Critical democratic pedagogy through the arts in indigenous/Maasai rural schools in Kenya

Mary Anne Drinkwater, OISE/University of Toronto

Paper for 2nd World Conference on Arts Education
Seoul, Korea,
Critical democratic pedagogy through the arts in indigenous/Maasai rural schools in Kenya

Mary A. Drinkwater

OISE/University of Toronto, Canada

mary.drinkwater@utoronto.ca

Introduction

The emergence of many newly independent countries in the 1960s coincided with a tremendous surge in mass schooling as nation-states began to signal their move towards an ideal of ‘Western modernity’. Educational researchers and policy makers around the world have argued that both the policy initiative of mass education and the ideal of Western modernity have been linked to increasing social, political and educational inequities (Appadurai, 1996; Dei et al, 2006; Fitzsimmons, 2000; Mundy, 2005). Educational policy reform which serves to address these inequities and deepen learning is needed. It is hoped that through the use of a critical democratic theoretical framework, this paper will begin a critique of the current structure in schools in Kenya and will introduce the possibilities for a re-construction of a system which values indigenous knowledge and which could deepen educational knowledge and experience.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of traditional Maasai culture, with a particular focus on power relations (social, economic, educational). Secondly, it will examine three major periods in Kenyan/Maasai history: European missionaries; British colonialism; Independence-1963. Thirdly, it will examine the impact of globalization on the current structure and purpose of education in many indigenous (Maasai) schools in Kenya. Finally, it will explore the possibilities for and constraints on critical democratic pedagogy through the arts, to help Maasai youth and their communities blend the traditional with the modern as they continue to learn and grow.

Theoretical Framework:

In critiquing the current system, it will be important to ask to what extent it is consistent with critical democratic beliefs, qualities and values: whose interest the current conceptualization serves; and who’s voices are being sought or silenced. Many
educational theorists and researchers have promulgated the values of democracy and
democratic practice in education (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1989; and Portelli,
2001). For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the conception of a developmental
and robust democracy, which necessitates a ‘way of life’ and which holds as its non-
negotiables the values of openness, respectful dialogue, serious inquiry, reason, equity
and comfort with ambiguity.

Rationale for research:

Traditionally, the Maasai have been a nomadic pastoralist tribe whose territory has spread
throughout much of East Africa, including Kenya and Tanzania. For years, they had
resisted any form of involvement in the mass schooling system which arose during the
British colonial period. This system was based on a deficit model which failed to recognize
the value or importance of indigenous knowledge or practices. However, as globalization
continues to spread across nation-states and throughout public education it has begun to
impact indigenous peoples in many countries, including the Maasai, in Kenya. Limited
research, which focuses specifically on the impacts of globalization on schooling and
education, has been done in Maasai villages and schools. Kuehn (1997) identified three
related themes that have characterized globalization and which have become evident in
educational systems around the world: unrestrained global competition; potential
restrictions on democracy; and possible distortions of the social purposes of education
toward a too-close relationship to the economy, “converting community values to values of
the market” and making students “human capital to be prepared for ‘global competition’ (p.
71). In order for educational systems to respond to these globalization themes,
educational researchers have argued that, particularly in the current transnational
contexts, it is becoming even more pressing to consider pedagogical practices that are
informed by how people come to know, understand and experience themselves both as
members of a community and citizens of a nation state. (Popkewitz, 2000; Rizvi, 2000).
The purpose of this paper will be to explore the use of critical democratic pedagogy
through the arts in schools as an educational policy tool to increase critical inquiry, student
voice in issues of equity and social justice, and student engagement for Maasai youth.

Traditional Maasai culture and education

The Maasai have traditionally been, and many continue to be semi-nomadic pastoralists
living in scattered settlements in the Rift Valley of Kenya. Currently numbering
approximately 1.5 million in Kenya, many Maasai still herd and follow their cattle on
seasonal migrations (Bonini, 2006). Being nomadic herders, the Maasai count their wealth in cattle; they rarely slaughter or sell them, but use them in a subsistence lifestyle. They are a strong and independent tribe, proud of their warriors, or *ilmuran*, and fiercely defensive of their independence (Miller, 2009). With the advent of mass media and information communication technology, both the lifestyle and independence of the Maasai have been seriously threatened by economic factors and by civil society and human rights activist groups. The culture and traditions of the Maasai have been both reified (as a unique, powerful and colourful tribe by the tourism industry) or condemned (as illiterate and cruel savages by missionaries and some human rights organizations) (Phillips & Bhavnagri, 2002).

