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PREVIEW

ERITREAN CHILDREN'S INDIGENOUS EDUCATION SYSTEMS
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

by

Joan M. Sullivan

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration, Curriculum and
Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Larry Andrews

Lincoln, Nebraska

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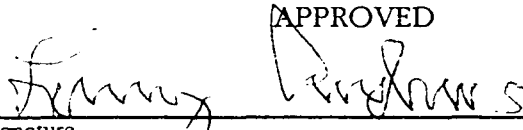
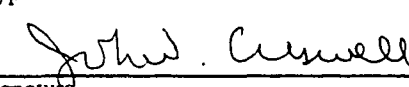
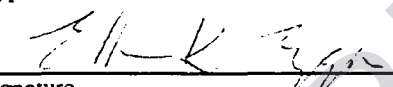


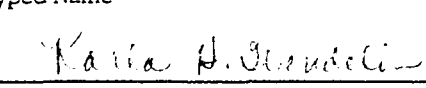
Eritrean Children's Indigenous Education Systems With

Implications For A National Curriculum

BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

ERITREAN CHILDREN'S INDIGENOUS EDUCATION SYSTEMS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Joan Marie Sullivan, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1996

Adviser: Larry Andrews

During the 1994–1995 academic year, this ethnographic research study, conducted in four culturally and linguistically diverse settings in the eastern African country of Eritrea, studied how the indigenous competencies of fine arts, language, spatial and logical reasoning, and interpersonal relationships are developed in the home and society environs. The data collected indicated an indigenous education framework consisting of cultural activities, methods of transmission, transmitters, and values that constituted the basic components in learners' acquisition of proficiency in each competency area. The fundamental objective of the indigenous education—community building—remained consistent among the dissimilar ethnic units.

Implications drawn from this study of how people learn in their indigenous society facilitate the harmonization of the roles of teacher and learner in a more formal learning environment, and help in the transfer of practical (indigenous) knowledge to a more formal academic environment. The utilization of indigenous-competency-specific critical thinking skills, teaching methods, and learning activities constructs “links” between the disparate home and work environments.

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In Eritrea:

Throughout my travels the people of Eritrea, in the most remote villages as well as in urban towns, have been generous and courteous in their offers of hospitality and assistance. I am deeply grateful for the gifts of food, shelter and many wonderful memories they have shared with me. From them I have learned the invaluable lessons of friendship, kindness and most importantly dedication to the creation of an education system despite overwhelming obstacles. The children of Eritrea have been my constant inspiration during this work; in them I have discerned a determination and perseverance to participate in the formal learning process despite the numerous odd they face.

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Tessenei gave me information on refugee issues, patiently answered my questions and were helpful with transportation. The USIS Public Affairs Officer, Chris Data, and the staff of USIS Asmara prevented all the “little things” from becoming “big things”, and thus greatly facilitated the progress of this research. Fran and Richard Davey and Ailene Norton listened regularly to my research progress and travels and always encouraged me. Pat Quarti and Nancy Godfrey kept me healthy and thus enabled me to carry out the necessary extended field travels. A special thank you to Development Concepts Inc. who kindly provided me with a much needed base in Asmara.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Education for us is an instrument of liberation; no less than the gun.
*Deputy Administrator of the Department of
Education during the war for independence.*

People are on the move. The fiery round ball of sun that has hung over the village all day is now slowly sinking in the west and the intense heat has given way to the coolness of the early evening. Once again the village is bustling with activity and noise. Young boys and girls walk to distant grazing fields to fetch the families' herds of sheep and goats whose bleating can be heard from far off. Laughter and bits of conversation mingle together as the older girls and women begin preparation for the evening meal of *shiro*, a sauce made from dried chickpeas, that is cooked over a small charcoal stove. The men of the village cluster together around small fires that glow brilliantly in the deepening darkness discussing the day's events while sipping tea or boiled goat's milk. Amidst the sights and sounds, I sit with an

education official who points to a distant mountain and describes the fortunes of the local school.

During the war our children went to school in that mountain's caves, but when the country was liberated they moved to under the trees and later to grass huts built by the community. Now we are building schools with permanent walls and the children are no longer having to move. If anything explains the progress our country has made, it is the movement of the schools.

