# Democratizing Education for the Enhancement of Education for Sustainable Development: A Challenge in Botswana

Agreement Lathi Jotia
Dept. of Languages and Social Sciences
University of Botswana

**Abstract**

This paper registers that there is a strong relationship between the prevailing global discourse on Education for Sustainable Development and Democracy in Education. As such, in order for any nation to be seen to be having a relevant and quality education, its education system should be seen to be addressing the principles of democracy in a more direct and robust way. The role of education in advancing the global dream of sustainable development-which of late is also being marshalled by Environmental Education, cannot be overemphasized. However, the paper contends that unless we begin to democratize education to give learners a voice and a sense of being partners and key stakeholders in the process of educating and or advancing the state's socio-economic and political aspirations, the objectives of having sustainable development will remain an absolute nightmare.

**Key Words**: Education, Sustainable Development, Environmental Education, Democratic Education, Relevant Quality Education

## INTRODUCTION

*We should not, must not, be complacent about the health and future of...democracy. Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998).*

Within the global discourse, relevant and quality education is undoubtedly a significant factor in the improving of the human conditions in both the socio-economic and political spheres. Globalization has become an ideological discourse that drives change within the nation-state and even beyond and in order for this change process to be effective, the ways of doing education has to change in order to align with the global dictates of producing citizens who are self confident and also morally and socially responsible. The education system that the nation-state chooses to follow, therefore; is highly influenced by the global wave and in order for education to be deemed effective, it has to be seen to be producing democratically conscious and self confident citizens who have values and skills of understanding. Education can only be deemed relevant and of quality if its products actively partake in the sustainable development of the nation-state.

In this case, sustainable development would entail among other things, the willingness to use the environment wisely together with its limited resources such that the future generations can also benefit from it. Burbules & Torres (2000:15) contend:

> In educational terms, there is a growing understanding that the neoliberal version of globalization, particularly as implemented (and ideologically defended) by bilateral, multilateral, and international organizations, is reflected in educational agenda that privileges, if not directly imposes, particular policies for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction, and testing.

Taking the above argument into account, it could be asserted that the erosion of a nation-state's autonomy, especially in matters that pertain to education and policy, calls for more nuanced critical analysis in that if the nation-state loses control of the education system, then we are bound to see the emergence of "top-down" approaches to education which disempower and sideline the educators as well as the learners, thus producing products who are marginalized, frustrated and isolated from the sustainable development issues. Authoritarian education policies are undemocratic; they suffocate the chances of producing intellectually democratic citizens who are supposed to see themselves as partners in all sustainable development efforts.

According to Dewey (in Campbell, 2004), education systems which deem themselves democratic must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. It definitely breeds logic to charge that relevant education for sustainable development must firstly mandate environmental educators and learners with the ideological orientation that classrooms can be empowering democratic spaces where ideas, even those pertaining to the environment, can be exchanged freely both theoretically and in practice. Democratizing education liberalizes views even those relating to the environment especially regarding how best it could be conserved, rather than narrowing the environmental problems and solutions to a conservative logic that there can only be one solution to the problem which is dictated by "those who know it all" or the intellectual cultural bio-conservatives. Giving individuals the freedom to think critically opens up spheres for having an intellectually sustainable society whose views can impact the environment positively. Van Der Ryn and Cowan (1996, 65) concur:

> Sustainability is embedded in the processes that occur over long periods of time and are not always visually obvious. It follows that ecological design works best with people committed to a particular place and the kinds of local knowledge that grow from that place. This knowledge is slowly accumulated, season by season, through active engagement with the land.

An educationally democratic philosophical orientation maintains that the classroom should be a place where a free flow of ideas about the environment and sustainable development should be allowed to evolve and can ultimately produce a more accurate environmental education and enlightenment on how best the general public should mingle with the environment for its future sustainability (Kester, 2009). According to Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1998), citizenship education should foster respect for the law, justice, and democracy and also nurture common good at the same time encouraging independence of thought as well as developing skills of reflection, enquiry and debate.