Prior to the introduction of ‘formal schooling’ by British missionaries in the late nineteenth century, the Maasai had developed their own form of indigenous education which had as its goals the maintenance of a cohesive society and the survival of their migratory lifestyle. The education they are provided with through formal teaching and experience, the skills they are supposed to develop, the persons who teach them, as well as, the space in which they are taught, differ according to gender and age or, more exactly, to position in the age-class system. When they are infants or still fairly young, boys and girls are brought up by women (mother and older sisters) inside the boma (shelter). As soon as they are able to, they help their mothers in looking after lambs or goat kids close to the boma fence. During their early childhood, they live in a female setting and have only limited relationships with men. As they begin to grow up, boys walk a few miles with the boma herders to start learning pastoral skills, while girls remain within the boma.

Elders socialized the children with the Maasai’s cultural values of collective ideology, tribal cohesion, positive relations with others, respect for elders, and conformity to tribal norms and rituals. As a result, the children connected their personal identities to the context of their family or clan. Collective ideology and tribal cohesion emphasized the teaching of practical skills for effectively contributing to a group. For example, children learned about cattle tending, health care, and defense of their clan, as well as how these roles are interdependent (Bogonko, 1992). The close and dependent relationship with Maasai culture is reflected in the goals of their education system, which emphasize collectivity and focus on what is in the best interests of the family, clan, tribe, religion, and tradition (Raju, 1973). Elders frequently employed a rich oral tradition, which included personal narratives, oral history, folktales, songs, parables, riddles and rhymes to transmit cultural values and beliefs and history.
An historical overview of ‘formal education’ for the Maasai in Kenya.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Maasai began to feel the first interventions by foreign powers. British missionary schools were soon established throughout Kenya for the purpose of both civilizing and assimilating the ‘natives’. During the years that followed, many of the traditional Maasai values were weakened, as a result of the hegemonic power of the missionary schools, which actively undermined parents’ and grandparents' authority and wisdom by teaching the Maasai children, that the ways of their family elders were ignorant, backward, savage, and pagan (Bogonko, 1992; Phillips & Bhavnagri, 2002).

Although Kenya declared its independence in 1963, a strong and consistent initiative to build the infrastructure to support schooling in rural areas, such as the Rift Valley, is still missing. Approximately 33 percent of children in Maasai communities are enrolled in primary schools compared to a national average that was twice as high in the 1990s (Bonini, 2006). The educational goals established shortly after independence included: 1) respect for Kenyan culture; 2) social equality, cohesiveness, and collaboration; and 3) national development (Raju, 1973). Power issues between the dominant Kikuyu tribe, which controls Kenyan education and politics, and the Maasai left them with limited government resources necessary to attain these post-Independence goals (Phillips & Bhavnagri, 2002). In the early 1980s, with the global economic downturn and the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies and educational reforms, educational infrastructure deteriorated and enrolment in primary schools began to decline. By the late 1980s, external financial pressures resulting from structural adjustment policies, coincided with charges of corruption against the Kenyan government and led several donors to cease external aid.

As a result of pressure and support from domestic and international NGOs and the World Bank, around universal rights, such as the right to education, Kenya announced its free primary education policy in late 2002. The overwhelming popular response and the limited budget for education created a new host of problems for the Kenyan government, including overcrowding of schools, minimal supplies and equipment, decreased quality of learning and teacher shortages (Mundy, 2008).

Globalization

Globalization, in the neoliberal context, has raised concerns from educational policy analysts who question the push for standardization and worry about educational
homogeneity and increasing inequity. On the positive side, Ramirez & Ventresca, (1992), Ramirez, (2003) and Myers et. al (1997) have found that with respect to the role of mass education in creating “modern” citizens in nation-states, the discourse around the limited educability of certain groups has been replaced by discourses of ‘education as human right’ and ‘education as human capital’. As new national identities were being developed, a world cultural perspective supported and encouraged national and/or regional distinctiveness, as long as ‘world standards’ were not violated.

As we enter the twenty-first century, with a growing number of social, cultural and economic factors challenging the pastoral well-being and resiliency of the Maasai, the sense of urgency for educational programming which gives hope to Maasai youth is clearly present. The availability of information communication technology is exposing Massai to both the opportunities and temptations of the outside world. Many youth are now questioning traditional practices such as polygamy, early marriage and female circumcision and global issues such as climate change (Miller, 2009). I will argue that schools and schooling needs to be re-structured to include critical democratic pedagogy which can provide a framework for the inclusion of voices, such as those of Indigenous peoples, presently marginalized in the debate on globalization. It is in this larger context of globalization that Indigenous voices must be heard and addressed (Shiva, 1991a, 1991b).

Foucault (1977) has argued that space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power. For Foucault, power is oppressive and is based on hierarchical observation, judgment, and examination under conditions of close and continual surveillance in disciplinary ‘blocks’….which in the case of Maasai youth could be in schools, homes, villages or out with their herds. By reducing or removing these hierarchical layers of power in the classroom, critical democratic pedagogy can provide the opportunity for Massai youth to begin to critically investigate issues that impact their lives, locally, nationally and internationally. Foucault observed that it is through experiences like this that traditional social relations in these blocks may become fragmented or disrupted.