Peace has come to Eritrea after a thirty-year armed struggle for independence, the longest by any country on the continent of Africa, and a new sense of order, one of permanence, growth and stability, is taking hold. An education system that once taught children how to stand still in order to avoid being seen and shot at from enemy planes overhead now examines how to make the curriculum relevant to the country's nation-building efforts. Schools are being built and both genders are being encouraged to participate in the formal education system. For the 1994–95 academic year I travelled the highlands and lowlands of this country, visiting four culturally and linguistically disparate communities to observe how children learn in their home and community environments, in order to make "links" between the indigenous and formal educational systems in the country.

Eritrea's Colonial Legacy

Italy formally declared Eritrea a colony on January 1, 1890, and until its defeat in the Horn of Africa by Allied forces in 1941 had a significant presence in the country (Kutschera 27). Many of the Italians who came to this land farmed in the fertile highland areas. During their fifty-year presence, they created an extensive transportation network with a railroad between the port of Massawa and the capital city of Asmara, and constructed over 3,600 kilometers of road, most of which were unpaved (UNICEF 19). With the defeat of the Italians in 1941, Eritrea came under the administrative rule of the British which lasted until 1952. On December 2, 1950, the United Nations passed a resolution recommending that Eritrea “constitute an autonomous unit federate with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown” (Fessehatzion 11). Eritrea was granted self-rule under the protection of Ethiopia’s Emperor Hail Selassie, with the Eritrean government controlling “legislative, executive and judicial powers in domestic affairs while assigning defense, currency and finance, and international economic and financial relations” to Ethiopia (Fessehatzion 11). All revenues for Eritrea were channeled through Ethiopia; Ethiopian officials replaced Eritreans in all important government posts; Eritrean culture, languages and traditions were replaced with those of the ruling Ethiopian group-the Amharic. The Eritrean people were in effect colonized by Ethiopia, which in 1961 formally annexed the country (Cliiffe and Davidson 21; Firebrace 18–21).

History of the Eritrean Liberation Struggle

In 1961, Eritrea began its thirty-year armed struggle for self-determination with Woldeab Weldemariam, to many the “Father of the Eritrean liberation movement,” as the spokesman for Eritrean independence first, from within the country and later from exile in Egypt (Firebrace 29; UNICEF 17).¹ From the early 1960s until 1974 the Eritrea People’s Liberation Front (*EPLF*) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (*ELF*) aggressively opposed Haile Selassie’s government, and by the early 1970s the liberation organizations had made significant progress (Cliffe and Davidson 36). In 1974 Selassie’s government was overthrown, in part because of the tremendous advances the Eritrean liberation movement had made, and replaced by a military regime headed by Mengistu Hailemariam. From 1974-78 approximately 90% of the country was in the hands of the *EPLF* and the *ELF*. However, in 1978 Mengistu², with the backing of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, launched a full-scale offensive against the Eritrean forces, forcing a strategic withdrawal into the Sahel Desert by the liberation forces (Firebrace 22-23; UNICEF 17-18). During this time, the two Eritrean liberation movements fought a civil war for control, with the *EPLF* emerging victorious. Many *ELF* fighters left and became refugees in the Sudan, while others joined the *EPLF* (Kutshcera 36-37).

From 1978 to 1988, the Ethiopians launched eight major offensives against the Eritrean forces. In 1982, the Red Star Campaign of the Ethiopian Army

proved to be a critical turning point in the war for the Eritrean liberation movement. The former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics supplied the Ethiopian regime with military advisors, troops and significant amounts of armaments, but it all failed to help Mengistu, as the campaign proved to be ineffectual against the Eritrean army. In 1988 the Ethiopian army suffered a second major defeat when its troops were annihilated in the Sahel village of Afabet; 18,000 Ethiopian soldiers were taken prisoners of war, and a large quantity of military equipment—tanks, guns, ammunition—was captured. In 1990, the *EPLF* captured the Red Sea port of Massawa, Ethiopia's only link to the sea (Kutschera 38). Finally, on May 24, 1991, the longest military struggle for independence in Africa ended when the *EPLF* entered the capital city of Asmara (UNICEF 18). On April 23-25, 1993 a nationwide referendum was held, and 98% of the population voted for independence. Eritrea became the 52nd country on the continent of Africa on May 24, 1993, and a member of the United Nations and the Organization for African Unity a few days later. Today, President Issais Afeworki heads the transitional government of this nation of 2.3 to 2.8 million people³ located in the Horn of Africa, with border on the Red Sea, the Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti (UNICEF 17-19).

