

# Bridging the Gap—Narratives as a Literacy Vehicle for Indigenous San Students in Botswana

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*The purpose of this study was to find out San students' understandings of their learning experiences in the Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School [pseudonym], a Remote Area Dwellers (RAD) boarding school in Botswana, and how these experiences impacted students' identities based on their memories of primary and current attendance in junior secondary school. In addition, the researcher wanted to find out what San students valued and found meaningful in their home and school environments, and how these related to the possibilities for literacy learning through stories.*

*The six participants in Grades 8 and 9 shared their stories with the researcher which revealed their understandings of literacy, both in and out of school. The narrative methodology was adopted for a number of reasons. Firstly, San peoples are known to be excellent storytellers and they also enjoy telling and sharing stories. The San also teach their children though stories (Pridmore, 1995). Through the shared stories, the researcher wanted the students to be free to tell their stories of their formal school experiences and those things that had value to them. Secondly, the researcher wanted to create a close working relationship with the participants so that they would open up and share their stories. Thirdly, through the narrative, the researcher also shared her story with the participants. Lastly, through the narrative, the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu/Botho was adopted in the research process as a method and a theory to guide the study. As a result, the researcher treated the participants with respect and as equals in the research process. Two important findings from this study are: (1) although San students faced many problems in their formal education journey, they found solidarity in each other and in their rich culture by telling stories; and (2) the students expressed a wish for their ways of knowing to be included in formal classrooms in Botswana schools, for the benefit of all. An important recommendation from this study is that stories should be included as a teaching pedagogy in San students' formal education, not only in Botswana but throughout Southern Africa.*

## *Introduction—The San Peoples of Botswana*

Botswana has the highest number of San people in Southern Africa and approximately 100,000 San (Sylvain, 2002) have found themselves residing in the very dry areas of the Kalahari Desert without education or amenities. Nyati-Ramahobo (2004) states that due to their nomadic nature, they are present in seven out of the eight administrative districts in Botswana. *Basarwa/San of Botswana* (also called Bushmen or Basarwa) are Southern Africa's first Indigenous hunter-gatherers (le Roux, 1999). In scholarly circles, *San* is the preferred word. According to Coulson and Campbell (2001, p. 31), traditional San lore is a combination of the natural and the super-

natural “with both realms existing within each other at the same time, but with the supernatural realm being seen by only those who know how to step into it ....” The San do not separate the spiritual from their daily activities; the two are integrated.

In Botswana, the San peoples occupy the lowest levels in economic, social, educational, and political terms (Hays, 2002; Mazonde, 2002; Saugestad, 1998). For example, in the poorest areas where the San are found, only 22.4% of school-aged children go to school (Nyati-Saleshando, 2011; UNICEF, 2008).

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of the study was to find out how the San students understand and experience literacies both in and outside of school, to better understand what literacy means to them. Is reading and writing important to these students? The study also sought to examine if San ways of knowing are represented in the classroom. San students in Botswana generally underperform in school and some end up dropping out of school.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What are San students’ understandings of their learning experiences in school and how do these impact the students’ identities? (based on memories of primary school and current attendance in junior secondary school)
2. What do San children value and find meaningful in their home and school environments? How do these relate to the possibilities for literacy learning?

#### *My Interest in the Study*

Growing up in Botswana as a child and teenager in the late 1970s and 1980s opened my eyes to the fact that the peace Botswana is well known for was not extended to the San peoples. This was very shocking for me since *Botho* is a pillar in Tswana homes and society. *Botho* is preached to the young from an early age, and those that do not exercise this Southern African philosophy of accommodating and accepting all people in society, regardless of their social standing, are heavily chastised. The San were not strangers to me growing up, as they and the Bakhalahari peoples were cattle herders of the Tswana (those who speak *Setswana*). Growing up as a child, I do not remember associating and playing with San children, although some looked after my father’s cattle. We were made to believe they were uncultured, barbaric, and unschooled. I remember vividly that it was taboo to interact with them closely. Understandably, I felt sorry for them. I heard story after story of their ill-treatment by non-San peoples.

