take the different levels of features as well as types of education in account.

At its root, education is only one of several types of learning as a human activity. It is not merely habitual or instinctive learning, initiated from within and by the learner; instead, it is organised by society, outside the learner, and it is planned, rather than purely spontaneous. The deep structure of education has three main components. The first is **knowledge-substance**, in the broadest sense of the word: what education is about and what it contains. The second is the **knowledge-state**, which could be seen as a scale from the given to the new discovery. The third is **knowledge-relations**, the complementary role set of the educator and the educated (be it teacher and learner or whatever terms for these roles are used in a particular context).

From these three components, four types of education can be identified, each with its own rules for generating different meanings from the deep structure: **community learning**, **vocational training**, **complementary education**, and **formal education**. Definitions of these four types of education do not produce consistently precise boundaries. Qu'ranic schools, for example, bear all the characteristics of formal education, but are community ventures to a greater degree than formal education. Many arts institutions, especially in the British tradition, have out-of-school educational programmes for young people in music, dance or theatre, which are very formally organised, taught, and examined in the child's free time, and yet which are not part of the formal education system. In the rural African setting, the transmission of knowledge in *ngoma* (music-story-drama-song- dance) can also be very formalised. To the outside observer in rural Africa, training in cleaning grain, pounding millet or maize, basket weaving, tending cattle, or making dairy products, resembles low-technology vocational education. Yet the meaning of "vocational education" denotes a more formally organised system of training related to employment in a labour market in the formal economy, which involves other distinctive structural features at the surface level.

What all four types of education have in common is that they organise the same elements in identifiable structures at the surface level generated from deep structures of learning. What differentiates them from each other is how these structures are organised at the surface level, and the degree of uniformity or diversity. The greatest uniformity of structure is in formal education, where it is a function of control, i.e. through the nation state or globalisation. The greatest diversity of organisation, on the other hand, is in community education. The common elements of education, however they are structured, are knowledge, time, space, management, grouping, instruction, assessment, and recognition.

If one were to compare formal schooling with community learning in rural Africa, one would observe some distinct differences. In formal schooling, knowledge is strictly classified, time is put into tables, space is strictly delineated and contained, management is formalised, children are grouped in set sizes of narrow age bands called classes, materials are pre-selected and approved, instruction is professionalised, assessment is formalised, and recognition is done through certification. In community learning, knowledge is weakly classified but more strongly framed, learning is only sometimes divided into time compartments but usually corresponds to main stages of life and the working year, and only sometimes (e.g. initiation) into confined space; it is flexibly

managed, more by virtue of real competence than formal role, groups vary in size and spread from own age-groups to mixed-age groups, materials are what are available and appropriate to the task and do not need approval, instruction is in the hands of a range of community members from slightly older mentors to highly respected elders, assessment is based on demonstrated competence (seldom tested in artificially construed situations), and recognition is in the form of rewards, respect, status, and/or increased responsibility (Tedla,1995).

Both forms of education coexist in many children's lives—community education through upbringing and formal education through schooling—but in African literature there are numerous descriptions of the particularly painful ways in which the contrast between them has created a divide in the minds of African children and young people.

Complementary education and vocational education have more flexible structures than formal education but not the degree of flexibility that community education has. Both respond to the shortcomings of formal education in meeting widely varying needs, age groups and circumstances. Vocational education also has some distant roots back to family-based apprenticeship within the same trade. Complementary education is largely the content and certification of formal education organised in a different way, although one should perhaps ask if that is what it really ought to be.

The point to be made here is that to move toward equitable diversity, one must clearly define the level of diversity to be reached, so that the discussion does not become superficial. If the full potential of the diversity illustrated above were to be realised, one would see a system of education recognising a variety of forms of knowledge and ways of organising learning in terms of time, space, grouping, assessment, and recognition. The changes in roles and in systems could be quite profound, and one must be aware that one cannot change one element at the surface level without implications at deeper levels. We will now discuss two examples from Namibia where the inadequacy of the formal system led to strategies for diversification. Following these examples, we will return to a discussion of some of the deeper implications.

