# Indigenisation of the School Curriculum: Connecting Classroom and Community Experiences

Christine Mwanza and Robert Changwe
*The University of Zambia*

**Abstract**

*There are an estimated 300 million indigenous people worldwide, roughly 5 percent of the world's population (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004). Despite this significant presence, national schooling systems have ignored, minimized, or ridiculed their histories pre- and post-Western contact, as well as their cultural contributions towards social and environmental sustainability. This in most cases has led to the education systems offered in most nations less relevant and unproductive for the masses. The sole purpose of any education system is to have a curriculum that offers relevant education to its learners. The aim of this paper therefore was to explore literature for the potentials of indigenising the school curriculum as a way of ensuring that curriculum relevance is upheld. For this to be successful, curriculum developers and policy makers should ensure that indigenous education must continuously re-invent itself so that it honours the basic cultural tenets of the ethnic groups it serves, recognizes the hybrid nature of many indigenous practices, and uses learning as a catalyst to foster social and environmental integrity. This paper therefore, concludes that there is a lot that can be learnt from indigenous education if its best practices are well synchronised with the formal curriculum thereby linking theory to practice for an effective curriculum.*

**Keywords**: Indigenous Education, School Curriculum, Curriculum Development, Classrooms and Communities.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Indigenous education tends to reflect the values, wisdom and expectations of the community or wider society as a whole (Kelly, 1999). It encompasses what local people know, value or do. Indigenous education was functional because the curriculum was developed to attend to the realities of the community and it was need based (Faunwa, 1974). It put emphasis on practical learning and the young adult learned by watching, participating and executing what they learnt. The skills like carving, masonry, clay working, cloth making, building, canoe making, cooking, and home management were insisted amongst the children in the community. These skills were open to all, as they consisted of the basic skills, knowledge and attitudes that enabled individuals to live and function effectively in their communities. This in all senses implies that indigenous education was highly functional. The sole purpose of any curriculum is relevance and indigenous

education was immediately relevant to its learners. The knowledge, attitudes, skills and values that were imparted in learners were relevant for the immediate and long-term socioeconomic activities.

Intellectual training occupied a very small place in indigenous education. This means that greater emphasis was placed on the 'concrete' or real-life issues rather than the 'abstract' knowledge. It is worthwhile arguing that traditional African societies had their own ways of reasoning, but to some people this kind of reasoning could not enable them to imagine alternatives to decisions arrived at, a factor that was partly attributed to the emphasis placed on traditions i.e., beliefs and their threats (Mushi, 2009).

Education has been found to have a positive impact on human development. This outcome ultimately depends on the quality of education being offered. Poor quality education leads to negative economic development while good quality education leads to positive human development. History has it that there has been a mismatch between educational outcomes and the needs of the labour market. According to the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (2013), Zambia has experienced a rapid decline in the performance of its economy since the mid 1970's. This scenario has seriously affected Zambia's ability to generate employment opportunities for its labour force. In relation to this, Bishop (1985) observed that if a country is to achieve rapid economic development, its education system must be related to the experiences prevailing on the labour market.

Despite substantial schooling in a country, its productivity and economic growth can be slowed if the skill acquired during the years spent in school do not match what is on the labour market. The mismatch normally enables school dropouts to leave primary and secondary education without any single skill for them to earn a good living. In case of learners who reach tertiary institutions of learning, most of the college and university products end up being job seekers at the expense of them being job creators as well as employers. This can greatly provide a signal to every educationist that there is indeed something profitable the current formal education system can learn from indigenous education system. In trying to mitigate some of the highlighted shortfalls in the education sector, it is very important for the education system to focus on skills relevant to its society particularly the needs of the labour market. Bishop (1985) emphasized further that a curriculum must be designed in the light of the major trends and developments within society and it must also reflect the major social and cultural needs of the society. An education system goes astray when it has no relevance to society. Curriculum relevance therefore, can only be actualized if the curriculum is indigenised through connecting classroom and community experiences. It is from this background that the authors of this paper aimed to explore literature on the potentials of connecting classroom and community experiences through indigenising the curriculum as a way of ensuring that curriculum relevance is upheld.