**Empowering Citizens through Democratic Engagement in Environmental Education**

In the case of Botswana, it could be contended that there is a greater divide between the goals of the education system and the goal of producing democratically active citizens. In as much as it is more of an open secret that Botswana is a shining example of a successful democracy in Africa, the relationship between democracy and education leaves much to be desired, hence the argument that in order for any nation to be seen to be having a relevant and quality education, its education system should be seen to be addressing the principles of democracy in a more direct and robust way. Citizens can only ascertain equitable and sustainable use of the environment if they are "democratically empowered" to realize that they have a significant role to play in the shaping of the future of their country. When that happens, they would come to the full realization of the fact that the futures of generations to come, as well as theirs, lie in their own hands. This has been and continues to be Botswana's greatest challenge especially that Environmental Education (EE) is just a new field in the curriculum and to date there is still so much confusion looming regarding whether there is a difference between Environmental Education and Environmental Science (ES).

Rosenberg (2004) poses an interesting and difficult question on how a nation can move towards a kind of development that will sustain people and planet and help them prosper without negatively tempering with the environment. Although Rosenberg admits that there are no easy answers to such a question, she sells the idea that sustainable development should be fuelled by ecological (to do with activities on the ecosystem), social (that majority of the people should benefit from the environment not just the privileged few) and economic (have economic models that promote equity in the distribution of resources) sustainability. The contention here is that ecological, social and economic sustainability are intertwined and that the poor are the ones who more often than not are affected by the environment. While Rosenberg could be seen to be scoring some points on this argument, it should be argued vividly that democratic empowerment should be the basis of the citizen's ecological, social and economic sustainability's understanding. If citizens do not understand the fact that they have a democratic obligation towards their country and environment, there is no way they can pursue sustainable development initiatives in order to preserve and or conserve the environment. More often than not, they will consider themselves aliens in the shaping of the development process of their country.

Environmental issues such as increased environmental degradation, global warming, land degradation, fresh water contamination, desertification, drought, wildlife depletion, use of toxic products, drought, among others, are common especially to southern Africa and their remedy can only come from citizens who are democratically conscious and of the realization that they can be agents of change in as far as the unsound and abusive use of the environment is concerned. The need for citizenship education can therefore not be overemphasized. This is the form of education that enables the citizens to behave and act as citizens not just having knowledge of citizenship and civic society but rather having values, skills and moral obligation to do that which is right for their country (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). Citizenship democratic education in institutions of learning cannot be left to chance if at all we are to address the harm, danger and the deficit in quality of life that is caused by environmental degradation and or negligence around the globe generally and in Botswana in particular.

On another score, it often troubles one to learn that most of the environmental problems especially in Botswana are stated, identified and state defined as well. The question that should quickly spring to the mind is whether the citizens, especially the ordinary ones, do not have the lenses to identify the environmental problems which directly affect them? That is the problem with an education system that seems to be dictating what ought to be done without taking all stakeholders on board. The ultimate is that people tend to think that they cannot identify any other problem besides those that have been identified by the state and also await the state for solutions rather than taking an initiative towards the solution.

Atlhopheng et. al (1998) observe that state-defined problems in Botswana are inadequate and are highly problematic since they tend to focus on those identified by the ruling class and seem to undermine those that could be directly affecting the ordinary citizens. Therefore; the argument here is that if the education citizen were democratic enough, then the citizens could be realizing that they have a direct relationship with their environment and that environmental problems that affect them should not be left to anybody else to identify them but should be identifying them as the directly affected people and relaying them to the state and not vice-versa. Is it not logical that a person whose house is on fire should be the one yelling for help rather than strangers and or the neighbours? Undemocratic forms of educating breed passive citizens. Atlhopheng et. al (1998) further assert that there is absolute need for the democratization of the environmental question in Botswana whereby various affected groups can be allowed to define, identify and prioritize environmental problems confronting them. When the democratic paradigm is allowed to take course, then the citizens become empowered and the state also becomes a partner and not a demi-god in solution seeking for the environmental problems.

In view of the fact that the globalization force, which is significantly driven by the western life style, swiftly moves us to embrace "consumerist" lifestyle which is fuelled by advances in technology and has great impact on the environment, it is essential that our education systems are redirected to empower the citizens, especially our children to develop environmental consciousness and a sense of ownership to the environment. It is an indisputable matter that humankind is losing direction on how to develop a sustainable relationship with the environment. The environmental problems we face today are a living testimony that our behaviours and mindsets towards the environment should be evolved and that positive evolutionary endeavour can only be made possible by democratic ways of educating and empowering those who directly interact with the environment on a daily routine.