Eritrea Today

Against tremendous odds the Eritrean people survived a generation of war and years of repeated drought and famine. The country's infrastructure has

been destroyed. Roads and railways are not usable. Power stations do not function adequately. Communication links are weak. Schools and health services are inadequate to meet the populace's demands. The infant mortality rate is approximately 135 per 1,000 live births, and the under 5 mortality rate about 203 per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy at birth is about 46 years; access to safe and clean drinking water remains low in most provinces. Almost 1 million Eritreans, approximately 1/3 of the population, left the country during the years of conflict: 700,000 became refugees in the Sudan, and 300,000 left for other countries (UNICEF 19).

Eritrea has three main geographical regions: the central highlands, the western lowlands (on the border with the Sudan and Ethiopia), and the eastern lowlands (along the Red Sea coast and Djibouti). The central highlands, the most densely populated area of the country, where the ethnic groups of the Bilen (2.1%), Saho (5%), and Tigrinya (50%) live, enjoys a tropical highland climate. Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, is located in the center of the region. The western lowlands is inhabited chiefly by pastoralists: Hedareb (2.5%), and Rashaida (.5%); and agropastoralists: Kunama (2%), Nara (1.5%), and Tigre (31%). The land is semi-desert with temperatures ranging from 20° centigrade in the cool months, to well above the 45° centigrade mark in the hot months. In the eastern lowland region the Afar (5%) engage in fishing and pastoralism for their primary livelihood. The land is arid, with minimal rainfall, and has little potential for agriculture (UNICEF 12).

During the 1994–1995 school year the government underwent intensive restructuring; 10% of the work force was streamlined and the local government structure was changed from nine provinces to six administrative districts in May 1995. The government rationalized the structural change as a necessity for the full development of the people of Eritrea and for an efficient administration that would promote equitable and sustainable development. “The new structure,” it said, “takes at its bases national resources, demography, infrastructure and the unity of the Eritrean people” (Eritrea Profile 5).

History of the Eritrean Educational System

In traditional African society, a pivotal institution within each cultural unit was the educational system that focused on producing a man or woman of character with useful skills appropriate to his/her status in life. The educational system was integrated: each social institution had a role in providing moral and practical instruction which enabled the youth to learn their role in society. The aim of indigenous African education has been aptly described as “the preparation of youth, their insertion and complete integration into the life of the community” (Fafunwa and Aisiku 15).

Honesty, respect, co-operation, and conformity to social order were the primary goals of the educational system, whose functional curriculum spanned social, religious, and technical domains. Africans viewed

education not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end. Its goal was to move a student from the status of an *absolute* individual to that of one who was part of a community.

The curriculum was integrated, not compartmentalized, the contents were interwoven, and the language of instruction was the one spoken among the people at large. The curriculum centered on communal life and incorporated the following: a sense of observation, spontaneous activities, educative games, co-education of both genders, and an attentiveness to nature. Education was participatory: ceremonies, rituals, recitation, and demonstration all had a place. It was practical: student learned to fish, weave, carve, cook, among other such activities. It was recreational: wrestling, dancing, drumming, singing, and racing were all an integral part of the curriculum. It involved intellectual training: the youth studied local history, legends, poetry, story-telling, and the environment (Abbam 1869-70).

Since indigenous African education was relevant to the social, economic, and political conditions of each ethnic group, and the medium of instruction was in a language all pupils were literate in, it produced young men and women who were fully participant in community life, and who had the skills necessary for successful participation in such a social setting. The educational system prepared the people for a useful life, as its goals were “directly linked to the needs of that particular society at that particular time” (Abbam 1870). However, with colonization the indigenous forms of education were

discarded and new policies were implemented, thus stripping the population of much of their cultural heritage.

As in other countries, much of the methodology and ideology in Eritrean curricula was taken from the West with limited attention given to the pedagogical imperatives of Eritrea. During the period of Italian colonization, basic education for the Eritrean student was described as follows:

By the end of the fourth year, the Eritrean student should be able to speak our language (Italian) moderately well, he should know the four arithmetical operations . . . he should be a convinced propagandist of the principles of hygiene, and of history, he should know only the names of those who have made Italy great. (English Panel 49)

During federation with Ethiopia (1952–1962) Amharic, an Ethiopian language, was made the official language of instruction in the Eritrean educational system. In the reign of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie (1962–1974), the schools in Eritrea underwent further colonization of their curriculum. “. . . a new curriculum was introduced in the elementary school programme in order to Ethiopianize the educational system to the needs and requirements of the country” (Tesfamariam 7).