### **The Namibian situation: a move towards equitable diversity**

*The doors of learning and culture shall be opened [Freedom Charter, South Africa].*

Although the compelling goal of Education for All was adopted by Namibia, along with over 100 other countries, in Jomtien, many attitudes, policies, practices and procedures still contribute to the maintenance of inequities. In this regard Anderson (1992) states that there appear to be two main obstacles keeping education systems from reaching and teaching everybody effectively—a lack of resources and a lack of ideas—resulting in the doors of learning remaining closed for many.

Since Independence, the Namibian government has devoted a substantial amount of its funds to the education sector and currently spends about 28 of its budget on education. However, the needs are so great that education appears to be 'chronically underfunded.' According to Anderson (1992) the lack of funds and the lack of ideas are related in many countries. When funds are not available, people do not devote attention to education. If good ideas are lacking and education seems to stagnate, funds are diverted to other enterprises. This situation has manifested itself in many African countries over the last decade.

In future years, a society that does not educate its people will be disabled in terms of the economic productivity and social welfare of its people. Education for All and the principle of lifelong learning therefore are very important goals to pursue. However, many people do not believe that Education

for All is an achievable goal because of scarcity and need in many African countries. We would argue that Education for All is achievable, but not by pursuing policies and programmes of the past. What is needed are present-day educational innovations which offer new ideas and experiences and educational responses that are tailored to the requirements and needs of the groups they are designed to serve. Innovative and low-cost education programmes **can** improve access to and quality of education and, simultaneously, generate new sources of funds and support. Even small financial investments in education can release great creativity and energy (Anderson, 1992). It is within this context that two innovative alternative programmes in Namibia are described. Both these programmes are targeted towards those who have historically been disadvantaged and marginalised – the San (also referred to as Bushmen, but for this paper the Ju/'hoansi) and the Ovahimba.

### **The Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project**

The Bushmen/San are the oldest indigenous people of the sub-region. They have been treated brutally both by fellow Black Namibians and Europeans and have been driven off almost all their traditional lands. According to Swarts and Avenstrup (1994), 80 percent of Bushmen speakers in Namibia have never been in school. The way in which the formal education system treated Bushmen in the past did not create confidence and trust in education.

The majority of the Ju/'hoan-speaking Bushmen live in the Nyae Nyae area of north-eastern Namibia. According to Kann (1991) pre-independence education for black people in Namibia was characterised by very high dropout, repetition and failure rates. The situation among the Ju/'hoansi was even worse. The people had no control over their own schooling. The educational philosophy used in the schools was totally alien to the informal education children were exposed to at home. The curriculum was repressive and to a large extent irrelevant to the lives of the learners; it contained elements, like corporal punishment, which were unheard of in Ju/'hoan society. Teachers did not speak or understand Ju/'hoan and learners did not speak or understand Afrikaans (the medium of instruction). The result was that very few Ju/'hoan children started school (about 5 percent of 3 000). Virtually only a handful have completed school or have been to school long enough to become fully literate.

The Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project (NNVSP) was initially a fully donor-funded project under the auspices of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation (NNDF). The Namibian government now funds some components of the project, while some are still donor-funded. The project aims to bring lower primary education (Grades 1 – 3) to the children in the area, instead of the children having to go away to a government school or not to go to school at all. The education provided is meaningful, relevant, and culturally affirmative; it adheres to the national curriculum for lower primary, which provides a reasonable framework for local development. The medium of instruction is Ju/'hoan.

The Nyae Nyae Village schools consist of five small schools scattered across a relatively large area. Learners come from feeder villages and stay with relatives. The schools have a feeding programme where a member of the community does the cooking.

The teachers (five senior and six junior teachers) have been recruited from the ranks of the Ju/'hoan communities scattered across the Nyae Nyae area. The main requirements for recruitment are that candidates are Ju/'hoan speakers and acceptable to the community. Since only a very limited number of people already had some formal education, it was imperative to use them in creative and innovative ways to cover the three main professional components to be catered for by the project.

- All concerned agreed that the most effective education for Ju/'hoansi would build on the educational strengths of their own society. According to Kann (1991) the intended aims of the NNVSP were:
- to increase the number of children who actually started school
- to overcome the high drop-out rate among children who started school in the government school at Tsumkwe
- to facilitate the transition from village and family life to a life in a hostel away from family
- to provide literacy skills in the Ju/'hoan language before the children had to start learning in a foreign language, English.