**Educating for Sustainable Development: A Possibility or a Nightmare?**

Taking into account the environmental problems facing human kind today, it is no surprise that the United Nations (UN) has decided to declare the period between (2005-2014) as a decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) and that ESD should pay attention to quality basic education as well as sustainable development whereby a harmonious relationship should be developed between the environment and human beings. It is clear from the UN objectives that individual education systems should foster the idea of having quality education for sustainable development. Let me hasten to outline the fact that quality and sustainable education for development should be directly linked to the democratic project of every nation-state. According to Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2004), there is a concern that there is no adequate debate and knowledge on education and sustainable development issues. In addition, there is also some evidence that whilst some policies on sustainable development do exist, the implementation of those policies leaves much to be desired. The question that begs to be answered therefore is; what role then are our education systems playing?

Hattingh (2004) advises that in the midst of all this environmental problems and failing policies, one key aspect of education for sustainable development must be to foster and promote open-ended critical review on ways in which sustainable development is being understood, interpreted and applied to various environmental contexts. A dialogue on sustainable development in this case should not just be narrowed down to the involvement of the state and other influential apparatus, but must accommodate the civil society organizations, educators, learners, environmentalists, social activists groups, to state a few.

Critical and democratic discussions should be held to focus on local, national and international environmental problems and how best they could be tackled. In the words of Hattingh (2004), a strong model of sustainable development should challenge all sectors of society to engage on a 'fundamental rethink' on how to establish a society characterised by ecological integrity, social justice and economic viability. It is my contention that this fundamental rethink should also embrace, among other things, the idea of liberalizing education so that we could accommodate even the marginalized voices who never see themselves as part of the environmental problems affecting us. Democratic education for sustainable development initiatives is an ideal provision for a new synthesis that attempts to solve the giant environmental problems we face today and will also squash the gender disparities we see even within environmental problems solution-seeking platforms.

A well-thought and democratized Environmental Education has the potential for contributing towards the birth of Education for Sustainable Development because it can raise the level of awareness amongst citizens, can also help shape attitudes positively, as well as creating a sense of responsibility among citizens which will also challenge them to participate actively in all matters that relate to their environment. Atlhopheng et al (1998) also add that environmental education should be promoted as part of a country's formal and informal education system although it is not the absolute panacea to all the environmental problems-can make a positive mark towards solving the problems. In view of the fact that environmental problems are broad and diverse, it would be a purely myopic analysis to claim that these problems can be solved without the promotion of a collective effort from all parties that matter. The 'miseducation' of the citizens on environment-related issues also warrants the guilty that should be imposed on our public education for failing to conscientize the masses on issues that pertain to their environment.

Educating for Sustainable Development can become a possibility if the process of educating can begin to prepare individuals for functioning in both professional and societal settings whereby they will be confronted with complex problems where they will have to work together with experts from different disciplinary domains and societal stakeholders (Samuelsson & Holmberg, 2006). Looking at this point within the context of Botswana, it could be argued that learners do not have a problem with acquiring knowledge related to whatever their field of study is. However, the giant problem is the implementation of the acquired knowledge. This is largely a problem triggered by our traditional ways of educating whereby the educator is seen as the fountain of knowledge and a provider of all. Traditional and/or conservative ways of doing education suppress the learners' ability to show their potential on problem-solving skills. Undemocratic ways of educating make learners complacent and teacher-dependent, hence making choices and acting independently becomes a challenge in many cases.

> Making a case for the democratization of education, Davies (in Harber, 1998, p. 98), shares.
> Education in the contemporary context must be transformative...Both genders must learn that to be socially responsible is not incompatible with being free, that to be successful does not necessarily require aggressiveness, that a true leader does not rule with force. This can only happen within the context of a democratic school culture that replaces slavish allegiance to authority with critical thinking and flexibility.

As such, a transformative educational agenda is what we need today in our "empowered schools" so that citizens, who are the products of the education system, can develop core values driven by a sense of hope for better possibilities within their environment. The voice of the products of our education system must be nourished by being given a platform to interact and debate diverse ideas and pave a way for a positive sustainable future development. If democracy is allowed to become an important part of the reform process in education for sustainable development, then we can rest assured that educating for sustainable development is a possibility and not a nightmare.

**Corporal Punishment: A Danger to Democratic Education in Botswana Schools**

Shmueli (2007) states that the use of corporal punishment during the educating process of a child is one of the most troubling issues which trigger discussions from sociologists, psychologists, jurists, educators, to state just a few. According to Shumueli's observations, the use of corporal punishment in the modern day teaching and learning environments should be abolished because of the emotional and physical damage on the learner. In a sense, the use of corporal punishment violates democratic ways of associating with learners in the school environment.

