

# **A Contradiction between Authoritarian Culture and Democratic Learner Participation in Environmental Learning Activities**

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## **Abstract**

Botswana's national philosophy of education, *Kagisano*, which means Social Harmony, has as one of its main principles, participatory democracy. This implies a voice for all the people including learners on issues that affect them and their future, not only in politics but also in community, social and economic affairs (Botswana Government, 1977). In environmental learning processes this has meant that implementing democracy in schools implies that decisions in the teaching and learning processes should be shared among all the stakeholders who are affected in the school education system. To promote relevance of environmental education, the curriculum has therefore recommended participatory approaches through varied methods of teaching meant to respond to the country's socio ecological challenges and needs by engaging learners in environmental management activities through democratic participation.

Drawing on focus group discussions, interview and observation data from one primary school in Botswana, I use Activity Theory to unearth a contradiction that emerges between the national education philosophy imperative and the authoritarian culture in the school. The results from this research reveal that teachers, using their power and authority, have come to see democratic participation of learners as part of the education system's provision of theoretical and practical skills which do not necessarily directly relate to the reality around learners and their socio-ecological needs.

**Keywords:** Democratic participation, learner participation, environmental management activities, authoritarian culture.

## **Introduction**

Central to Botswana's national philosophy of education, *Kagisano*, which means *Social Harmony*, is its focus on the principle of *participatory democracy* implying a voice for all the people in issues that affect them and their future, not only in politics but also in community, social and economic affairs (Botswana Government, 1977, p. 24). Encapsulated within this principle is the call for participatory approaches in school learning processes that are democratic. According to the commissioners who were tasked to come up with the *Kagisano* philosophy, democracy involves giving each person a voice in the running of affairs of the

teaching and learning process “and the chance to participate, directly..., in decisions affecting their lives” (Botswana Government 1977, p. 25). Implementing democracy in education, particularly in schools implies that decisions about teaching and learning processes in schools should be shared among all the stakeholders who are affected, that is, “... the community and parents, professional workers in education, and the *pupils themselves*” (ibid, my emphasis) Drawing on this philosophy, it was expected that a reorientation of the curriculum should embody the national principle of democracy and should emphasise the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills that Botswana will need in a developing, rapidly changing society which is faced with increasing pressure of economic and socio-ecological challenges in their society (Botswana Government, 1977).

The focus of education in the school and classroom should therefore be upon learners: enabling them to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour that will give them a full successful life and continued personal growth; and equipping them *to participate effectively* in a changing society (p. 23, my emphasis).

The *Kagisano* philosophy acknowledged that substantial changes throughout the education system were necessary in order to adapt the education or pursue new goals that could produce such learners. Hence according to Tabulawa (1997), the education policy pronounced a new strategy for achieving those goals in the country’s quest for curricula reforms in

the teacher-student relationship which, in the case of Botswana, has been found to be excessively teacher-dominated. Such change could only take place if learner-centred pedagogy were to be adopted by teachers (p. 189-190).

This paper emerges out of an investigation in one primary school in Botswana aimed at understanding how learner-centred democratic pedagogy plays out in environmental education processes within a school culture that still seems to be authoritarian but seeks to meet the national education philosophy’s demand that clearly stipulates that learner participation is a democratic human right issue.

## **Democratic Participation of Children as a Human Right**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2004) has been instrumental in setting a global agenda for raising awareness about children and in particular actively encouraging an increase in children’s participation in democratic societies by placing an emphasis on children’s involvement in environmental decision-making (Barratt Hacking, Barratt, & Scott, 2007, p. 531). The obligation and right for children to be involved and engaged in civic responsibilities and decisions about matters that affect their lives is firmly enshrined in this convention through Article 12 of the CRC which says,

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (UNCRC, 2004).

Article 12 challenges states to consider children as citizens with both the capacity and the right to agency rather than construing children and young people as awaiting transformation into mature, rational and competent adults (Roche, 1999; Greene & Hogan, 2006; Hart, 1992; Lansdown 2001 and Graham, Whelan & Fitzgerald, 2006). These authors view this statement as a challenge that imposes an obligation on adults in their capacity as teachers, parents, professionals, politicians or any other children’s custodians, to create opportunities and ensure that children are listened to and enabled and encouraged to participate and contribute their views on all relevant matters that affect them. “All people have a right to express their views

when decisions are being made that directly affect their lives – and children are people too.” Lansdown, (2001, p. 7) contends.

An interest in learner participation has particularly come from the human rights movement and organisations such as UNICEF whose primary objective is advocacy to improve children's rights and the economic and social policies that affect them by upholding and facilitating the full implementation of the UNCRC. This children's rights movement has raised interest in *how* children are treated in society through emphasising participation, with the hope that children will be more aware of social transformation so that they can make changes on socio-ecological issues (such as waste and sanitation, poverty, HIV/AIDS and climate change impacts, and other social problems) all of which are challenges that affect children in Botswana (Preece & Mosweunyane, 2004; UNDP Botswana Human Development Report, 2005; Maundeni & Mookodi, 2004). In environmental education, the focus has mainly been on teaching children to participate in understanding and addressing environmental issues (Jensen & Schnack, 2006; Carlsson & Jensen, 2006; Jensen, 2004; Barratt Hacking et al., 2007). However though some sectors of society have argued that Article 12 of the UNCRC poses serious challenges in that children rights expose them to a certain degree of risk as it places them outside adult protection if their views and decisions are taken seriously, Lansdown (2001) counter-argues this perception by pointing out that

this is to misunderstand the nature of the rights embodied in the CRC as the Convention does not give children full adult rights. Rather, it gives children the right to be heard and to gradually take increasing responsibility for decisions as their competence evolves (p. 7).

