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Critical Practitioner Inquiry and the Transformation of Teacher Education in Namibia

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ABSTRACT This article analyses the role of action research ('critical practitioner inquiry') in furthering the implementation of democratic educational reforms in the southern African country of Namibia. The focus is on action research that is carried out by school and college-based teacher educators as part of a staff development course organised by Umeå University (Sweden) and the Namibian Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC]. Three of the authors were participants in this course and one was an external facilitator brought in to support the action researchers. Following a description of the general political, economic and educational situation in Namibia, and of the nature of the democratic reforms in teaching and teacher education, six action research projects completed by the 1995 course participants are briefly described. These studies uncovered gaps between the rhetoric and reality of the reforms, illuminated the complexities under less than ideal conditions, and contribute concrete ideas about how to address some of the problems that arose in implementing the reforms. The role of action research in teacher education reform in developing countries is considered.

The Namibian Context

Namibia (formerly Southwest Africa under colonial rule) is a country of approximately 1,500,000 people in Southern Africa of whom 93% are black, 5% are white and 2% are mixed-race (Johnson & Devlin-Foltz, 1993). In 1990, following a 23-year war against white minority rule by South Africa Namibia achieved independence from South Africa. The former liberation

movement, Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), formed the country's first democratic government in March, 1990. At independence Namibia inherited a school system segregated along racial lines and dedicated to maintaining a system of social and political inequalities based on apartheid.

In 1990, about two-thirds of the population could not read or write and nearly 40,000 young Namibians had no access to schools. The average black class was 59 pupils per teacher, while white classrooms had an average of about 10 pupils per teacher. Furthermore, school leaving examinations resulted in overwhelming failure for black students and success for white students (Johnson & Devlin-Foltz. 1993). For example:

> *In 1991, 3660 pupils took the school leaving examination. 1100 passed but only 437 scored well enough to qualify for university. Over 2100 pupils failed – nearly two thirds of the total candidates .... The pass rate for White schools was 94%. The pass rate for schools serving the Ovambo, more than half of the country's population. was about 12%. In Namibia's first year as a majority-ruled nation, Whites accounted for 75% of those qualifying for university entrance while making up only 5% of the total population. (Johnson & Devlin-Foltz, 1993, p. 3)*

These examination results are not surprising given the fact that Namibian educational policy prior to independence mirrored the racist and elite Bantu education system in South Africa (Mckay & Romm, 1992). Primary schooling had been compulsory for whites, but not for blacks. Per capita expenditures for white education were anywhere from 5 to 10 times those for black education (Ellis, 1984). At both the primary and secondary school levels, there were many poorly qualified and untrained teachers for black students. These teachers often had to work in inadequate physical structures that were often without electricity and adequate supplies of books and writing materials (Leys & Saul, 1995).[1]

Education for black Namibian students prior to independence emphasised memorisation and rote repetition, preparation for a subservient role to white authority in the Southwest African society (Jansen, 1995).

> *The earlier educational picture reflected a belief in a teacher centered, authoritarian, externally-resourced educational system in which the learners who were allowed to enter, were regarded as passive dependants. The learners' only right was to access to a recognised expert's valued knowledge; knowledge which had to be uncritically internalised for recall at predetermined times set by the examination calendar. (Howard, 1995, p.3)*

At independence, the SWAPO government immediately began the difficult process of ridding the educational system of its colonial. anti-African character. After consultation with various groups of Namibians and foreign advisors, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) established a new

educational policy which was published in the document *Toward Education for All* (MEC, 1993).[2]

This new educational policy sought to achieve at least 10 years of primary education for all Namibian students free of any bias because of race, ethnicity, gender or social class background. At the same time. efforts were made to create adult educational opportunities to overcome illiteracy and respond to the needs for training and retraining adult workers (Amukgo, 1993; Lind, 1996). The transition from educating a small group of elites to educating all students involved much more than increasing the number of children and adults in educational programmes. It also involved replacing the old educational philosophy and practices with those suitable for educating all Namibians as a fundamental right of citizenship (Dahlstrom, 1995). It involved a focus on learning and not just schooling.

The new policy of Basic Education for All (BEA) was founded on a different view of teaching and learning and of knowledge and how it is acquired than that which existed in the pre independence system. Under the old authoritarian teacher-centred system, teacher–student relationships could be characterised as a subject/object relation. The goal of the new policy was to transform teacher–student relations to more of a subject/subject relation (Andersson et al, 1991). BEA called for a transition from teacher-centred to learner-centred classrooms, from an emphasis on rote learning to a focus on a meaning-centred learning that harnesses the curiosity of learners and the excitement of learning. It also involved a shift from an authoritarian top down pedagogy and decision making to a more interactive pedagogy, and democratic schools with broader participation in decision making (Rowell, 1995).