The project design therefore rested on the following three pillars: curriculum and materials development, language development, and teacher education.

### **Curriculum and Materials Development**

The Ju/'hoan way of child rearing is much less authoritarian and more child-centred than most societies. The Ju/'hoan do not force children to go to school. If the education is not good enough and interesting enough, the children will just not go to school and the parents will not force them. The curriculum and materials therefore had to be developed to be relevant and interesting to the lives of Ju/'hoan children in order to maintain interest and engagement in school activities. In this regard parents, learners, and student teachers were involved in curriculum and language development. Language, folk-tales, and stories received a lot of attention, and traditional skills like tracking, formed the basis for developing some science materials. One important guiding principle, however, was that the village school curriculum was to dovetail with the national curriculum to ensure that children could relatively easily make the transition to the government school.

The methodology adopted can very simply be summarised as 'learning by doing and observing,' with observing having being refined to a fine art and science by the Ju/'hoan and other hunter-gatherers. The methodology was aimed at instilling a positive attitude towards education and training, and great sensitivity was required from those assisting in that endeavour (Kann, 1991). In order to make their transition to the government school easier, the children were, however, required to know what other children their age knew, and preferably a bit more.

### **Language Development**

Readers that relate to the immediate environment have been produced in the Ju/'hoan language based on oral folk tales well know to the learners. Tales have been collected, selected and modified for written transmission by the student teachers, in collaboration with community members and the teacher trainer. The illustrations of the readers were selected from drawings done by the learners themselves. Thus the community, learners, and student teachers contributed to a large extent to language and curriculum development, a situation not widely found in schools in Namibia (Swarts and Avenstrup, 1994).

### **Teacher Education**

The student teachers received an induction course and a pre-service teacher education course as well as in-service training. The induction course was intended to make student teachers well versed in the reading and writing of Ju/'hoan and to provide basic oral English skills and mathematical skills

corresponding to Grade 5. The main aim of the pre-service course was to make the student teachers familiar with the Grade 1 curriculum and the materials developed for that curriculum. They had to understand and subscribe to the basic philosophy underlying the VSP and had to be acceptable to the community. The in-service course concentrated on the Grades 2 and 3 curriculum and materials. The student teachers, in collaboration with the teacher trainer, developed a simple and practical teacher's handbook for use during their training and while working in their schools.

### **Grade 10 Equivalence**

The minimum requirements for employment as a teacher in Namibia are Grade 10 or equivalent and the Instructional Skills Certificate (ISC). Since the training of the NNVSP student teachers had been specifically devised for their situation, they would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to write a general Grade 10 examination in 9 different subjects. The National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) therefore advised the Permanent Secretary that it was *“theoretically possible to reach comparable knowledge, skills and attitudes partly or wholly through other means. In such cases, the knowledge, skills and attitudes would not be able to be validly assessed through the JSC examination. A valid means of assessment for the alternative acquisition of equivalent knowledge, skills and attitudes would have to take into account the results of both formal and non-formal learning, and experiential learning”* (NIED, 1997).

Four areas of learning were to be assessed: Linguistic and Literacy (English and Mother Tongue), Mathematical, Natural Scientific, and Socio-Economic. NIED recommended certain major assignments that would give evidence of a knowledge base equivalent to Grade 10:

- a major assignment in Namibian history, and an in-depth project on one aspect of Namibian history, e.g. The Bushmen
- a major assignment in Geography giving an overview of main geographical features of Namibia, and an in-depth project, e.g. on the Nyae Nyae area
- a major assignment in Natural Science, e.g. Life Science, involving field work, experiments, and a theoretical part explaining various phenomena observed, based on the ecology of the Nyae Nyae area
- a portfolio of work completed in Mathematics showing command of the four operations and their application to a variety of tasks of measurement, estimation and calculation. All examples were to be related to everyday life and the immediate environment
- a collection of oral tradition (stories, oral history, songs) in the mother tongue, written down, and commented on for use in teaching
- a portfolio of written work in English, including examples of letters, reports, summaries, notes, essays, etc. (the content could all be related to issues in teaching and learning)

The English used in other assignments could also be assessed as part of English competency. Oral English could be assessed when visiting teachers, in their teaching of English, and in a discussion about their work.