Beyond that, Lansdown argues that adults can only act to facilitate children's participation and meet their needs “if they know what is happening in children's lives - only children can provide that information” (ibid.). A key challenge that emerges, then, is whether and how we can best identify the opportunities that can enable and facilitate children's participation so that its principles and prospects as espoused in Article 12 are meaningful, relevant and important to the everyday lived experience of children in their contexts for their own welfare and that of the environment. From these arguments it becomes clear that considerable emphasis must be placed on participatory approaches and the role they can play education for their sustainable futures.

## **Participatory Approaches in Environmental Education Learning Processes**

Within the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework (Stevenson, 2007; Landorf, Doscher & Rocco, 2008; Robotom, 2007; Gough, 2006) one of the themes of involving learners in environmental education actions is to develop appropriate and genuine *participatory approaches* and methods that are purposeful (Lotz-Sisitka, 2006). In a consultative process that the Southern African Development Community Regional Environmental Education Programme (SADC-REEP) carried out in the southern Africa region, it established that Environmental Education is strongly oriented towards contextual socio-ecological issues. It thus has a strong environmental focus and also considers other concerns to re-orient education towards sustainable development (Lotz-Sisitka, 2006). This provides a firm foundation for ESD work in the region through ESD practices and involving participatory approaches which are

... seen to be important in building capacity for action taking, and also for ensuring ownership and longer term sustainability of initiatives. There was a strong consensus that participatory approaches were useful in teaching practices, but at the same time, there was a concern that some participatory approaches were superficially used, and were not as effective as they should be (p. 15).

This statement calls for participatory methods that are learner-centred where “everyone is represented appropriately so that they are able to voice their views on the situation” (p.19). This is part of a broader trend towards examining participation in constructivist learning processes through access to language, cultural capital and through scaffolded pedagogical processes where it is strongly recommended that these processes are supported through the skills of the ‘knowledgeable other’ such as the teacher (ibid.). This support could be provided through, among other things, understanding how learning takes place in social and cultural contexts.

## **Authoritarian Tswana Culture**

According to Tabulawa (1997), the commission that drew up the *Kagisano* philosophical document, challenged any features of the education system (be it structure, organisation, curriculum, content or methods) that appeared to impair the principle of democracy. The commission suggested that it would be meaningless to speak of democracy if schools showed quite opposite tendencies (ibid., p. 190). In response to this call, a number of learner-centred and participatory models of learning have since emerged and been advanced over recent years in the Botswana education system (including in environmental education teaching and learning processes) in order to bring about some reforms that would embrace this principle of participatory democracy. But research done on pedagogical practices in Botswana, have repeatedly shown that teaching and learning processes continue to be teacher dominated (Tabulawa, 1997; Monyatsi, 2005; Ketlhoilwe, 2007). This has been attributed to the history of authority structures that have their roots in the colonial bureaucratic-authoritarian models and the Tswana culture that demands children’s submissive compliance to authorities and adults (Tabulawa, 1997; Maundeni, 2002).

In Botswana, children are rarely involved or consulted on important issues or on matters concerning themselves. The socialization of children emphasizes passivity and submissiveness in most spheres of their lives in the family, school and society at large (Tabulawa, 1997; Maundeni, 2002). The school is an institution within a broader society operating within a set socio-cultural context. This therefore means that even in schools, as a result of the way children are socialised in Botswana, the resultant tendency is that children do not question adults which is “by and large influenced by Tswana conceptions of adult-child relations and conceptions of the place of children” (Maundeni, 2002, p. 287). This subjugates children as in Tswana culture it is considered improper for children to question adults’ decisions. Maundeni’s observation is supported by other scholars (Tabulawa, 1997, Monyatsi, 2005), who also observed that Tswana culture demands unquestioning obedience of children towards parents, teachers and any other adults, and that it obliges children to “willingly do whatever they are told” (Maundeni, 2002, p. 287). These expectations are reinforced by the use of a Tswana proverb that emphasizes complete subservience of children to adults: ‘*Motsala-motho ke Modimo wa gagwe*’ which translates to ‘A child’s parent is its god’ (Maundeni, p. 288, citing Schapera, 1977, p. 179). However, though Botswana has attempted to embrace democratic values across most of its institutions in line with the philosophy of *Kagisano*, these attempts have persistently been undermined because of this strong indigenous paternalistic culture which is undemocratic and is evident in Botswana’s educational processes. Control and authority are still centred on those in authority and this is visibly so in pedagogical practices (Monyatsi, 2005; Tabulawa, 1997).

## **Authoritarian Pedagogical Practices in Schools**

Consistent with the Tswana authoritarian culture, asymmetrical power relationships have always mandated the authoritarian teacher to direct all teaching and learning activities, (Tabulawa, 1997, p. 194). This is because “the assumption is that in the practice of learning there is a teacher who knows what has to be learned” (Daniels, 2008, p.126). Monyatsi (2005)

corroborates Tabulawa's findings in his study on the transformation of schools into democratic organisations in which he observed that Botswana schools are still organised bureaucratically whereby cultural values are reinforced in schools and

in pursuant of efficiency and effectiveness, schools have been, and are still structurally organised along bureaucratic lines; with the common feature of tight control, a somewhat rigid and inflexible dependence on top-down authoritarianism (p.355).

It becomes clear from what these researchers have observed in the teaching and learning structures in schools that democracy, so much cherished in Botswana's philosophy of *Kagisano* philosophy, could not be reasonably expected to develop and flourish if schools themselves continue to be undemocratic (Tabulawa, 1997. p. 190). Perhaps it was in the light of these entrenched cultural values that have been embedded in the schools' pedagogical practices that the government has relentlessly invested in teacher development programmes that could equip teachers with the requisite skills to vary their pedagogical practices in order to embrace more democratic approaches in their teaching.