The new philosophy of learner-centred education which was based on the four principles of access, equity, quality and democracy called for the active involvement of learners in the learning process. and a focus on helping students learn how to go beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge to learn how to use it, transform it and teach it in a way consistent with the democratic goals of post-independence Namibia.

The goal of access focuses on providing all Namibian students with 10 years of basic education by expanding the capacity of the educational system (e.g. the number of schools, classrooms and qualified teachers), and by addressing the barriers outside and inside schools that keep children from going to school and from learning in school (e.g. gender biases, punitive discipline).

The goal of equity emphasises the importance of achieving a fair educational system where both access to schooling and its results do not depend on race, family origin, gender or the region of the country in which one lives. For example, students would not be excluded or discouraged from the tracks that lead to better jobs because they are girls. Books and other curriculum materials would not have images that portray the world from only one group's perspective or suggest that one group is better suited for particular positions in life (MEC, 1993). It is believed that reducing the inequalities of the past requires affirmative action in the present where

special encouragement and supports are provided to those who experienced discrimination under the old system.

The goal of quality focuses on establishing learner-centred classrooms where learning becomes more of an interactive, exciting and intrinsically rewarding activity than in the past. To bring this about, it is believed that teachers must come to adopt a broader vision of their role, to see themselves as part of a process of nation building and not simply as workers who mediate between curriculum experts and learners (MEC, 1993). Two major challenges that have been identified related to the goal of quality are the development of instructional strategies that will make it possible for all learners to succeed, and the Namibiansation of the curriculum where more of the material is created by Namibians themselves and is relevant to local community contexts. This requires a new more ambitious role for teachers as creators of curriculum materials.

The final goal of democracy emphasises broad participation in decision-making about education. Here schools are responsive to their local communities and parents and are organised to enable community members to actively participate in school governance, and in the evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are also viewed as active participants in all aspects of educational decision making and as contributors to the making of educational policies and the building of a Nambian 'knowledge base' about education.

In addition to fostering a new united Namibia, education in the new Namibia was also to be much more relevant to the local cultures represented by the various groups served by the schools, building on the cultural resources brought to school by the students including the various mother tongue languages. In learner-centred education teaching was to begin with the interests of the learners, their level of maturity and previous experiences, and was to focus on the quality and meaningfulness of learning. Teachers were now charged with the task of breaking down barriers between subjects and integrating school life with life outside in the community and were being asked to learn how to use local and natural resources as an alternative or supplement to the use of ready-made study materials.

The tension between breaking down the separations that had maintained social injustice and honouring and respecting the various local cultures in the society can be seen in the language policy for the schools that was adopted as a part of BEA. In part to help Namibians develop a new unified national identity, English was adopted as the new national language of the country. Instruction was to occur in the mother tongue languages in grades 1 – 3 with English as a subject, thereby helping to foster a positive identity with a student's cultural group. In grades 4 – 7 English was to be phased in as the main medium of instruction for all subjects except languages. By 1995. all secondary grades were to be taught through the medium of English.

The difficulties in implementing the ambitious agenda for change contained in BEA can be illustrated by examining this language policy for schooling. Despite the noble intent to develop the bilingual competence of all

students in English and another language, and the desire to promote both national unity and pride in one's local culture, many practical and political dynamics have complicated the realisation of these goals. The lack of competence in English among many of the teachers and even teacher educators, and the lack of culturally relevant reading materials in English and in the mother tongues have clearly slowed the acquisition of bilingual competence among students.

Despite a clear desire to make a visible break with colonialism and its manifestations such as the pervasive use of the Afrikaans language, even at the end of 1992, many of the available textbooks, syllabi and schemes of work in schools were in Afrikaans (Jansen, 1995). In addition, an official government policy of reconciliation which sought to promote respect. tolerance and understanding among Namibians across racial and social divides (Angula & Grant Lewis, 1997) has resulted in the retention of civil servants in many key bureaucratic positions within the MEC who had been responsible for implementing apartheid educational policies. Despite the efforts of the MEC to push toward an equitable basic education for all Namibian students. some who are in positions of power and influence in the MEC, and others in schools and communities continue to hold on to the ideology of the apartheid education of the past. Apart from the desires of some to maintain the system of privileges that existed under South African rule the conditions in some schools such as large class sizes of up to 70 students, and a lack of materials and resources has made the ideal of learner-centred education a difficult goal to achieve.