In order to prepare them for the major assignments and projects in each learning area, NIED supplied the teacher trainers with suitable reading lists and resource books, asking them not only rely on the resource books and reading lists but also on the knowledge of the older people in their community. They were thus encouraged to consult their elders, as a large percentage of the

information needed was based on oral traditions (History, Mother Tongue and even Geography and Mathematics). The following are examples of assignments given to the student teachers:

- Describe (tell us more about) the leadership system in your own society or group (Social History).
- Describe briefly the relations between your people and the other population groups in your region (Namibian history since independence).
- Were any of your people employed by the South African government? List the posts or jobs (if any) such people were assigned to (Pre-independence history).
- Draw a map of your immediate surroundings to a scale, e.g. ten steps to one cm. Devise your own way to indicate trees, houses, water points, roads, etc. on the map (Geography: Direction and Scale).
- Describe the weather at Tsumkwe/Baraka at 08:00 and again at 13:00 on a certain day (Geography: Weather and climate).
- Describe a very useful plant in your area. Why is it so useful? (Geography: Ecology).
- What are the environmental problems caused by over-utilisation of natural resources in the Nyae Nyae area? Suggest solutions to these problems (Life Science: Environment).

#### **Outcome of Grade 10 Equivalence Assessment**

The five senior student teachers completed their assignments under the guidance of their teacher trainer. As part of the moderation exercise, they were required to spend a residential period of a week at NIED in July 1998, during which they were given smaller projects as individuals and in groups. The moderators, NIED Education Officers and a Ju/'hoan language specialist, observed them in executing the projects and discussed the projects with them. All five of them completed assignments and could execute the projects well, demonstrating a surprisingly good grasp of relatively difficult and fairly advanced concepts across the learning areas. The moderators recommended that all of them receive Grade 10 equivalence and that they be enrolled for the ISC. In November 1999 they wrote the ISC examination and all of them passed with even better grades than many other candidates did in the formal system, some of whom even had Grade 12 certificates. They have now achieved partially qualified status and will be enrolled in the Basic Education Teachers' Diploma (BETD) In-Service Programme to obtain full qualification. This was major achievement in the face of many obstacles.

#### **The NAMAS/MBEC Kunene Project for Educationally Marginalised Children**

The Ovahimba people live in northwest Namibia in the Kunene region. They are a nomadic and marginalised group still living a very traditional way of life. The ordinary formal education system does not cater for the real needs of the Ovahimba, who often move around during the school year in search of grazing for their cattle.

Providing education for all Namibians has proven to be a great challenge to the educational system, and unconventional and creative ways had to be found to accommodate the educational needs of widely diverse groups. Since schools in Namibia were designed for people with a more permanent settlement pattern, the traditional nomadic and semi-nomadic Himba way of life was not catered for

in school organisation. This resulted in limited access for Ovahimba children, aggravated by a lack of emphasis on the socio-cultural context and life experiences of the Himba learner. In this respect a Himba headman expressed himself in the following way:

*We want education for our children, so we send them to school far away. There they stay without any parental care, which is not good for them. Then they come home and they do not respect their parents and the elders any longer. They show contempt for our traditional ways of living. This is not good.*  
(Hvidsten & Kavari, 1997).

The Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (MBEC) (through The National Institute for Educational Development, *NIED*) commissioned a former Norwegian ambassador to Namibia to do a desk study on the educational situation of the children of the nomadic and semi-nomadic Himba. As a result of this study, NIED submitted a project proposal in 1996, and The Namibia Association of Norway (NAMAS) agreed to fund the *Education for Marginalised Children in the Kunene Project*. Project implementation started in 1997, and 12 mobile schools have been established since then.