My question has always been, “Why cannot someone do something to stop this lack of *Botho*, since *Botho* is about giving respect?” After earning

my first college degree, I was posted as a teacher in the remote part of northern Botswana. There I came into direct contact with some San children and other minorities, such as the Wayeyi or the river people. I remember two San boys I taught in a senior secondary school. They were the only San students in my class, and I was constantly told that they would drop out. I started to panic when I realized that they were more absent than present for school. When I asked them to explain their frequent absenteeism, they always said that they had to go and see the social worker, or they had to go home, or some other reason. I admit that I was not surprised when they eventually dropped out of school and went back to lead a poverty-stricken life with their parents. I never heard of them again. I always wondered if there was anything I could have done to keep them in school. For me, obtaining a Fulbright scholarship to go to the U.S. was a dream, come true, because it seemed to be a way to gain the knowledge, experiences, and credibility to contribute to San empowerment, not only in Botswana but across Southern Africa. My focus was on the San Indigenous literacy practices and unique ways of reading the world. I believe that the San people have a great deal to contribute to mainstream Tswana children and the world at large. For example, they are taught to value peace, avoid negative competition, and to excel in everything they do (Shostak, 1981, 2000).

My personal experiences and what I have studied about language, culture, and literacy prompted me to study the educational experiences of San children's literacy in one Botswana junior secondary school, to better understand their challenges within formal education and their views of what it means to be literate. I adopted research methods that seemed consistent with my experience living in a society that values a Botho view of human relations. Botho, also known as *Ubuntu*, recognizes that who one is is knowable only by recognizing others. In current Botswana, this is problematic with regard to the San people's position within Botswana society.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu/Botho is used as a guiding framework for this study. According to Chilisa & Preece (2005), Ubuntu/Botho is a Southern African philosophy that stands for respect for human life, mutual help, generosity, cooperation, respect for older people, harmony and preservation of the sacred, respect, and humane behaviour. In South Africa, it is known as Ubuntu and in Botswana, Botho. Throughout this study, the term *Botho* is used. For this study, Botho provided a lens to highlight the experiences of the San participants since Botho preaches equality, peace, humane behaviour, love, and respect. Botho also accommodates diverse opinions and ways of thinking and is therefore very relevant for this study. Through the use of Botho, the participants were treated with respect and as equals in the research process.

*Storytelling as a Way of Eliciting Data and Stories as Data*

Because the research was about the San students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School and how they understood literacy and made meaning, it was necessary to focus on the participants' lived experiences. According to Bruner (2002), stories portray life and they always have a message. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) posit that human beings are, by nature, storytellers and the lives we lead are storied lives individually and socially. Furthermore, "learners, teachers, and researchers are story tellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Hence, narrative inquiry is about stories lived and told. In addition, Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 20) explain that narrative inquiry is a partnership "between the researcher and participant, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus". Narrative inquiry is about studying experience and experience should not be seen in isolation but it should be contextualized (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938). A narrative inquiry approach recognizes that, although people are individuals, they must be understood in relation to other peoples or within their social context. This echoes the Botho philosophy in Botswana: *motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe*. A person can only be a person through others. In Zulu, Botho is also known as Ubuntu and "is not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself, which lures and enables human beings to become abantu or humanized beings, living in daily self-expressive works of love and efforts to create harmonious relationships in the community and the world beyond" (Mnyada, 1997, p. 81). As a theoretical perspective, Botho was necessary if I was to have any chance of San students speaking with me without fear, since it preaches equality and respect of the research participants.

According to Marjorie Shostak (1981, 2000), who lived among the !Kung San in the Dobe region from 1969-1971, "telling stories is a main source of aesthetic pleasure for the !Kung" (1981, p. 20). Through stories, children are entertained. They learn about love, respect, peace, and how to conduct themselves from the stories told by adults. Stories have messages that teach the young about life. This is why I found the narrative inquiry approach culturally appropriate for my study of San students' literacy experiences at Botswana's Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. By collecting students' stories, I was able to understand and represent how they view literacy in their lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) write that it is correct to say "inquiry into narrative" as it is "narrative inquiry" because the narrative is both a "phenomenon and method". In my study, *story* refers to the data collected and *narrative* to writing about the data. In the study, my aim was to bring out the voices of the San students and their lived experiences, and their understanding of literacies in and out of school. However, I do acknowledge that in writing about their stories, my voice was also heard. For example, my efforts at buying them

toiletries and asking others for donations for them is documented in the study. This was bound to happen as stories in the study reflect my engagement with the participants and how the research process has shaped me as a researcher.