> *Although there is broad agreement on the general directions our education system should develop, some of our citizens are resistant to change. There remain problems of communication and suspicion about motives. Perhaps most troubling is the continued reluctance of some to make the transition from educating elites to education for all and the new education philosophy principles and pedagogy that transition requires. (MEC, 1993, p. 29)*

One of the key factors in the eventual success of the reformers in implementing the philosophy and practices of BEA will be the system of teacher education in the country that will need to prepare new and current teachers to teach according to the new learner-centred philosophy. Teacher education was considered by SWAPO to be one of the most important areas of reform because of teachers' strategic role in the reform process (Nyambe, 1996 a, b). We will now examine the way in which the MEC has attempted to develop a programme of teacher education in Namibia that would support the realisation of its goals.

Teacher Education in Namibia

Before independence teacher education in Namibia was part of the political agenda of separation of the races to maintain social injustice (Cohen, 1994). At independence white teachers were educated at Windhoek College and

'coloured' teachers at Khomasdal College, both of which filled out their available places by admitting large numbers of students from South Africa. The teacher education curriculum was mainly academic with little professional study and only a few weeks of student teaching. A watered-down version of this course was offered to black Namibian students in three 'satellite' campuses of the Academy of Education and in the capital city, Windhoek. These were located at Ongwediva, Rundu and Katima-Mulilo along the northern and most densely populated strip of the country where most of the Black majority lives. The certificate earned by students at these three northern campuses was not recognised as a proper qualification for salary purposes (Dahlstrom, 1995).

Even before independence, and while in exile in Angola, SWAPO and foreign advisors from the University of Umeå in Sweden such as Lars Dahlstrom developed an alternative to the official racist teacher education system within Namibia, the Integrated Teacher Training Programme (ITTP). This 3-year training programme for primary school teachers which lasted until 1992, was based on the learner-centred and democratic educational philosophy which eventually came to characterise BEA. It was designed to educate the children of Namibians living in Angola in settlement camps while carrying on their struggle for independence (Dahlstrom, 1996).

The current preservice teacher education system for primary teachers in Namibia, the Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD), was developed from the ITTP to facilitate the achievement of the goals of BEA. It began in January, 1993 and is a 3-year course that places a major emphasis on curriculum theory and practice. One-third of the course is devoted to school-based studies, practical work in classrooms that accompanies academic study (Dahstrom, 1995). At the same time the MEC launched an inservice course for teachers administered by UNESCO which promoted the philosophy and practices advocated in BEA (Swarts, 1996). Teacher education in Namibia is viewed as a career-long process that continues throughout a teaching career. The BETD is based on the idea of teacher educators modelling in their classes in the colleges a democratic and learner-centred pedagogy that promotes learning through understanding the same kind of teaching that BEA calls for in the schools of Namibia.

The BETD curriculum emphasises the same democratic values that are articulated in BEA such as the promotion of social responsibility, gender and race equity, environmental awareness and protection, an understanding and respect for cultural diversity and the building of school environments that are responsive to the communities in which they exist. The teacher education curriculum includes experiences and content which promote these values. For example, because of the goal of developing strong school and community connections, and to link what students experience in school with their outside lives, student teachers are encouraged during their training course to initiate various kinds of cooperative projects involving parents and other community members. In rural areas, where the majority of the population lives:

> *Such projects could focus on improving school buildings arranging school gardens, improving sanitary and water installations, fencing, etc. The future teachers should also be encouraged to involve the learners in different community activities outside school such as campaigns to keep the environment clean, helping elderly or handicapped people, etc. (MEC, 1992a, p. 7)*

Despite this attempt to make the teacher education curriculum congruent with the philosophy of BEA, teacher educators had for the most part been educated in the authoritarian system of the past, and needed help in understanding and implementing the new educational philosophy.[3] A key component in the whole educational reform agenda was a staff development course for teacher educators in the colleges [4] the B-Level Course.[5]

The B-level Course for Teacher Educators [6]

The academic B-level course for teacher educators which began in August. 1993 was designed to create an opportunity for teacher educators to experience an educational setting in line with the new philosophy of BEA and the BETD. At the beginning of the 1995/96 academic year, 34 Namibian educators had completed the B-level course. The course is organised and administered by the University of Umeå in Sweden through the Teacher Education Reform Project located at the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED). It is a one-year part-time 20-credit course organised in three modules. Each module has an intensive 2-week face-to-face period during College vacations followed by assignments, self-study and research between the contact sessions. The course was originally designed for teacher educators, but has been expanded to include support (cooperating) teachers working with the Colleges. education officers at regional offices and selected officials from the MEC.