### **Authoritarian Culture in Environmental Education Teaching Processes**

In an attempt to embrace the participatory approach in the teaching of environmental education, Ketlhoilwe (2007) observed that, consistent with the authoritarian culture revealed by Tabulawa (1997), Maundeni (2002) and Monyatsi (2005), power relations are embedded in classroom discourses as reflected by teachers who teach by giving instructions and learners responding as expected.

The curriculum has recommended participatory approaches through varied methods of teaching meant to promote relevance of environmental education to the country's socio ecological challenges and needs. But teachers, using their power and authority, have come to see it as part of the education system's provision of theoretical and practical skills which do not necessarily directly relate to the reality around learners. There is little connection made between the tasks undertaken to improve the environmental problems at the school, or why they are being undertaken in the first place. Children consequently see these tasks as hard labour, and not as learning activities (Ketlhoilwe, 2007; Silo, 2011).

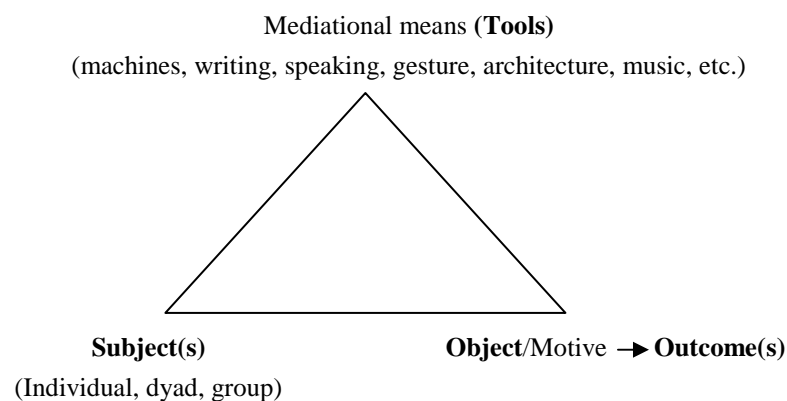
Further review of literature (Tabulawa, 1997) reaffirms that there has been substantial effort and investment that has been directed towards teacher development in order to implement educational reforms, with the expectation that this can solve problems of resistance to pedagogic change, but without success. There is therefore need for reform in teaching that will recognise the socio-cultural context within which learning takes place in order for the change processes in learning to take place. Also emerging from some of these studies done in Botswana outlined above on pedagogical reforms is that the responsibility is squarely placed on the teacher as the central agent with potential for pedagogic change in terms of developing the learners' pro-environmental behaviours with the hope that the objective of learner-centred education will be realised.

Tabulawa, (1997) and Ketlhoilwe, (2007)'s research and numerous other qualitative studies of teacher development programmes targeted for curriculum reforms and pedagogic change towards learner-centred approaches seem to focus on the teacher's central role in the teaching and learning processes. These studies provide valuable findings regarding the barriers and constraints school systems encounter when teachers attempt to integrate participatory approaches in their teaching activities. However, these traditional qualitative studies do not address the historical development or the social nature of how the programme integration efforts of teachers affect the subsequent learner participation in these activities and more importantly how learners themselves participate in these activities as agents of change within such a strong authoritarian culture. These studies have not explored the inherent potential of

learners' initiatives as active participants and agents of change and the implications that this could have for pedagogic reform and change. It is this gap that this paper intends to explore, as some of these views seem not to recognise that learners are constituent to a cultural, historical and social milieu. They cannot be viewed as inert subjects but are innate agents with the ability to contribute to social change in the environmental education learning process. It is also apparent that in most of these research models and studies, there is a relative dearth of research regarding how children actually participate in these learning activities from their perspective as active agents. It is this central dilemma, namely *how* participation is constituted specifically in environmental educational processes against the established authoritarian culture in schools that forms the main object of this paper. Below, I outline a methodology for investigating the how culture contradicts democratic learner participation in environmental learning activities as envisaged by the *Kagisano* philosophy.

## The Theoretical Framework for Understanding Learner Participation

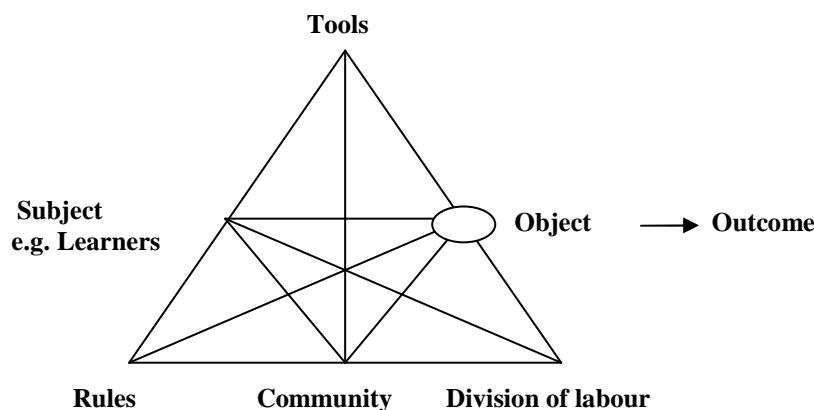
To understand learner participation and to identify tensions in participatory practices, I drew on Engeström's (1987) Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) mediational model of human **activity systems**. Drawing on Marxist psychology, Vygotsky (1978), argued that learner participation is mediated by **artefacts or tools** which modify how the individual **subjects (learners)** will achieve their **object** (Daniels, 2001, 2008; Engeström, 1987, 2001). Artefacts or tools are created by individuals and social groups of which the learner is part, in order to interact with their world (Daniels, 2001, 2008). Viewed this way Vygotsky essentially enables us to conceptualise participation of learners as mediated through socio-historical cultural tools. This basic interaction forms an **activity system** (Daniels 2001, 2008). Figure 1 illustrates the first generation Vygotskian activity system which is a representation of mediation, where the subject acts on the object using mediational means (tools).