Botswana is doing well in the area of democracy although it has its own limitations. However, setting up structures that promote democracy in the education sector is a serious challenge.The goal of a school, as Dewey (1935) would put it, is to instill in each member an ability to think reflectively and critically, so as to become a successful member of a democratic society. The production of democratic critical thinkers in Botswana schools has been a challenge. The legalization of corporal punishment (which is indirect promotion of abuse) in schools, to a large extent suppresses and contradicts the ideals of democracy in education. Of late, cases of child abuse in schools have been rampant since teachers take the law into their hands by administering corporal punishment indiscriminately and without adhering to the rules of its implementation. This in some instances has triggered civil unrest in schools, strikes and violence which lead to vandalism of property and even violence against teachers.

According to Harber (1998), making reference to Dewey, he indicates that in cases where democracy has fallen, it was too exclusively political in nature. It had not become part of the bone and blood of the people in daily conduct. Unless democratic habits of thought and actions are part of the fiber of the people, political democracy is insecure.

**Power and Authoritarianism in Schools**

Children in our schools have a minimal say in the administration of the school as well as how the curriculum should be run or having an input on some of the development projects which are supposed to be instituted in school. Harber (1998) further contends that schools which are run by marginalizing the voices of the learners are just the same as prisons or factories whose pursuit is just mass production. Children are the hope for the future and are also the future of any democracy. Addressing the issue of *African Children and HIV/AIDS,* Howard and Singhal (2003:3) contend that 'a community's hopes and aspirations are embodied in their children; children present possibilities. They are a community's bright signal…' If children are to truly become bright signals in Botswana schools, then the manner in which they are treated should change so as to give them a platform where they can emancipate from being docile citizens to being critical thinkers who can pursue their country's democratic obligations without fear for being punished corporally or victimized otherwise. If Botswana's focus is really so much into the production of relevant quality and sustainable education, then children so be placed at the center of the democratic process in schools.

Teachers in our schools are often armed with sticks, sjamboks and board dusters during their teaching and even outside the classroom and it appears as though corporally punishing students even for minor offences is a tradition. In one of my studies; *The Quest for Deep Democratic Participation: Schools as Democratic Spaces in the Post-Colonial Botswana,* I came face-to-face with the brutality and authoritarian state of affairs of our schools. During some of my class observations, I saw teachers punishing students for failing tests, coming late to school and for talking to their colleagues in class. Democratic practices are rare to find and punishing students for such cases is absolutely abusive and contrary to the outlines of the penal code in as far as the administration of corporal punishment is concerned. Wouldn't it make sense to firstly establish the reasons why a student failed or came late rather than administering corporal punishment instantly? The diversity of children in schools should be taken into account prior to the administration of unjustified punishment more so not all learners learn the same and some might fail a test due to extraordinary circumstances at their homes.

If Botswana is to continue holding the crown of being a shining example of African democracy, then the manner in which the young democrats (students) are treated should definitely change. Subjecting children to abuse and silencing them through corporal punishment will never yield any positive results in as far as their attitudes and behaviors are concerned. If anything, the schools are going to produce rebellious people in society. The argument that corporal punishment is an African thing is misleading and is tantamount to claiming that African traditions or cultures are abusive or do promote abuse. We clearly have to draw a cutline between the proper administration of corporal punishment as a corrective measure and the haphazard, indiscriminant and abusive administration of corporal punishment. The current state of affairs in our schools is an eminent danger to any efforts geared towards relevant and quality education for sustainability.

In a study by Muchado (2002) on *The Perceived Needs for School Counseling Services in Primary and Secondary Schools in Botswana,* students generally indicated that they hate corporal punishment and that in some instances it makes them feel so angry, hateful and above all, they do feel that they are being oppressed. As though not enough, another study by

Tafa (2003); *Corporal Punishment: The Brutal Face of Botswana's Authoritarian Schools,* shows that the researcher observed students being caned for using vulgar language, coming late to school, fighting and for not doing their home work. Tafa mentions that the amazing thing is that in the same school, the school head was seen holding student's head with his left hand, then tilting it to the left and then whacking the student's right cheek three times.