The content of the course focuses upon knowledge and skills in the areas of educational reform, the teaching and learning processes, curriculum development, the production of teaching and learning materials, management issues, student assessment, valuation and educational research. A major component of the course is the planning, preparing, and presentation of an action research project by each course participant (TERP, 1994).[7]

Action research, the systematic and intentional inquiry about one's own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1994), is consistent with the active role for learners advocated in BEA and the BETD and the shift in view about whose knowledge is valued as a source of expertise for educational reform. It is also consistent with the goal of the MLC to democratise the educational system within the country broadening participation in decision making about schools and the desire to build a Namibian 'knowledge base' for education that builds capacity within the country to handle its own educational affairs. Under the old system. the dominant view was that knowledge belongs to a few 'experts' who deliver it to passive learners. In

post-independence Namibia, teachers are viewed as producers, as well as recipients of knowledge and critical practitioner inquiry by teachers is valued as an important component of efforts to transform schooling to realise the goals of BEA.

> *A teacher must be able to examine the activities in school (including his/her own work in a scientific and critical way and be prepared to take initiatives for change. Locally initiated development work is one of the most important instruments for educational change. (MEC, 1992b, p. 14)*

Action research both as a vehicle for professional development, and as a source of new knowledge about the process of educational reform in schools and in the colleges, was identified as an important element in the transformation of Namibian education. Student teachers enrolled in the BETD, and teachers and teacher educators enrolled in the B-level course conduct action research studies as the culminating and synthesising activity in their respective courses.[8] This article will focus on teacher educators who have conducted action research in the B-level course.[9] Following a description of the framework and processes used for introducing action research to teacher educators in the B-level course, we will discuss some of the research projects conducted by teacher educators and the role of the action research process thus far in furthering the educational agenda of the BEA. Peggy, Alina and Miriam were members of the B-level action research group that met during the 1994/95 year. Ken visited this group for 3 days in May 1995 and served as a 'critical friend' attempting to support the action researchers in their work.[10]

Practitioner Research in the B-level Course as a Vehicle for Educational Reform in Namibia

Howard (1995), the coordinator of the B-level course in May 1995, has described the process used in structuring the action research inquiries of teacher educators. During the 2-week face-to-face sessions, teacher educators from the colleges, as well as a few school-based teacher educators such as support (cooperating) teachers, design and monitor the progress of structured inquiries about some aspect of their practice as teachers or teacher educators. The only stipulation is that the research projects have to be relevant to furthering the teacher education reform agenda in Namibia (TERP, 1994). While drawing on British, Australian and North American models of the action research process advocated by John Elliott and Stephen Kemmis, and by the University of New Mexico group (e.g. Kemmis, 1985; Elliott, 1991; Anderson et al, 1994) the form of critical practitioner inquiry that has emerged in the B-level course has been adapted and reshaped to fit the current Namibian context and the need to transform unjust institutional and societal structures.

> *We felt that it was only through recognising the multi-dimensional, multilayered nature of the whole context that the researcher could reflect on the meaning and share that meaning with others as a way to discussing appropriate action. 'Uncritical' action research does not permit complex reconceptualisations of knowledge and therefore fails to appreciate the ambiguities and the ideological structures of the classroom situation. Critical action research (that advocated on the B-level) is question posing, based on reflective critical analyses of the whole situation in collboration with others. (Howard, 1995, p. 6)[11]*

There are several ways in which critical practitioner inquiry in Namibian teacher education has taken on a distinctive Namibian identity despite its reliance on British North American and Australian models of action research. The naming of the process as critical practitioner inquiry was symbolically important in communicating the desire to shape the process to suit Namibian purposes and contexts. One example of this shaping is the emphasis given in doing action research to situating the research within a larger socio-political context. Researchers are encouraged to view their inquiries in relation to the larger educational and political reforms in the country and specifically as part of the effort to promote greater access equity democracy and quality in education. They are also encouraged to situate their research in relation to their own life histories within this socio-political context.

According to Howard (1995), a number of questions are posed to course participants to help guide the research process which acknowledge both the individual and collective nature of the work:

- What is happening in my/our educational context now and what questions have I/we posed about this situation?
- How many of my/our peers agree that the question(s) is really there?
- What would I like to change about my present situation?
- How many actions can I/we think of to implement this change, and which one shall I/we try first?
- How will I/we observe/monitor record and report the outcomes?
- How will I/we share/discuss my/our results with others?
- What subsequent action will I/we take to accommodate my/our findings? (Howard, 1995, p. 7)

Howard argues that unlike in South Africa where Walker (1988, 1992, 1995) had encountered a great deal of resistance by black teachers toward the emancipatory possibilities in action research prior to majority rule, Namibian teacher educators enthusiastically embraced their new role as active shapers of the new educational practices in schools and teachers colleges. Walker (1992) argues that black teachers in South Africa who participated in her action research project actively resisted a role as curriculum shapers and knowledge producers because they worked under highly repressive political conditions, and lacked access to alternative ways

of thinking about schooling and acting as teachers. Walker raises serious questions about the relevance of the methodology of action research as a tool for educational transformation in developing countries. She warns that action research may be stripped of its emancipatory potential in some conditions:

> *The prospects for action research taking root appear daunting where teachers, under conditions of apartheid education simply have not seen themselves as agents in curriculum development or as educational knowledge producers ... Teachers in South Africa mostly do not start from positions of innovative and reflective practice given the history and effects of authoritarian surveillance of teachers working lives of political repression and a truncated view of their professionalism which has turned on teachers as mere instruments of state ideology. (Walker, 1995, pp. 13-14)*

There were a number of factors in post-independence Namibia that could have accounted for the more receptive response of teachers and teacher educators to the call that they play an active role in figuring out how the policies of BEA could be implemented in schools and teachers colleges in Namibia. First, a number of the teachers and teacher educators who have participated in the B-level course were involved in the ITPP teacher education programme that began in refugee camps in Angola. Here, they were able to experience alternatives to the apartheid educational system that dominated Southwest Africa under South African rule. Also unlike in Walker's work where Bantu education was still the official state ideology, the B-level course has operated in a context where the official position of the government was to promote equity and social justice.[12] Despite the fact that some people in Namibia have still held on to the apartheid ideology after independence and have tried in various ways to subvert the educational and societal reforms sponsored by the SWAPO government it was significant that an expanded role for teachers as key shapers of the educational reforms had the official endorsement of the government.

Despite their different positions about the relevance of action research for assisting in the transformation of apartheid influenced educational systems, both Walker and Howard agree that the models of the action research process that have been proposed in more industrialised societies need to be modified and adapted to work in countries like South Africa and Namibia.[13] We will now examine the kind of action research done by teacher educators and others in Namibia, and speculate about its role in promoting the goals of the SWAPO government's educational reforms.

One B-level Action Research Group

For 3 days in May 1995, Ken was a participant observer in an action research group in northern Namibia. This particular session of the group lasted for a week starting several days before he arrived and ending several days after he left. Six Namibian educators participated in this session a

primary school teacher and support (cooperating) teacher (Alina Kakunde Amukushu), a manager of a teacher resource center in the Rundu region in the north (Scholastica Mbava Hausiku) two teacher educators from Windhoek College (Pelagia Peggy Shilamba and Benthasi Matuipi 'Sugar' Uakumbua) a teacher educator from Ongwediva College (Katonyala Miriam Muukenga) and a curriculum development specialist from the National Institute for Educational Development (Michael Ochurub). Three facilitators from the TERP and Ken were there to serve as resource people to the action researchers.[14] Prior to and during Ken's visit to the group, the facilitators provided a lot of general moral and emotional support to the researchers, and various forms of technical assistance in conducting a self-study research project. This particular meeting of the action researchers came near the end of their research projects. All of the researchers had collected the data for their studies and had come to the meeting with draft write-ups of their research.

Prior to the 1994/95 B-level course action research studies a number of action research reports had previously been done by Namibian teacher educators. These reports focused on the complexities of implementing the rhetoric of the reforms given the context of Namibia only a few years after independence. For example, the adoption of the BETD programme 1993 involved a shift in the teacher education colleges from the vaguely conceived 'practicums; to the idea of 'school-based studies' where student teachers spend a substantial portion of their training in schools and communities carrying out specific tasks associated with their college courses. One study by Mubita (1994) of Ongwediva College had focused on identifying problems associated with this transition. Mubita interviewed support (cooperating) teachers and surveyed student teachers about their experiences in the new school-based studies courses at the college and illuminated a number of problems in the implementation of the new concept such as poor coordination between the assignments given by lecturers and the school schedules, inadequate explanation of the tasks to students and inadequate coordination in the assignments given by lecturers in different subject areas. Mubuta then made several specific recommendations for addressing these problems.

All of the action research reports that had been done prior to and after May 1995 were similar to this study in that they addressed an aspect of the researcher's own practice and attempted to enhance the quality of implementation of some aspect of the BEA and BETD reforms. Examples of the other studies include:

(1) a study of the problems in mathematics experienced by students at Rundu College and an examination of to what the degree the modelling of learner-centred math teaching in the college influences the attitudes of students toward the subject (Botes, 1994b);

(2) a study of the impact of a workshop conducted by Windhoek College teacher educators for the college faculty to familiarize them with the principles underlying the BETD (Campion & Kuliles, 1993);

(3) a study of why some non-Rukwangali speaking BETD Rundu College had trouble learning thelanguage (Hawina, n.d.);
(4) a study of student reactions to the implementation of the new ideas associated with the BETD at Rundu college (Botes, 1994a);
(5) a study to assess BETD student understanding and attitude toward integrated curriculum work at Windhoek College (Nitschke, 1994); and
(6) a study of the degree to which teaching in the social studies department at Ongwediva College conformed to the ideas of democratic pedagogy and learner-centred instruction in the BETD syllabus (Shipena, 1995).