The 'mobile school' concept is based on the recognition that the traditional ways of organising primary schools do not cater for the real needs of people like the Ovahimba (MBEC, 1999). Therefore the mobile school units had to adapt to the socio-cultural context and life experiences of the Ovahimba learners in an effort to make education more accessible (by moving around with the people) and the experience more relevant and meaningful (by incorporating life experiences and daily activities of the people) to the learners. The Himba have a deep knowledge and conscience of their environment, and they try to maintain the balance in nature necessary to survive in their harsh environment. This knowledge is being put into the curriculum to make the learning experiences of children both relevant and meaningful. This approach aims to achieve the following:

- to ensure the Ovahimba children access to education which is acceptable to them
- to motivate them to participate and not to drop out at an early stage
- to provide education that is culturally affirmative
- to provide education which will empower them to participate in modern life.

The mobile schools are made of a strong, light canvas shade supported by light, strong poles of a tent pole type. They can be easily disassembled and transported when the community decides to move to another area. They are described in the following way:

*The mobile units must be truly 'mobile' in order to be moved around without too much hassle and too heavy demands on transport. Many places where the units will need to be set up are without any roads or tracks negotiable even in the best 4x4 vehicle. In such places transport by donkey's back would probably be the only viable solution. There is a need to think along untraditional lines when it comes to creating the mobile units. In the warm and dry climate of Kaokoland a classroom could basically be a cool shade that gives protection against the scorching sun.*  
(Hvidsten & Kavari, 1997).

Each mobile school unit has an itinerant teacher who has to be acceptable to the community. The mobile school units are managed by a principal who is assisted by the advisory teachers and an inspector. The name Ondao, which refers to a root with medicinal and healing properties, was chosen by the Ovahimba headmen for the mobile school units. The name symbolises an attempt by the concerned parties to heal the educational wounds left by generations of educational neglect (MBEC 1999).

An evaluation of the project was carried out in October 1999. The findings as contained in the draft evaluation report indicate an "overwhelming positive impact of the project on the communities with

regards to access to education, interest in education, progress of learners, acceptance by the community, and high levels of commitment among teachers” (some of whom are only now enrolled in upgrading programmes). The role of the principal is experienced as very supportive and effective, and the headmen are positive about the project.

The two examples given here move to equitable diversity in different ways. In the case of the Ovahimba project, it is the reorganisation of time, space and grouping, and the implications those changes have for instruction, management and organisation. Further progress into development of the dialect to enrich the standard dialect Otjiherero has only begun, and progress in local curriculum development has been delayed, owing to the loss of the project co-ordinator. The potential consequences for redefining knowledge, or changing the roles of the teacher, have yet to be seen. In the case of the Nyae Nyae, the consequence was not only the change in organisational features but also a wider recognition of knowledge, particularly experiential knowledge and knowledge acquired through community learning (e.g. language and culture). The project also piloted alternative ways of assessing achievement, but could give the same recognition.

It is important to note that both these examples are from marginalised groups: they do not at the moment threaten vested interests in the mainstream, but they do have considerable potential and significance if the lessons which can be learnt from them are applied in other contexts. How many different forms of knowledge, skills and competencies could be assessed and recognised, if diversity were not only recognised, but developed into an integrated, holistic system? One must also be aware that the formal education system is the one with the most firmly embedded power structures, not least the colonial inheritance of Examination Boards. In the opening sections of this paper, the way in which former systems are reproduced even as they are transformed (in what Giddens calls structuration, see Giddens in Cassell, 1993), was exemplified. Major institutional and legislative changes will be needed if integrated, equitable diversity is to be the path to follow, and one will have to see in what ways the interests of power elites will be reproduced in that transformation. The power interests behind formal education, not least played out in curriculum and examinations, may find new ways of entrenching themselves and turning flexibility, equity and diversity to their own advantage at the expense of others.

## Conclusion

In view of the examples of what can be achieved with relatively small investments but big ideas and unconventional approaches, one should heed the words of a well-known African educator:

*Africa, more than any other continent in the world, needs to re-think its education systems in line with, on the one hand, the globalisation of the world economy, and on the other, the real situation. In addition, all too often, the inherited colonial systems of education have been preserved more or less intact, generally with the rationale of 'preserving standards' although these so-called standards were more illusory than real, with a very small elite enjoying exactly the same education as in the metropolitan country and the vast majority being deprived of any form of modern education at all.*

(Chung, 1996)

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