## 2.0 DEFINITIONS OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Indigenous education has prehistoric roots that date back to times when groups of indigenous peoples first came together in international, sustainable communities. African indigenous education was a lifelong process of learning which enabled members of the society to steadily progress through predetermined stages of life of graduation from cradle to the grave. This implies that African indigenous education was continuous throughout lifetime. Mushi (2009) defined African indigenous education as a process of passing among the tribal members and from one generation to another the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions norms and values of the tribe. African indigenous education can generally be defined as the form of learning in African traditional societies in which knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of the community, were passed from elders to children, by means of oral instructions and practical activities.

Indigenous education can further be defined as the native, locally developed form of bringing up the youngsters by the older and more experienced members of the society. It is the life long process of learning, with well-defined goals, structures, content and methods through which cultural values, skills, norms and heritage are transmitted by the older and more experienced members of society from one generation to another to be integrated into society (Snelson, 1974).

Traditional African indigenous education was community oriented, geared to solving the problems of the community. The instructional activities were therefore, directed towards the social life of the community, so as to prepare the learners to fit into their community. The learning experiences were made orally and the knowledge was stored in the heads of elders. The instructors were carefully selected from the family or clan. Their task was to impart knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to its learners, informally at the didactic and practical levels. Nyerere (1975) explained that at the didactic level, the teaching process took the form of the stories, legends, riddles, and songs; while at the practical level individuals enacted what they had learnt didactically, by imitating and watching what their elders performed.

The question of learning by doing is very important. The best way to learn sewing is to sew; the best way to learn farming is to farm; the best way to learn cooking is to cook; the best way to learn how to teach is to teach and so on (Nyerere, 1975 in Mushi, 2009). The practical aspect of the indigenous education stresses how relevant the education system was to its learners. Thus, linking classroom work to real life community experiences is one of the principles that can make the current form of education system functional.

Indigenous education was not separated from other spheres of community activities. This implies that it was the whole life of the community and it had no special time of a day or life when it took place. Instead, it took place in the entire span of life and this explains why it is viewed as a life-long process in which an individual acquired skills, knowledge, attitudes and values from womb to tomb.

Mushi (2009) commented that in this case, education was essentially part of life and not separated from the societal culture. The knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that were imparted were relevant to the socio-economic activities of an individual. The learners learned the skills that were for immediate and long-term life activities. This in other words implied that indigenous education was highly practical in nature that its relevance was immediately realised.

Furthermore, indigenous education had no paper work-testing and certificates but learners graduated ceremoniously. There were basically no formal examinations at the end of a specific level of training, but a learner was considered a graduate when he/she was able to practice what he/she had learnt throughout the period of training. The ceremony was held to mark the completion of training and thus assuming more community responsibilities. This was common especially during what Mushi (2009) referred to as 'coming of age' ceremonies and 'the rites of passage'.

## 3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Despite education being instrumental in bringing about societal change, it also has many other roles such as modifying as well as preserving worthwhile cultural practices. In line with this assertion, Bishop (1985) explained that education has a special role of preserving all that is best and worthwhile in a nation's cultural and traditional heritage. Indigenous education specifically focuses on teaching indigenous knowledge, models, methods, and content within formal or non-formal educational systems. The growing recognition and use of indigenous education methods can be a response to the erosion and loss of indigenous knowledge through the processes of colonialism, globalization, and modernity (Grenier, 1998). Unless the preservation of culture is actively encouraged the culture soon disappears. With the environment that is ceaselessly changing, indigenisation of the school curriculum remains the only reliable way of preserving a nation's cultural heritage. Bishop (1985) supported this when he stated that to give a sensitive understanding of a nation's cultural heritage, it is necessary to teach its customs and traditions, its songs, dances, legends, heroic exploits and even its traditional culinary art and home remedies.

Indigenous education is learning that is rooted in what is local, the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (Smith & Sobel, 2010). This type of education is premised on experiential learning; that is, subject matter is taught in such a manner that it connects to students' experiences in their communities (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Knapp, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Roberts, 2012).