During the May, 1995 session that was held in an isolated conference centre near Etosha National Park, Ken – as an outsider – was struck by the very supportive community that had evolved over the year in the group. There was a lot of joking and good humour and a noticeable lack of tension. While the researchers showed some hesitancy about writing their reports in English, they seemed generally enthusiastic about the course and the studies in which they were engaged.

The six studies that Ken observed in process were related to the BEA and BETD reforms in a variety of ways.[15] Michael Ochurub's (1995) study illuminated a contradiction between a reform rhetoric that calls for teachers to be actively involved in curriculum development and the reality of practice where teachers had not been consulted prior to the development of the new economics curriculum for junior and senior secondary schools. This study suggests that the majority of economics teachers in the Windhoek region want to be involved in the development of the economics syllabus and that the consequences of their non-involvement were several problems for teachers in using the syllabus including a lack of correlation between the syllabus and the texts. Ochurub calls for a more democratic form of curriculum development consistent with the rhetoric of the reforms.

In three other studies conducted by the teacher educators based in colleges, problems in implementing the ideas of the reforms were documented and progress was made in developing ways to address them or in viewing the research problems in more complex ways. First, Peggy Shilamba (1995) who was then teaching at Windhoek College conducted observations and interviews to assess the knowledge of study skills by her BETD students, and the extent to which their perceived lack of knowledge in this area was responsible for their passive attitude in the classroom. Despite the fact that she found more knowledge of study skills than she had expected, and had not yet assessed the degree to which the students were actually able to put the skills into practice (thereby postponing her initial desire to design and implement a study skills course for students), Peggy's progress over the year in the research had led her to expand her original definition of the research issue to explore aspects of the problem not previously considered such as: social group dynamics, learning in a second language and the role of culture on skill acquisition. At the end of a year of action research, Peggy came away with a clearer view of her situation and the research issue rather than with a solution to her original problem. This more comprehensive view of her practice situation which resulted

demonstrates the difference between action research and problem solving and made an important contribution to Peggy's work at Windhoek College.

In another study done at Ongwediva College, Miriam Muukenga (1995) actively involved her BETD 1 students in the teacher education process by surveying them through a questionnaire and interview about the problems that they were experiencing in using the English language. She followed up with interviews with teacher educators who also taught these same students, and asked both the students and teacher educators about their suggestions for addressing the problems identified. The research report includes several specific suggestions for improvement and a plan to share them with her colleagues so that they can take them into account in planning their courses.

In another college-based teacher educator study done at Windhoek College, Benthsai 'Sugar' Uakumbua (1995), acting on complaints raised by his BETD students and the community, investigated problems related to the teaching of the language of Otjiherero as a subject in the Windhoek region. Based on interviews with teachers Uakumbua discovered several ways in which Otjiherero taught in the schools had been 'bastardised' through translation from European languages. He and some of his BETD students then constructed a new Otjiherero syllabus outline based on an interpretation of this language that was unadulterated by European languages and sought feedback from teachers about what they had done. Uakumbua argues for the right of speakers of each Namibian language to be able to teach those languages in the schools in their pure forms minus colonial influence.

Two of the June 1995 action research studies were conducted by people working in primary schools in the north. One of the biggest problems associated with the implementation of the BEA and BETD reforms has been the difficulties that teachers and teacher educators have experienced in using the English language. These problems are understandable given the education received by these educators in Namibian schools where Afiikaans was the dominant language. Scholastika Hausika, the manager of a teacher resource centre in the Rundu region, conducted a study to investigate the reasons for difficulties with English among teachers in her region. She interviewed and surveyed teachers in rural areas and towns at the lower primary level and discovered a variety of reasons for difficulties in using and teaching English in addition to the low English ability of the teachers, including the lack of materials and texts and staff development workshops to support them, large class sizes (of up to 70 in some cases), and poor school and community relations. She also discovered that she needed to view her issue in a broader way taking into account the accepted role for Kavango women in society both at home and at school and that a solution to the problems related to the using and teaching of English would eventually require intervention at a more comprehensive level than she had initially anticipated.

Finally, in another action research study, Alina Amukushu (1995), a second grade teacher and support (cooperating) teacher in Oshakati Junior

Primary School, investigated problems that she was having in her classroom motivating some of her students to read in their mother tongue.

Alina talked with her 40 pupils and with their parents about the possible reasons for this situation. Hypothesising that the lack of adequate exposure to books was one important dimension of the problem, Alina constructed a reading corner in her classroom and examined how the introduction of this component affected the attitudes and skills of students who had and had not been having problems with reading. Some of the books for this reading corner were produced by the children themselves with assistance from Alina. Alina then systematically observed the use of the reading corner and was able to document some improvement in both the attitudes toward reading and reading skills of some of the children who had been having problems. She then conducted a workshop for 15 other teachers in her school where she shared what she had done. This led to a collaborative writing workshop where materials were produced for reading corners in several classrooms throughout the school.