**Schools should be Democratic Spaces**

In a democratic and a pluralist society, schools are expected to nurture participation and democratic engagements by both teachers and students. It is a violation of democratic principles of engagement to have schools that perpetrate imposition of fear and docility amongst students who are supposed to be the future leaders. One of the major weaknesses of Botswana's education system is that it promotes a state of affairs where teachers are supposed to be seen as superior 'monsters' who have the powers to educate and abuse. The situation is even worse when it comes to the girl child who is weak naturally and also gets oppressed by the dictates of culture which outline that girls are not supposed to be heard but rather should just be seen. In a sense, the girl child is denied an opportunity to engage in dialogue even in instances that affect her live directly. Deliberative democracy should be nurtured in schools so that students can learn how to participate in the democratic exercise in school and even beyond. This kind of a mindset will certainly move us closer to realizing the goals of sustainable education.

The issue of corporal punishment in schools stands out as one of the greatest enemy of nurturing democracy through pronounced social relationships. The use of corporal punishment to enforce and impose hierarchical dominance of teachers over students and specifically male teachers over female students is something that has to be bluntly criticized if at all democratic education is to become a reality in Botswana schools.

Botswana's education system needs to protect children's individual rights as well as civil liberties at the same time enhancing the flourishing of participatory democracy in the teaching-learning process. As Caldwell (2001) has correctly argued, the call for the democratization of education is a call that if taken into cognizance, would promote greater citizenship engagement. As such, there is absolute need to move away from school structures and policies or regulations which perpetrate undemocratic contexts of learning. The starting point should be the abolishment of corporal punishment in schools. Corporal punishment does not only affect the dignity of the learner but also endangers the existence of democracy in school and above all, it enslaves the teachers-some teachers cannot operate without using a stick.

**CONCLUSION**

On the basis of the above, the lack of progress in Educating for Sustainable Development initiatives is a clear signal that we have to reassess the role of education on sustainable development agenda. As earlier indicated, a relevant and quality education, and or environmental education, cannot be divorced from the principles of democracy. The improvement of the quality of education for sustainable development challenges the environmental educator to embrace and model democratic pedagogical practices in the classroom and even beyond. Hoffer (cited in Gerzon, 1997) posits that there is no right way to teach democracy unless we also practice it. Our obligation to the environment is a democratic assignment which can only be fulfilled by allowing democracy to be part of our teaching-learning process.

As UNESCO (cited in Ketlhoilwe, 2008,5) indicates, sustainability should be viewed in terms of ways of thinking about the world, and forms of social and personal practice that lead to ethical, empowered and personally fulfilled individuals, communities built on collaborative engagements, tolerance and equity as well as on a social system that promotes participation, transparency and justice. All this can become possible only if our education systems cherish the ideals of democratic education.

Whether environmental education is seen as the epicentre for sustainable development and vice versa is really not the issue. At the heart of the matter is that democracy should be lived and practiced by the citizens in their education system if at all we are to successfully account for both socio-economic and political factors that negatively impact the environment. Learners should be encouraged to investigate problems and come up with suggestions for solutions on their own on the basis of their hands-on experiences. This is one of the major deformities of Botswana's education system which subscribes more to the "teacher-talks and student-listens" approach to teaching. Also there is just too much emphasis placed on testing than on educating.

Ketlhoilwe (2008) also subscribes to the ideal that environmental educators can embark on activities such as taking students to a poverty-stricken environment where they can carry out observations and later write reports based on their experiences. This is what democratic education entails. If democratic teaching and learning is not made part of the environmental education pedagogy, then the ultimate is that we will end up with so many degreed or certificated citizens who are not problem-solvers but rather are just passive maintainers of the dictates of the status quo. Such kind of action, in the long run can prove to be a hazard to our environment as well as to our democracy.

Finally, as Fien (2001) correctly observes, for sustainable development to occur, there is need not only to educate the head, but also the hand and perhaps most importantly, the heart (xiv). In order for the products of our education system to be able to pursue the dream of sustainable development, they should be trained in ways that allow them to experience environmental problems as theirs and then be helped to gain authority and confidence to act towards their solutions. If we are serious about teaching about the environment and sustainable development, then the environmental educator, especially in Botswana should educate in a way that democratically inspires the learner to engage in hands-on activities that turn the empirical realities into the lived democratic experiences. The ideal way of learning about democracy for sustainable development is by doing it in an environmental education teaching-learning process. Botswana's education system's greatest challenge therefore; has been the implementation of pragmatic and deliberative democratic ways of educating. This is truly the cancer of our time in our effort to educate for sustainable development. In order for our education system to be able to survive the modern dictates of globalization and environmental problems, there is absolute need to reform it for possible sustainability in development.

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