Indigenous education was community oriented, geared to solving the problems of the community. The instructional activities were therefore directed towards the social life of the community, so as to prepare the learners to fit into

their community. The existing school systems in many countries are, however, not conducive to fostering economic development. In fact, they have even held back development on occasions on account of their bookish nature, their high cost and their semi-mechanical imitation of external models which do not fit with national needs (Bishop, 1985). On the contrary, with indigenous education, every member of the community was employed. Children learnt the skills that prepared them to immediately utilize their physical environment for self-employment. The skills acquired by watching and imitating the elders were immediately put into practical use. And thus, the children became productive and useful members in the society with immediate effect.

Indigenous education therefore was successful in maintaining the socio-economic and cultural structures of the society. The learners were taught among other things, to preserve their own culture and to get rid of external influences. Also, the skills like masonry, clay working, carving, cloth making, building, canoe making and tin smithery, were taught in the view of maintaining the socio-economic and cultural heritage of the society. Furthermore, it prepared its recipients for life duties in their societies. Indigenous education also changed in response to societal problems, like how to combat the emerging diseases, wild animals, enemies etc.

## 4.0 CONNECTING CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of breaking barriers that separate classrooms from communities. This could have come about as a result of the stroppiness of the classroom activities to be at variance with real life community experiences when after all schooling is a product of the community. Classrooms should be cultural spaces and centres that provide strategies to reclaim African cultural identities to counteract threats of cultural identity loss (Msila, 2016). One key aspect of this task is to reclaim the pre-modern practice of involving the entire community in the children's education. UNESCO (2000) recommended that curriculum planners and developers should consider infusing the curricular context with the wealth of indigenous knowledge from local community and also appropriating such knowledge towards human centered development.

Reducing the barriers between classroom and community therefore requires bringing the community to the school and taking the school to the community. Schools must find ways of linking children/learners to older community members who have retained knowledge of being connected to a place through sustainable practices. To be successful, indigenous education must be accompanied by formal education that exposes mainstream children to the histories and cultures of indigenous and minority groups. Since most educators are non-indigenous and because indigenous perspectives may offer solutions for current and future social and ecological problems, it is important to refer to indigenous education and agencies to develop curriculum and teaching strategies while at the same time encouraging activism on behalf of indigenous peoples (Buseri, 2010). In

addition, connecting experiences in the community to the content of the official curriculum, links students to the problems and resources of their own locality thereby promoting civic engagement.

A peaceful co-existence and a just society cannot be accomplished if main stream children/learners do not learn about ethnic minority cultures and the importance of respecting and affirming them. Indigenous education principles can play an important role in bringing local relevance to education process by bringing local community context (Shava, 2016). It is therefore cardinal to note that the place for indigenous education in formal education settings is attainable if efforts are made to identify areas of possible integration into the existing school curriculum. This strategy however may require an indigenous approach to education that involves the contextualisation of the school curriculum through integrating indigenous knowledge with other relevant and useful knowledge.

It has become imperative to address what Pyle (1993:140) called "the extinction of experience." Schools should seek a balance between participating in indoor and outdoor settings, spending time in human-built and natural habitats and fostering intellectual talents alongside manual training, physical activities and artistic endeavours. An overemphasis on curricular standards, prescribed teaching/ learning techniques, student assessment, and legalistic definitions of education have contributed to teachers shutting off their true selves and their acceptance of the students' culture when in the classroom. Classrooms have become bland and emotionless settings where the main relationship between teachers and students is cordial but distant, and whose allegiance is stronger to the institution than to the child. This is not the fault of teachers, many of whom are extremely caring and committed, but of modern, bureaucratised practices that dampen the intimate relationship that should exist between teachers and students (Pajak & Blasé, 1984). There is therefore need to deliberately put in place teacher preparation programmes specifically created to assist incorporation of indigenous education into the mainstream formal education as a way of connecting the classroom with the community for curriculum relevance.

In addition, partnerships among students, parents and local communities have the potential to maximize students' engagement and achievement. Even when schools as a whole do not embrace indigenous education, indigenous students can benefit from efforts to incorporate knowledge keepers into school settings. Families, as well as learners' career prospects are the most important influence in a child's life and instil critical values that encourage them to fully engage in schooling and contribute to the well-being of their communities.