Conclusions

These six studies demonstrate the limited, but important value of critical practitioner inquiry as a tool for supporting the goals of the SWAPO government's educational reforms. Within a generally supportive political context in which learner-centred and culturally responsive teaching were officially sanctioned by the MEC these six teacher educators teachers and curriculum specialist with the careful guidance of reform facilitators conducted research which uncovered gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of the reforms, shed new light on the complexities and meaning of implementing the general reform principles in real schools and colleges under less than ideal conditions, and contributed concrete ideas about how to address some of the problems. It is important to note that the problems and issues that were investigated by these action researchers were selected by the researchers themselves. Although in several cases the research did not result in concrete solutions to the problems studied, but to a deeper understanding of the researcher's situation, all 6 of these action researchers took an important step in becoming active interpreters of the broad principles underlying the educational reforms.

Howard (1995) has argued that the kind of reflective research engaged in by these 6 educators:

> *is a consciousness raising activity which enables one too see differently, to see different lenses all that we have come to take for granted. (p. 5)*

It was clear to Ken in observing these researchers that all of them had experienced new insights related to their practice and that they all experienced some progress both in understanding and in advancing the educational reform agenda, but he does not think that the experience of doing action research created a commitment to the reforms. It merely

strengthened the commitment that was already present and deepened participants' understanding of the meaning of the principles underlying them.

The action research conducted by Namibian educators in the B-level course has demonstrated its value to the implementation of the BEA and BETD reforms in two respects. First, it is a vehicle for the professional development of educators which help them assume and model for their students the same active roles in the learning process that they are trying to help their own students achieve. The participants in the B-level course have begun to internalise ways to learn from their experience that will be useful throughout their careers and that will, over time, lead to a decreasing reliance on external expertise.[16]

Secondly, action research is consistent with the democratic view of the educational research enterprise that has been adopted by the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), which rejects the idea of an exclusive and elite group of researchers who disseminate findings and Programme to educators throughout the country. In the democratic view of educational research officially embraced by NIED (Tabachnick, 1998), school practitioners and communities also make contributions to the production of knowledge about the educational practice. These can include the documentation of what is going on in the schools and colleges of Namibia, cases of successful implementation of various aspects of the reforms, studies which illuminate the gaps between the reform rhetoric and practice, and studies which help build a greater understanding of the major obstacles to the achievement of the reforms.

In a country like Namibia with very limited material resources and much poverty, the MEC cannot afford to support an educational research enterprise like those that exist in more economically developed countries where much of the research conducted is not connected by the researchers (even if it is potentially relevant) to helping educators and teacher educators understand and manage the complexities of educating all of their students to the same high standards.[17] John Mutorwa (1995) , the current minister of Basic Education in the MEC has urged NIED to promote the idea of 'useful educational research' which directly helps Namibia achieve the goals of the educational reforms. He argues that Namibia needs:

> *to develop policy and procedures in order to ensure that all areas needing to be investigated are investigated according to set priorities and national needs and that research is useful and the findings are translated into action ... All too often in the academic world, people use research to ride their own hobby horses and to blow up their own importance. As a Ministry, we cannot and will not be caught in that trap. (p. 2)*

Although action research has begun to make a contribution to empowering Namibian educators to take more control over the educational reform process there, by reducing somewhat the dependency on outside 'experts' from abroad for knowledge production and staff development, it has not

been a panacea for the educational ills of the country. The educational and social inequities that existed prior to independence still remain largely intact in some areas. Some educators including some employees in the MEC continue to actively resist and undermine the principles of the reform because they either are still tied to the ideology of bantu education or have compromised the principles of the reforms for the sake of promoting economic development in the short run. Teacher professional development programme and research programmes still exist which conflict with the ideas of a democratic research enterprise and useful educational research.

As more and more Namibian educators complete the BETD and the B-level course and experience both aspects of learner-centred education and the process of organising their experience so that they can learn from it through action research, and then make both of these accessible to others Namibia will keep creeping closer and closer to the realisation of its educational reforms.[18]

In addition to movement on the educational front however, the country will also clearly need to establish the social preconditions for the Basic Education for All that they envision. Land ownership, jobs, healthcare, housing, food, social and economic infrastructures, and all of the aspects of life in Namibia where huge gaps still exist between the majority who are poor and the minority elites, will all have to be addressed. Educational and social transformation must be accomplished through multiple strategies and on multiple fronts (Carnoy & Samoff, 1990). The goals of Basic Education for All can only be achieved if the material conditions of life for the large numbers of poor Namibians are improved and the gaps between the haves and the have nots are narrowed. Although educational transformation can contribute toward this end, it is also dependent for its own success on transformation in other spheres of the society.