**Figure 1:** Basic Vygotskian triangular representation of mediation (First generation activity system)

While this basic representation opens the way towards an understanding of mediated participation, it lacked an articulation of the individual subject and his/her role in the societal structure. One of Vygotsky's colleagues, Leontiev (in Daniels, 2001) went on further to develop Vygotsky's tool mediation by focusing on the object (e.g. participation in a particular environmental management activity) and how it is interpreted and what actions it elicited in learners (Edwards, 2005). This system formed the second generation activity system illustrated in Figure 2. Engeström further extended and developed the second generation activity system by taking the object-oriented, tool mediated collective activity system as the unit of analysis, thereby bridging the divide between the subject and the societal structure (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Daniels, 2001, 2008). This theoretical framework offers a more viable root model of participation by focusing on object transformation which helps map

relationships between learners (subject) and how their participation in environmental education activities (object) is mediated (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Daniels 2001, 2008). In developing and expanding the concept of the activity system, Engeström (2001) proposed that an individual activity system is an integral part of a much larger and expanded collective activity system. This expanded model considers the social, cultural and historical context within which the activity system is operating. The additional dimensions of this second generation activity system include the community of which the learners as subjects are part (their peers, teachers, parents, and others), the **rules** that pattern their participation (e.g. norms and rules in the school and community related to environmental activity), and the **division of labour** (how they divide up tasks and who does what) (Engeström, 1987).



**Figure 2:** Second generation activity system (Adapted from Engeström, 1987)

Tools, community, rules, and division of labour are the structures that can both enable and constrain learner participation in the activity system as their participation is mediated by these structural and socio-cultural dynamics in order to achieve an outcome (Engeström, 2001; Edwards, 2005).

## Some Basic Principles of CHAT

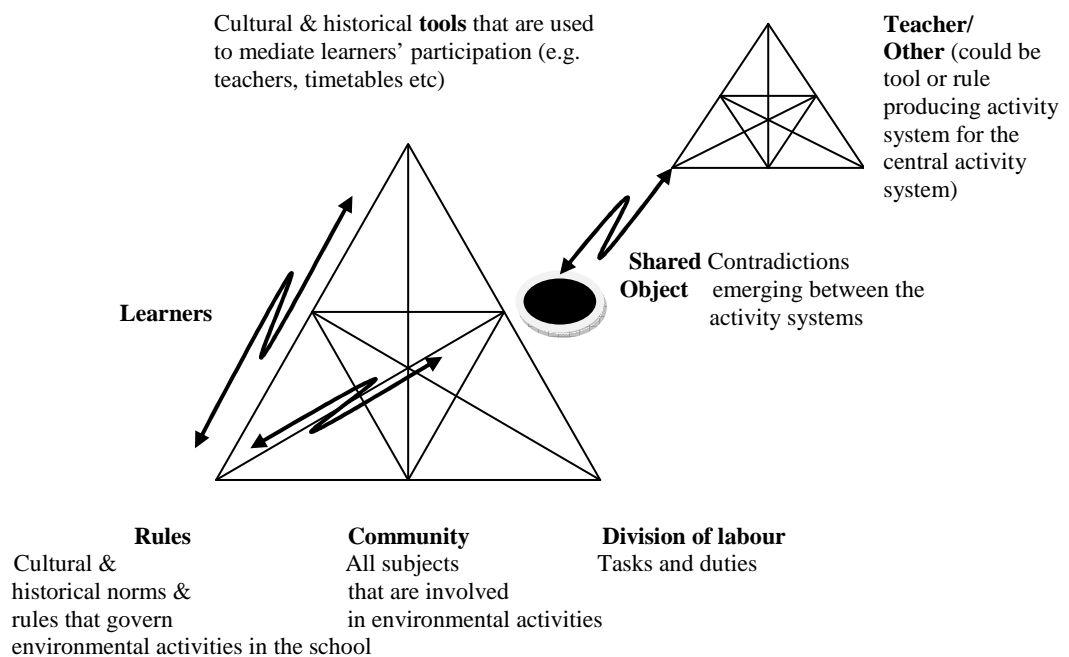
Some of the basic principles of CHAT that are shared by those drawing on the theory who are among others are Cole & Engeström (1993), Russell (2002) and Hardman (2005) are outlined below:

- Human activity is collective and human behaviour is social in origin (Cole & Engeström, 1993). Even when a learner apparently undertakes a solitary task such as picking up litter it is a collective activity because his or her actions are mediated by a complex network of socio-historically embedded tools, such as the rules that govern his actions.
- The human mind is social and it grows out of joint activity with shared tools. For example, in collective activity, the learners' involvement is influenced by the history, values, norms and social relations embedded in the shared cultural tools used by that community.
- Tools, which carry socio-historical meanings, mediate participation.
- CHAT theory assumes that learners are active cognising agents but that they act in sites that are not necessarily of their choosing with tools that constrain and afford their actions (Hardman, 2005).
- CHAT makes use of a contextualist methodology where learners participate in contexts that involve others and their participation is mediated by tools that both enable and constrain their actions.

- Multi-voicedness is another key element in activity systems (Engeström, 2001). This is because meaningful participation, for example in the environmental management activities can only be accomplished collectively rather than individually. An activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests (Engeström, 2001). This should allow the participants within the school community to negotiate and mediate rules and customs that describe how the school community functions in relation to these activities, what it believes, and ways that each participant can support different activities in the practices. The multi-voicedness “is a source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translation and negotiation” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).
- Activity systems are constantly subject to change and activity theory sees these changes as driven by contradictions (Engeström, 1987). Contradictions can arise within and between systems (ibid).