A former liberation fighter and now a Ministry of Education official, Tesfamariam was a student in the Eritrean educational system during Haile

Selassie's rule. According to him,

When I was a student during the Haile Selassie regime I remember that all the textbooks had the portrait of Haile Selassie which had written under it "His Majesty Haile Selassie, the King of Kings, elected by God". This had an implication in the mind of every school child. At this level all the textbooks tried to inculcate the dominance of the Amhara nationality, the history of 'great heroes' of Amhara and considered Eritrea as part of Ethiopia. . . . During the Haile Selassie regime, the middle Schools and secondary schools inherited the colonial system or western type. Here, I also remember that in history lessons we studied a book called Landmark Work History. This book was the history of great leaders of Europe, the battles they fought, the treaties they signed . . . etc. But we have not learned the history of our country. (Tefamariam 8)

After Haile Selassie was overthrown by Mengistu's Marxist military government, known as the Dergue, the Ethiopian government, realizing that the "main human resource of the Eritrean liberation army was the schools," took steps to build mistrust among the Eritrean teachers and students (Tefamariam 5), to further undermine the educational system. The Ethiopian-run Ministry of Education promoted students from one grade level

to another regardless of their lack of academic ability, in order to discourage them from joining the liberation organizations. “The kind of education advanced to Eritreans at the time (under the Ethiopian Dergue rule) did reflect neither Eritrean national history nor identity but purposely devised schemes to weaken and discredit Eritrea’s national history and identity,” (Gebregziabher 1).

The Education System in Eritrea Today

In Eritrea today, 50% of the population is under the age of 18 years, and 20% under the age of five years (UNICEF 13). According to the Ministry of Education there are 631 primary schools and secondary schools⁴ scattered through the highlands and the lowlands, 296,010 children in Eritrea are attending school, with female participation accounting for 43% of the enrollment.

Currently, due to cultural, economic or religious restrictions, many females have not been afforded the opportunity to participate in formal education. In addition, since the end of civil conflict in 1991 refugees (in organized and spontaneous streams)⁵ have been returning to the country and settling primarily in the western lowlands. This sudden influx of school-age children has put an additional strain upon the already overburdened educational system.

The Ministry of Education views education as the basic right of the child;

however, it recognizes that there are major stumbling blocks impeding the growth of education in the country. These include the following: the legacies of the thirty-year civil war, extreme poverty,⁶ recurrent phases of drought, underdevelopment, and the denial of education opportunities to a large number of children of school, especially females (Ministry of Education 5). The Ministry has indicated that one of its priorities is to increase female participation in all levels and areas of the educational system.

The Ministry has also undertaken an extensive national curriculum review to improve the quality of education, and make the curriculum reflect the local and national needs of the people.

Although there must be a common cord of shared knowledge in learning to address the concerns of national cohesion, the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of local needs and circumstance would imply curriculum adaptations to changing social contexts, job market requirements and the cultural aspirations of various communities. (Eritrea Profile 4)

A critical consideration in making the curriculum culture specific is the incorporation of indigenous pedagogical issues in the formal curricula to ease a learner's transition between the informal and formal learning environs. The identification of cultural components that are most influential in the

learning process and the transference of these elements to the formal educational system curricula is addressed in this research study.

The Research Problem

“Every culture features a set of roles that must be filled by individuals in each generation and then passed from one generation to the next. . . . In addition to individually prescribed roles, each culture values certain competencies that must be mastered by at least some members of each generation. . . . Failure to acquire the relevant roles or skills severely limits the realization of the potential of an individual, a group or the overall culture” (Gardner 257).

In a country such as Eritrea there is not one culture but many. Of the nine ethnic groups residing in this land totalling 124,320 square kilometers, the majority of the ethnic groups are agropastoralists/pastoralists (UNICEF 13). When writing a curriculum for Eritrea, the curriculum developers must look at not one but nine cultures that shape activity settings and/or contexts for individual action, teaching, learning, and task competencies in indigenous education. It is important to understand the variant cultures of the students, but not to identify individuals in broad cultural terms for fear of “restricting expectations of academic performance to a generalized analytical category. . . the method error that follows is to measure culture by assigning it as a trait to all children or parents in a group, thus assuming culture has uniform effects