**Critical Democratic Pedagogy and schooling in rural/Maasai communities**

The current structure and epistemologies of formal schooling in Maasai villages, which is based on hegemonic, Eurocentric principles and policies is very much in contradiction with that of indigenous models of education (Madjidi & Restoule, 2008). For the Maasai, as for many indigenous people, the purpose, curriculum, pedagogy, structure and environment are often linked to power-knowledge relationships in which a deficit mentality is regularly
adopted. When Indigenous peoples are educated in Western school buildings, separate from their traditional land, this decontextualizes their learning and disconnects learners from their base of experience. Madjidi & Restoule (2008) argue that the idea that learning should take place only within the four walls of a school, through the prescription of a fixed written curriculum, is diametrically opposed to the idea that learning is dynamic, experiential, and grounded in a sense of place.

As a placebo for equal opportunity, standardization has only further served to marginalize many youth. In a truly democratic society, schools should recognize and value diversity and model democratic principles and practice. Democracy is a value, a policy, a practice that respects, protects, and promotes human rights. Critical democracy will be framed as an ideal, recognizing the “contradictions between an espoused theory of democracy and a lived experience of inequality” (Darder, 1991, p. 63). I will argue that this ideal can and should stand as a vision of what our democracy aspires to and could become.

Critical pedagogy, as outlined by Freire (1998) must include critical and creative thinking, not just skills. The critical aspect must examine not only political issues, but also issues of social justice and equity. In a culture of democracy, the dialectic nature of both critique and possibility go hand in hand. However, the tough questions which must always be held at the forefront when critically examining any issue include: Why? To what end? and In whose interest? Woods (2005) describes this ‘way of living’ -- in & through relationships -- as one which is oriented towards the values that ultimately represent human progress & goodness. In Woods’ view, the social, political, ethical, pedagogical and artistic are intertwined. Woods (2005) continues to construct his model of democratic pedagogy by indicating a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with issues of social justice (promoting respect for diversity & reducing cultural & material inequalities) which impact upon and overlap with the practice of democracy. Together these provide a set of testing dimensions whose presence and interrelationship require exploration & application in each instance of teaching which purports to be democratic.

Use of the Arts in CDP

In his work on emancipatory discourses, Denzin (2008) argues that performance-based disciplines, such as education, can contribute to radical social change, to economic justice, to a Utopian cultural politics that extends localized critical (race) theory and the principles of a radical democracy to all aspects of decolonizing, indigenous societies. He writes of the need for educational researchers to think through the implications of a practical,
progressive politics of performative inquiry, an emancipatory discourse connecting indigenous epistemologies and theories of decolonization and the postcolonial with critical pedagogy, with new ways of reading, writing, and performing culture. The importance of performativity is not new to Kenyan society. In traditional Kenyan culture, the nurturing of children’s creative thinking was a responsibility especially reserved for the elders—men and women of high social esteem (Gacheru et. al, 1999). Aghan Odero, a contemporary Kenyan storyteller, speaks of the lessons learned under the training of his paternal grandmother who was “rich in imaginative charm and ethical insight”.

The power of aesthetic communication is that it both emotes and invokes feelings in both its creators and its recipients (Eisner, 2002). Story-telling through aesthetics, with music, dance & drama is still highly valued with Indigenous communities as ways to know and understand ourselves and the world. Both stories and one’s life experiences are used to make sense from these, both individually and collectively. CDP and the creation of stories through dialogue between Indigenous peoples sets up the possibility to create what Appadurai (1996) calls a ‘community of sentiment’. Appadurai suggests that “imagination is the staging ground for action” (p. 7) and a community of sentiment is a “group that begins to imagine and feel things together….capable of moving from shared imagination to collective action” (p. 8). It is this collective action that could also contribute to the process of ‘globalization from below’ (St. Denis, 2000). I will argue that combining CDP with performativity through the arts in schools has the potential to create “communities of sentiment” and promote “globalization from below”, locally, nationally and internationally.

In Massai culture, the arts play an important social and cultural role. Story-telling through aesthetics, with music, dance, drama and art is still highly valued with Indigenous communities as ways to know and understand ourselves and the world (Bonini, 2006; Madjidi, & Restoule, 2008). CDP could be used in schools to incorporate the arts to provide a tool for both inquiry and expression of voice, individually and /or collectively in classrooms, schools, homes and villages (St. Denis, 2000). Youth could use writing, painting, singing and performing to help promote both individual and collective reflection about issues of equity and social justice in their communities, country and globally. In the late 1970s, an African team of artists began revolutionizing the role of theatre and the performing arts in Kenya. With the appointment of Kenya’s first African Chief Inspector of Education, Wasambo Were, performance became one of the most crucial vehicles for inspiring creative thinking among Kenya’s young people (Gacheru, 1999).
Supports and Constraints for CDP

Education and politics are inseparable. Educational policy tools are attached to specific policy agendas which have their own set of power-knowledge relationships. In order to understand the role of education and the potential constraints for CDP, it is necessary to unpack the “controlling processes” (Nader, 1997) of education. The approach of Michel Foucault (1977), which emphasizes discourse and techniques or disciplines of power and control to regulate thoughts and behaviours will be useful here. Foucault’s work is particularly relevant in the analysis of the power relations which could serve to either support or constrain the use of CDP in schools in Maasai communities. For the purpose of this paper, I will examine two constraints and two supports.