### Contradictions in Activity Systems

Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions (represented by lightning arrows) within and between activity systems (Engeström, 2001) as illustrated in Figure 3. The central role of contradictions is that they offer opportunities for change and transformation. These contradictions arise when the conditions of components cause the learners in the activity system to face contradictory situations that hamper the attainment of the object (Engeström, 1987, 2001). Taking the second generation learner participation activity system discussed earlier (see Figure 2), third generation CHAT would emerge from the interaction of the learners’ activity system with their teachers as a tool producing activity system, as they are the main mediating tools in learner participation. In other words, the operational working conditions that learners face in an activity system may not favour the attainment of their object because of the conditions that one component of the activity system, say the authoritarian culture as a rule and how it is implemented by teachers as a mediating tool, creates tensions for other components in the system (Engeström, 1987).



**Figure 3:** Contradictions within and among activity systems



As active cognising agents, who act in contexts in which their actions are mediated by historically developed cultural tools that are sometimes beyond their control, these conditions can constrain or afford their actions in their attempt to work towards their object, which could be another central source of a contradiction within components of the activity (Engeström, 2001).

## Methods

Using case study methodology, the research focussed on generating a body of data concerned with the identification of issues relating to how learner participation was mediated, rules and roles governing their participation in environmental management activities in one primary school in Botswana. This was subsequently followed by the identification of contradictions within the activity system in the school. This data was generated mainly from tape recorded focus group interviews which were conducted with learners during workshops and were the main data generation source. This was accompanied by observations of all environmental management activities undertaken in the school and how learners were participating in them, recorded as field notes. These also served to triangulate the data collected from the focus group interviews. Further data was generated from learners' narratives where I asked them to show, tell and explain how they participate in these activities either through tours or informal conversations with them as they went about their activities. This was noted in observation notes. Concurrently more data was generated from semi-structured interviews with teachers, school heads, cleaners who all constituted the school community.

Focus group interviews with learners instead of individual interviews enabled maximum participation by all children participants in each of the focus group interviews that were conducted in each school. Focus group interviews "appeared to offer the most economical and effective means of ascertaining children's views" (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996, p. 131). This was made possible because children in focus groups had the safety and support of their peers, an environment within which there was a power balance, a crucial factor for optimal learner participation (Hill et al, 1996; Hennessy & Heary, 2006). Focus group interviews for learners and individual interviews for teachers, cleaners and the school heads of the school communities were very useful tools for unpacking each of their motives in these activities (Hardman, 2005, p. 102).

Examining participation using cultural historical activity systems in the school environmental management activity systems not only allowed the analysis of collective action as a unit of analysis (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987) but also allowed me to capture (a) the dynamic structure of activity, (b) the historical development of the activity over time, (c) the socio-cultural influence in the formation of subjects' actions (Leontiev, 1981). In this analysis using the activity system I had to identify the contradictions and tensions linked to how the object of participation was selected and mediated. I also had to explore how the rules mediating participation were set and designed, how roles were allocated, who made decisions on what actions should be undertaken.

## Results and Discussion

This section provides detailed empirical results and findings of the environmental management activity systems and how learners participated in the context of the school. The main objective is to depict a clear picture and understand how learners' participation in environmental management activities is mediated.

The discussion focuses on the emerging contradictions arising in the school environmental management activity systems to establish what objects the learners and mediation tools (teachers) were acting on in the school context. I also consider the rules that patterned this mediation and the form of participation that learners were taking in these activities, how this participation was mediated to achieve the objects as well as their roles in these activities.

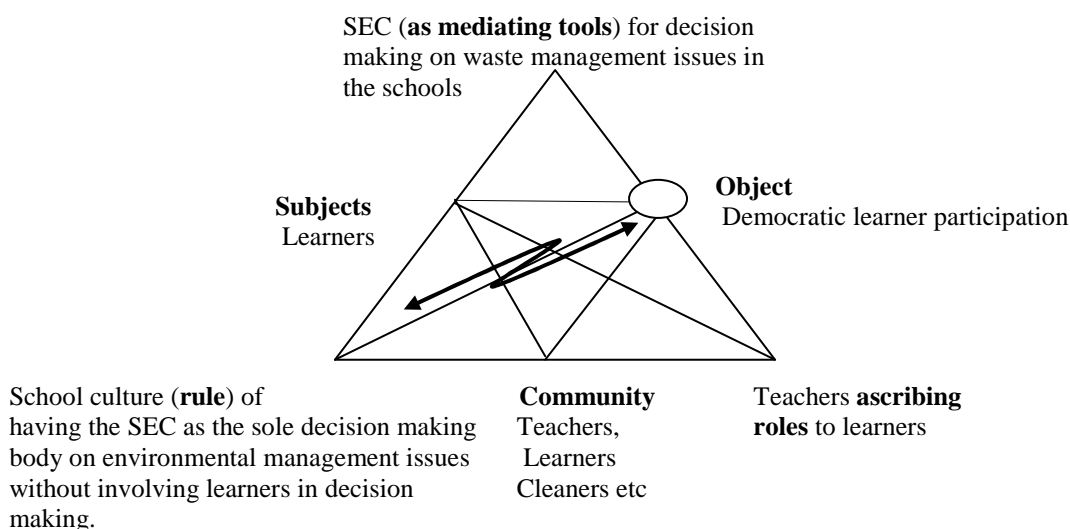
I present the picture that emerges out of the school’s environmental management activity systems by trying to unearth and reveal the contradictions that emerged from these activity systems.