Recognizing the importance of these cultural manifestations and their rightful place in the curriculum is helpful for Indigenous students in both urban and more remote and seemingly traditional communities. This in the long run is likely to foster student's connections to societies and may create vibrant partnerships between schools and communities. Such an education system with no doubt will

boost the learners' achievement and promote environmental, social and economic vitality. An ideal school is where the activities of survival and sustenance in daily life are conjoined with book learning to "throw light upon the practical work, [and] give it meaning and liberal value" (Dewey, 1907: 94). Intellectual engagement with and reflection upon an experience within community brings multiple perspectives to bear on its meaning and maximizes the potential for learning. In pre-colonial indigenous contexts, the community including its natural environment was the classroom (Kirkness, 1998). For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples offered their children holistic experiential education grounded in relationship with the land and community and focused on living well in their surroundings (Kirkness, 1998; Wilson & Battiste, 2011). Education therefore was never at any point detached from people's day to day lives. The only hope for such a desired kind of education therefore, is through linking the classrooms and communities so that productive and effective education can be attained for the benefit of the learners, society/ community and the nation as a whole more especially in this era where almost every university or college graduate anticipates to be employed and not to be an employer.

## 5.0 EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Educators have found that attending to learners' needs, while developing culturally responsive relationships is not an easy task. Practitioners, researchers, and educators have theorized and documented the potential of indigenous education linked to students' lives and their experiences to formal education for some time (Gruenewald, 2003a; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Bishop (2004), for example, argued that when students are taught literature written by local authors and assisted to investigate the ecology of the area in which they live and the stories associated with their surroundings or locality, their conscious level of the place increases and they are helped to appreciate the value of their community and develop a sense of stewardship. Indigenous communities are able to 'reclaim and revalue their languages and traditions, in so doing, improve the educational success of indigenous students,' thus ensuring their survival as a culture.

There is need for educators to negotiate numerous pressures which may range from inflexible national systems of education, institutional inertia, lack of financial resources and focus on the need to develop and create educational materials and the necessity of training and socialising educators to creatively incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, pedagogies, languages and community members into schooling efforts. Despite such important advances, there are deeply entrenched tensions between the aspirations, goals and practices of indigenous education and those of mainstream formal education. Often enough, the educational programmes are initiated as Indigenous peoples themselves and non-Indigenous allies seek to reform educational efforts by infusing formal schooling efforts with the unique

alternative Indigenous knowledge systems, pedagogies and languages. These pressures present immense ongoing challenges for those who seek to indigenise schools and school systems. If educators bend too far towards Western models of education, they risk reproducing the same fossilized and insensitive systems they are trying to circumvent (Abu-Saad, 2006; Arratia, 1997; McCarty, 2002 & Sarangapani, 2003). At the same time, through ongoing struggles to orient local efforts towards Indigenous models of education, educators can ground students in their communities and geographical spaces while fostering academic achievement and providing preferable alternatives to homogenised formal schooling efforts. Alignment of the formal curriculum with the philosophies of Indigenous education contend that teacher experiences with this way of teaching and learning will point to foundational and practical ways that teacher educators might begin to integrate the theories and methodologies of indigenised curriculum learning in their practice.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

It can be noted from this paper that indigenous education and modern formal education are not parallel or opposite in nature. The two types of education systems can easily complement each other and enable an effective education for its learners. As noted earlier, the sole purpose of any curriculum is to provide education that is relevant for the benefit of the learner, society and the nation at large. An education system goes astray if it has no relevance to its society as noted by Bishop (1985). A closer look at these types of education systems indicates that indigenous education is highly functional and practical. It is the type of education that accords its learners with highly productive education which they can put into immediate use upon attaining it. In addition, it has been established that the modern formal education is mostly theoretical and bookish in nature detaching it from the much-needed relevance for the development of the society. There is therefore need to embrace the calls for opportunities of indigenising the school curriculum to ensure that curriculum relevance is upheld. Indigenising the curriculum calls for connecting classrooms and communities to ensure that learners are not at any point separated from their environment and societies. The inclusion of the indigenous education methods into the school curriculum often enhances educational effectiveness by providing an education that adheres to an indigenous person's own inherent perspectives, experiences, language and customs thereby making it easier for learners' transition to the realm of adulthood. There is great need therefore to fully involve the entire community in the education of the learners in order to accord them a productive education experience that would make them job creators and employers in the 21st century.

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