Action research conducted by teachers, teacher educators and curriculum specialists in the B-level course makes a very small, but useful, contribution to educational and social transformation in Namibia. It is a methodology for conducting educational research and the professional development of educators that contributes to the demystification of expertise and the lessening of hierarchy that will eventually lead toward decreased reliance on outside experts and the increased capacity of Namibians to determine their own future.

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Notes

[1] New reform initiatives were recently undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Culture to redirect new resources to disadvantaged schools in order to create reasonable learning environments in those schools (Angula & Grant Lewis, 1997).

[2] See Angula & Grant Lewis for a detailed discussion of this consultation process.

[3] Many teacher educators spent some years in exile and had been exposed to alternatives to the apartheid educational system. Also, as Amukugo (1993) points out, there has always been some resistance within Namibia to the educational policies of the past which were based on apartheid.

[4] There are currently four teacher colleges in Namibia preparing teachers for work in primary schools. They are Windhoek College (the former college for Whites) and the three former 'satellite' campuses of the Academy of Education. Rundu College, Ongwediva College, and Caprivi College. About 600 students begin the BETD course each year and approximately 150 teacher educators work in the four Colleges of Education. Senior secondary teachers are prepared at the University of Namibia.

[5] In addition to the B-level course, staff development for teacher educators also includes subject upgrading courses for teacher educators and Educational Development Units staffed by a reform facilitator in each of the colleges. These EDU's are resource centres for teacher educators that support teacher educators on a daily basis and through periodic workshops in making the transition to learner centred education in the colleges. In addition, plans are underway to extend the B-level course for an additional 3 years of study, with a higher diploma awarded after the second year and a master's degree after the fourth year. Currently, there are 30 teachers and teacher educators enrolled in the Higher Degree course.

[6] Most of the information about the structure of the B-level course for teacher educators was taken from Lindsay Howard's (1995) description of the course. Lindsay was the coordinator of this course for teacher educators in May 1995 and was involved as a facilitator in the action research group that will be described later in this paper.

[7] When the B-level course began, the term action research was used to describe practitioner inquiry. As the Namibians began to give a particular Namibian identity to the process and to adapt it to fit their circumstances and particular goals, the term 'critical practitioner inquiry' began to be used as well. Both terms will be used in this article to describe the self-study research carried out by Namibian educators in the course.

[8] Participants also conduct an action research study during the second year of the course.

[9] For discussion of action research conducted by teacher education students in the third year of the BETD, see Griffin, 1995; Mayumbelo, 1996; Odin, 1995. During the first 2-years of the BETD programme student teachers also conduct 'critical inquiries' which are limited and short-term studies which help to prepare them to conduct action research during the third year. For discussion of the critical inquiry, projects in Namibian Teachers Colleges see Andersson & Mbodo (1995) and Yurich & Meyer (1995).

[10] In June 1994 and September 1996 Ken also participated for several days in the B-level course while teacher educators were engaged in curriculum development

work and action research. In May and December 1997 he participated for another 2 weeks supporting the action research of course participants.

[11] By uncritical action, Howard is referring to research that is not situated in relation to the broader social political context.

[12] In practice, the official educational position of the MEC based on the principles of equity, access democracy, and quality was compromised by the SWAPO government's policy of reconciliation. These reflect tensions within SWAPO and within Namibia generally between those who want to prioritise economic development and those who believe that the focus should be on achieving increased equality in social relations (Leys & Saul, 1995).

[13] Others such as McTaggart (1992) have written about the cultural imperialism associated with imposing a method of action research developed in a highly industrialised society in third world countries without cultural adaptation of the inquiry process.

[14] The TERP personnel who were involved in the course included Lindsay Howard the B-level course coordinator, and Lena and Bjorn Odin who were then the reform facilitators at Caprivi College of Education.

[15] To obtain summaries of these studies, contact Lars Dahlstrom, Director of TERP at PO Box 1165, National Institute for Educational Development, Okahandja, Namibia.

[16] See Robinson (1989) for an example of teacher education action research from South Africa which is very similar to the Namibian studies.

[17] See Zeichner (1995) for a critique of the self-serving nature of much of the academic educational research that is produced in the USA.

[18] Some research on the BETD has shown that despite some positive achievements that have been realised thus far with regard to increased commitment to a learner-centred approach to education by student teachers, the critical and transformative potential of some aspects of the reforms have not been fully realised as some teacher education students have interpreted parts of the reforms (e.g. professionalisation, reflection) in non-critical ways (Nyambe, 1996a, b).

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