### Contradiction between Rules of Traditional Culture and the Democratic Participation

It became evident that the teachers in this school were the main mediating tools which were driven by the need to implement the objective of the *Kagisano* philosophy of making the participatory approach part of environmental education processes in the school for “a direct, perceived benefit to the learners” (Botswana Government, 2007, p. 9). This impacted on learners’ participation in environmental management activities in the school as far as the school’s desire to meet the democratic philosophical imperative is concerned. At philosophical level there is no contradiction or conflicting objective but at practice level, the mediating tools (teachers) interpreted the philosophy to suit their perceived outcome. One begins to note some contradictions emerging between the philosophical imperative to have learners democratically participate in environmental education and the teachers as the mediating tools in authority in this activity system. The contradictions are unearthed and discussed in the section below.

### Contradiction between School Culture and the Object of Participation-Teachers as the Decision Making Body

The contradiction is between the school culture of having the teachers making decisions and the object of having learners participate in decision making as envisaged in the *Kagisano* philosophical framework. The existence of the School Environmental Committee (SEC) in the school which was only made up of teachers was probably one of the greatest sources of contradictions that emerged in this case study. The committee was tasked with identifying environmental management issues and choosing actions to address these issues in which children could participate. The contradiction is illustrated in Figure 4 and extracts that follow.



**Figure 4:** Contradiction between school culture (rule) and object of learner participation

**Extract 1: Teachers' (T) Comments on the Constitution of the Committee**

*T: To be honest this is a committee that is formed by teachers. Like myself I am really not learned in issues of the environment, I haven't really had any training to do with such issues. But because I am teacher I have to be in the committee. But I am also interested in environmental issues. The other two teachers are just people who had an interest and decided to be in the committee. Not that we can say we are really good at when it comes to expertise in the area and looking at the needs of the school, but we have to do it to guide these children.*

*R: How do you decide to come up with decisions on what are the children's needs?*

*T: Like I said we came up with this project after discussing it at length and said with this problem of litter and the dirty school, we should do something as committee for children to learn that it is not good to live in surroundings*

*R: How do your children participate in this waste management project you are saying you came up with?*

*T: That's when we said let us make a cleaning rota and this cleaning rota divides classes and each class having a day allocated to them for picking litter and cleaning the classrooms and how they do it as well as cleaning the portion allocated to them, so that every child should participate. No child is left out. The cleaning rota, I draw it and give it to them and I display it in the office and make sure the children follow it. Those who don't are punished.*

**Extract 2: Deputy Head (DH) on Litter as a Focus for Environmental Management**

*DH: Firstly, I would say that after establishing that there is a lot of litter and dirt in the school we then established this environmental health club or committee. We made a litter picking rota and then each day there will be picking of litter by children... But we also have naughty children here Ma Silo. They mess up their toilets and the next thing they go outside and mess up the environment too by using the areas outside for their sanitary needs.*

The contradiction manifests itself as a tension between the school rule in which the school environmental committee (SEC) makes all decisions in environmental management and the object of learners participating in decision making as conceptualised in the *Kagisano* philosophy. The contradiction played itself out in the manner in which the SEC prescribed the rules and regulations that governed environmental management activities and the position that learners occupied in these activities without being involved in the decision making process and without consideration of how this had limited learners' democratic participation.

At a micro level in the day to day participation in environmental management activities the teachers in the school environmental committee therefore made their own decisions on how children should participate in these activities which created constraints (Engeström, 1987, 2001). These decisions created constraints in that they generally discouraged children from identifying issues that were of concern to them and exploring other creative ways in which they could positively participate in these activities and from understanding their purpose for doing this in line with the philosophy imperative. It became clear that the rules within these school communities, responsibilities, tasks and power were not negotiated with learners, as rules were clearly stipulated and determined largely by the SEC and teachers in general. Primarily the role of learners, at the most basic level, was to act at an operational level on directives in these activities as instructed by the teachers and to respond as expected in

submissive compliance. Within these strongly normative approaches, teachers clearly thought learners were genuinely participating.

But this contradiction also manifested itself in misplaced assumptions by teachers on learners' needs and concerns as illustrated in the following examples.

### **Extract 3: School Head (H)'s Misplaced Assumption on the Children's Needs**

*H:... Besides keeping the school clean which is important, as well the child has to be responsible because by so doing you are trying to build the child to be divergent, without them expecting things to be done for them all the time. The child has to know that if he goes out there and comes across a can he has to pick it, or if he doesn't clear grass, he can be bitten by a snake as you can see how tall that grass is. The children have to do all these things so that they can learn to be responsible adults later in life.*

Within the last extract's understanding, the school seems to place value on the learners' potential "for what they will grow up to be but are devalued in terms of their present perspective and experiences" (Greene & Hill, 2006, p.3). This is a view consistent with developmental psychology's tendency to see children as less than adult and as people in the making rather than competent and complete social actors in their current context (ibid.). This, according to Carlsson and Jensen (2006), is to see the school as a laboratory where children are perceived not as current citizens with a democratic right to make their own choices, but rather as citizens of tomorrow "who have to learn good values and habits" (p.245), in this case responsibility and cleanliness.

This contradiction has impacted on learners' participation in environmental management activities in the school as far as the school's desire to meet the democratic participation objective is concerned. At philosophical level there is no contradiction or conflicting objective but at practice level, the mediating tools (teachers) using their authority interpreted philosophy to suit their perceived outcome on a misplaced assumption that children do not know what their needs are. This is illustrated by the extract below which contradicts the school head's assumption.