First, the short-term hope for an introduction of CDP in Maasai schools is significantly hampered by staffing issues both in providing teacher salaries on a consistent basis and in in-service training for staff in times of scarce resources. (Onderi & Croll, 2008). Secondly, links with international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO, provide both support and challenge. As political elites, in Kenya, try to signal advances in their efforts to promote mass education, they are finding that their financial and human resources are not able to keep pace with the growth in child populations and enrollment rates. It is not unfamiliar to find a school in rural Kenya in which 70-80 children sit, four to a bench, with or without textbooks, being taught by rote or from a faded blackboard (Bendetson, 1996; Fuller, 1991). As the national coffers diminish, the political elites find themselves searching to nurture interdependencies with other institutions which often leads to uncertainty, contradiction, and technical ambiguity (Fuller, 1991). For Kenya, the links with international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO, provide both support and challenge. The World Bank ‘Education for All-Fast Track Initiative’ has a distinctively economic and efficiency focus….noting that “expansion of post-primary education services while simultaneously improving its quality will require African countries to deliver these services more efficiently” (The World Bank, 2008, p. v). For a country like Kenya, which is currently struggling to provide the basic infrastructure for primary education, to turn its attention to this recent post-primary policy initiative of the World Bank creates a great deal of uncertainty about their ability to ‘deepen the learning’ at either one of these levels.

There are, however, a number of government and civil society organizations that are working hard to support the goals of progress and justice. The arts and culture have been
receiving both international and national support. One of international partnerships that
could assist in supporting an initiative to deepen learning in Kenyan schools using the arts
is UNESCO. In addition to support for primary education and social justice initiatives, the
principal priorities for 2008-2009 for UNESCO Nairobi in the field of culture are “the
promotion and safeguarding of cultural diversity, through activities and projects related to
tangible heritage (both cultural and natural), intangible heritage…and cultural dialogue”
(UNESCO, 2008).

Another organization which has contributed greatly to the profiling of culture is the Kenya
Drama and Education Association (KDEA), composed mainly of school teachers, is a
nationwide network of teachers with a love for performance-based theatre work in schools.
Its purpose is to advance theater in education throughout Kenya, promote theater as an
educational tool in all disciplines (not just the language arts), advance freedom of
expression, and cultivate the critical and creative capabilities of youth. Gacheru et. al
(1999) found that through the process of “going back to their roots”, by consulting with their
elders about stories and songs used regularly to hand down to younger generations,
students not only learned new elements of their own people's culture, but also gained
deeper insights into the way elements of the old culture can be blended with aspects of the
new. (p. 349) A trend that has clearly emerged from the efforts to indigenize the Drama
Festival has been a focus on themes reflective of current social issues and events. Many
shows have touched upon sensitive social issues. Gacheru et. al (1999) found that
observers felt that the Schools Drama Festival served as a “social barometer, reflecting
the most heated public issues and the most troubling social trends”. (p. 349)

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Kenya, like many post-colonial nation-states is still in a transitional space, struggling to
create its own national identity in the midst of the pressures of globalization. Since
independence, the drive to be recognized as a legitimate and ‘modern’ nation-state, to
create a strong national economy through tourism and to build the infrastructure for mass
education, government and social services has been an on-going process. However, it
may be worthwhile for Kenya to pause and reflect before continuing in its pursuit of a
model similar to Western modernity. Although the modernity project has brought with it a
wealth of new ideas and technology that people equate with being ‘modern’, many people
are now beginning to question its unintended consequences and are now asking ‘how
Western modernity has gone astray’ (Habermas, 1984). This tension is helping to open
spaces in which a new metanarrative of modernity can be created (Hayhoe, 2000). It is within these spaces in which we can “listen to and learn from other civilizations, and recognize that they may have something to offer in our efforts to understand the failings of our own experience with modernity” (Hayhoe, 2000, p. 424). I have argued in this paper that it is within these spaces that education, and specifically critical democratic pedagogy using the arts are needed. In Maasai culture, the arts have always held an important place. Critical democratic pedagogy, using the arts could be a valuable tool by which Maasai youth could begin to reshape their own modernity project toward greater justice, greater harmony and greater respect for the values of community.
References