### **Extract 4: Learners' (L) Concern about the State of Grass in the School**

*L2: I am complaining about the grass because there was a time a snake was killed in the grass, and this is dangerous for our lives. I think we can clear the grass or people from the village should be employed or asked to come and clear the grass and bushes. A lot of people are doing nothing in our village. They spend most of their time just drinking.*

*L5:...I am worried about dirty toilets and children not using toilets properly...The toilets are dirty....*

*R: Have you told your teachers about your concerns?*

*L5: No, we haven't, even if you tell them they won't listen. They just brush us off saying what do we know? We are just children we know nothing! So we don't bother ourselves.*

### **Extract 5: School Head's Misplaced Assumption on the Learners' Concern about the State of the Grass**

*R: Then the grass around the toilets. Don't they (children) ever complain about it?*

*H: No they don't complain, instead we are the ones who are worried about their safety. Children being children, they don't see any problem. It scares us because there are snakes around here. So we have to keep on remind them not to go and play around that area.*

The extract from the learners shows not only the learner's concern about safety, of which the school head is unaware, but also provides some evidence of action competence (Jensen &

Schnack, 2006) in the learner in that he could link environmental management issues to the socio-ecological context of the community by highlighting the problem of unemployment in the community and drinking habits.

This tension is further illustrated in the school where members of the SEC, had allocated among themselves supervision and monitoring roles over different areas relating to environmental management. It is worth noting that while the teachers supervised and monitored cooking and toilet cleaning, ironically these two areas constituted the main areas of concern for learners in which they felt the service delivery was poor. In spite of the fact that children were very aggrieved by the poor state of toilets, this was not the priority concern for teachers. In all the decisions that were taken regarding these areas, learners were not consulted; neither were they granted an opportunity for evaluation, which is in contrast with the basic tenets of democratic participation (Botswana Government, 1977; Hart, 1992; Jensen & Schnack, 2006; Jensen, 2004). Participation in a democratic environment entails the process of sharing with children decisions which affect their lives (Hart, 1992, p. 4). Related to the food, while teachers probably were genuinely interested in children's welfare, their lack of engagement with the children sometimes resulted in misplaced assumptions of the children's actual needs as illustrated in the extracts below.

### **Extract 6: Teacher on the Preparation of Learners' Food**

*R: Do you feel the food is properly prepared?*

*T: Cooking mma, they cook properly. Most children really enjoy their food.*

*R: I have seen some food thrown away around the bin...*

*T: They don't like it if it's plain beans. They like them mixed with samp. If its beans alone, they don't eat. They don't seem to go well with them. They cause stomach problems for them.*

### **Extract 7: Learners on their Food Preparation**

*L3: Sometimes they [food] are not properly cooked*

*R: Really, How is it not properly cooked?*

*L5: No taste, no salt, not fully cooked, no cooking oil. They just boil them and then take them to the classes...*

*L3: Maybe because they think we are just children we will just eat it.*

*R: But do the children eat the food?*

*L1: No, they don't eat*

*L3: And they throw it away all over the place*

*L2: And it makes the grounds dirty*

Both the extracts above indicate that children seemed to be equally, if not more concerned about their own needs and welfare, than their teachers assumed yet the latter felt they were acting in the best interest of children. This misplaced assumption was due to the fact that children were not provided with an opportunity to make decisions or evaluate issues that affected them (Jensen, 2004). This contradiction could probably have provided an opportunity to engage learners in playing an active role as creative participants. As illustrated in the extracts, engaging with children in a democratic participatory approach could have brought some of these issues to the fore.

The contradiction identified in the sections above was clearly depicted in the learners' identification of sanitation (toilets) as a main environmental management issue requiring urgent attention which teachers did not seem to give priority (Silo, 2011).

Due to culturally and historically formed position of authority that has been normalised into school practices (Ketlhoilwe, 2007) there was no democratic dialogue with learners regarding their concerns and interests (Silo, 2011). This contradiction manifested itself into a common tension where children were using areas outside toilets for their sanitary needs because of the

unsanitary state of the toilets. The deputy head even went on to perceive children’s use of outside for their sanitary needs as a form of insubordination.

Learners were not offered opportunities to raise their concerns in these activities nor the choice of means to work towards resolving issues, at times resulting in their lack of cooperation and utilising the area outside the toilets (see extract 2 above). This curtailed the development of the learners’ environmental action competence which is a hallmark of participatory democracy as the learners’ interests and concerns were not discussed, despite their concerns; dysfunctional and unsanitary toilets were not addressed in the school activity systems or discourses (Silo, 2011). Enabling fuller participation of learners in the school learning discourses by providing them with opportunities to identify environmental management issues that concern them may well have brought these concerns to the fore.

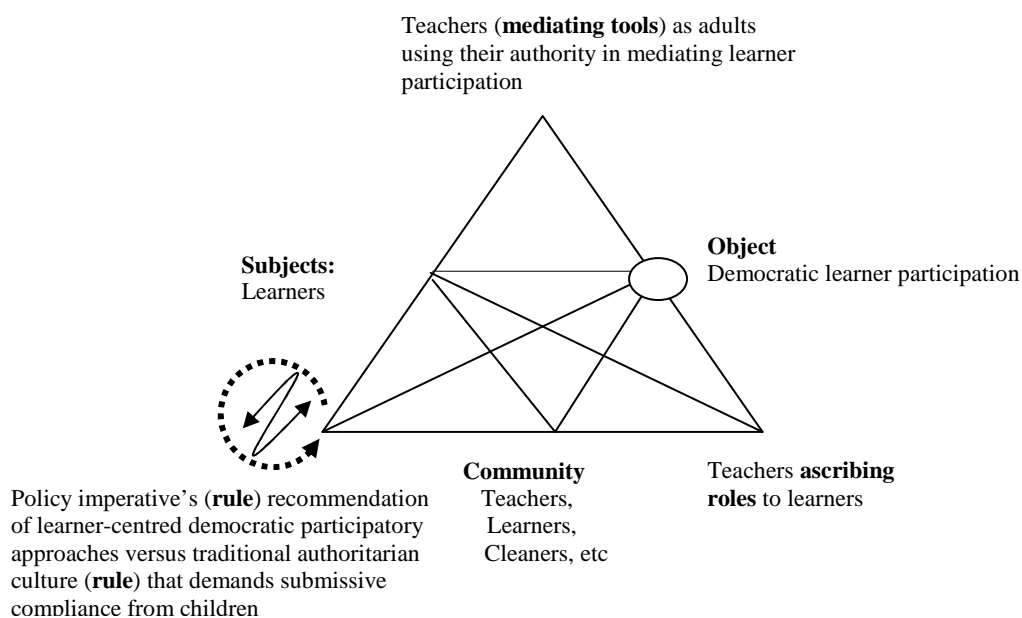
It also became evident that the unequal power relations between teachers and learners has led to learner compliance. Learners abide by the school rules which have become the normalized way of what teachers perceived as children’s participation in the activities. This is a product of a history or a traditional culture in which the teacher is the ultimate authority and children must be submissive to their elders and where it is deemed unnecessary to explain one’s motives to children, a culture that has been infused into school discourses as reflected in extract 8 where children still expressed some allegiance to their teachers and Figure 5 which reveals the contradiction.

**Extract 8: Learners’ Allegiance to Teachers**

*L3: The other thing that I don’t like in our school is that other children spoil the name of the school.*

*R: How?*

*L3: They don’t follow the rules from teachers. They don’t do as they are instructed by adults, they don’t pick up litter in morning in front of the school when they see papers lying around...*



**Figure 5:** Contradiction between national education philosophy imperative and rule of traditional authority culture

On another level, it could be assumed that because children were afraid of their teachers, they could not raise their concerns, resulting in some children addressing these concerns through

defiant means such as using bushes around toilets instead of toilets. Roche (1999) on power and domination, noted that;

...children do resist and challenge adult practices, though not necessarily in obvious and constructive ways. However, the choices available to children, as a relatively powerless group in society, differ from those that are relatively powerful... Children often have little choice but to engage in such symbolic politics of protest when faced with an unlistening and prejudging adult world. Children have to start where they are socially positioned. This means that they have to make their own space in spaces not of their own making (p. 478-479).

While the national education philosophy has justified intentions of creating meaningful participation for learners, the cultural traditional context presents constraining forces through norms and values that form a barrier to its intent. Obviously this compromises the space and opportunities that children occupy in terms of their place in these activities, hence infringing their right of being fully participating stakeholders of their school community (UNCRC, 2004; Barratt Hacking et al., 2007; Hart, 1992). As such it represents a missed opportunity for teachers to communicate and collaborate with children in order to establish their needs so as to work collectively towards a common solution. Children need to be recognized as full competent and capable stakeholders.

Ironically though the children were involved in activities under the supervision of their teachers most times, at classroom level when learners were not supervised, which was also quite common in this school, they set their own rules and allocated themselves roles during classroom cleaning.

Botswana has ratified the UNCRC, and in practice, through all its institutions including schools, it has to uphold children's rights to democratic participation. Children therefore have the right to express their opinions and influence decisions that affect them, be treated as active and valid members of society, and be given the opportunity to learn skills of participation and communication as fully participating stakeholders (Botswana Government, 1977; UNCRC, 2004).

A starting point to meeting this demand and necessity would be an open a democratic dialogue between teachers and learners (Silo, 2011). The school, as an institution which form part of society, would naturally be expected to uphold the democratic principle as enshrined in the education philosophy of *Kagisano*, to meet this demand. It would be paradoxical for Botswana, which has consistently been rated one of the most successful democracies in Africa and it is currently regarded as a model of African democracy (Preece & Mosweunyane, 2004), to fall short of living up to this image in one of the core structures of society, the school. The commission that developed the national education philosophy emphasised that schools themselves were small communities within the broader national society. The life of schools should give expression to Botswana's basic principle of democracy so that children can learn to understand and cherish it (Botswana Government, 1977). Unless this is pursued and achieved, and if schools continue to show quite opposite tendencies, it would be meaningless to speak of democracy (Monyatsi, 2005, p. 356).

In spite of international and national laws and policies (UNCRC, 2004; Botswana Government, 2007) that have accorded children the right to express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them, the study findings reveal that due to the historically embedded context such as the authoritarian culture in the school, children's participation has largely been subdued.

It would be an unfortunate paradox for historically developed cultural structures to be allowed to impede the realisation of this democratic ideal as enshrined in the UNCRC and the national education philosophy. This is because, while indeed certain aspects of culture have to be upheld for the social cohesion of institutions, such as the family, schools, community and general society, it has to be recognised that democracy is primarily about participation.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the culture and history of authoritarianism, democracy is one of the principles enshrined in the country's national education philosophy of *Kagisano*. Democratic teacher mediation therefore should be the main vehicle towards realising the objective of learner participation as espoused by the national education philosophy even within the historical and cultural constraints that could have led to, and indeed created patterns of exclusion of learners in environmental education discourses in this school in Botswana. The mediation can be adjusted to the cultural context and situations, as well as the needs of the learners. Teachers as mediators and brokers in the learning process might need to recognise this and seek strategies to represent the learners' interests and concerns in their selection of issues for environmental management activities, formulation of rules, allocation of roles, and evaluation of these activities within this cultural context.

Failure to do this will continue to create constraints which compromise the objective of the *Kagisano* philosophy imperative and the goal of participation for lifelong learning for sustainable development as it envisioned. Children's rights as advocated by the UNCRC are also compromised. What is also compromised is the philosophy's envisaged alignment with the call of producing an informed citizenry as envisioned by the Botswana's Vision 2016 that should equip learners with the necessary capacity to address the socio-ecological issues that continue to plague the youth in the country.

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