#### *Research Site*

Conducting educational research in Botswana involved getting permission from the Ministry of Education and the school administration, which then connected me to the relevant teachers. Getting permission to conduct research at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School focused on an institutional approval process. I explained the purpose of my research to the Ministry of Education official and after a month I was granted the permission to conduct research. I contacted the Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School deputy principal about my desire to conduct research in his school and he agreed to allow me to do so. In turn, the deputy principal informed the school staff of my research. Once everyone was informed, I believed that I would be welcomed at the school. Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School is what is known as a Remote Area Dwellers (RAD) school, primarily for children from settlements far from villages in Botswana. I was sure of finding San students in the school. Its proximity to the capital city of Gaborone was convenient because there was nowhere for me to stay at the school, so I could commute the approximately 200 kilometres for my research.

#### *Sampling*

Snowball sampling was used to find participants for the study. Sampling started with the assistance of Love and Peace [pseudonyms], two non-San participants who invited the San students to take part in the research. This form of sampling resulted in a total of ten participants in the study: two non-San participants, two San informal research assistants, and six San participants. The students' ages ranged from 14 to 16. Since the children's parents were far away in the remote area settlements, the school consented on parents' behalf for the students to participate in the research.

#### *Methods of Data Collection*

##### *Interviews*

Interviewing has been an important form of data collection in various types of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Before the interviews began, I gained students' trust by getting to know them, making a point of seeking them out in school and chatting to them. I showed respect for the students by always honouring our appointments and if I promised to bring them some toiletries, I did that. In conducting interviews with them, I was showing to them that I viewed them as capable and trusted their intelligence.

Interviews were conducted in *Setswana*, a *lingua franca* or working language between me and the participants. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed soon thereafter. In addition, I had informal talks with students. Co-participants (San and non-San) would come to me and volunteer to share a story. These informal talks allowed for flexibility and made it possible for me to follow the interests and concerns of the participants. When I got home each evening, I transcribed the digitally recorded interviews from that day.

### *Photography*

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 115), photographs help us to construct our lives and “are rich sources of field texts for the construction of social narratives”. I gave the six San participants disposable cameras to take pictures in their environment and the school. Love, one of my non-San informants, demonstrated how to use the cameras. Once demonstrated, each San student took some pictures as a test. I then asked the San participants to take pictures of the things that represented literacy or had meaning to them. After the pictures were developed, I met with each student to ask him or her to explain why they took a particular picture. This further shed light on students' experiences, perceptions, and ways in which they make meaning. Students described what was in the photograph and why they took the pictures they did.

### *Observations*

Observation is an important source of data in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Observations are different from interviews in that they take place in a natural setting and they represent a first-hand account of what transpired in the setting (Merriam, 1998). During my research, I sat at the back of the classrooms and took descriptive notes of teachers and students talking along with general classroom interactions actions. Students in Botswana secondary schools are accustomed to having visitors in their classrooms given that the teaching practice is supervised by teacher trainees from colleges of education. I therefore did not expect the students to feel anxious by my presence. I observed humanities and science lessons in Form One (Grade 8) and Form Two (Grade 9) classes.

Outside of classes, my role was that of participant observer again: I *hung around* the school observing the *goings on*. At times, I would go to the dining hall to listen and talk with the cooks as they prepared a meal for the students. Often, I went to the hostels and sports grounds where I observed students playing, singing, and telling stories. These experiences contributed to the rapport that developed between me and the students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School.

In the staffroom, teachers and other members of staff freely discussed students (San and non-San) in my presence. This became another observation opportunity. Ms. Tau [pseudonym], the Guidance and Counselling

teacher, went out of her way to offer information that she deemed of importance to my research. She would seek me out in the staffroom and tell me stories about San students.

### *Parents' Meeting*

I had to talk to the parents about their children's schooling, as failure to do so would have been construed as lack of Botho on my part. The parents were located throughout the snowballing sampling method (Merriam, 1998). By *parents*, I am not referring necessarily to the biological parents, as such, but to any adult who is viewed as a guardian or caregiver of a San student. Some of the biological parents did not necessarily live in the same village as their children and it is often a parental norm to assign the duty of *parent* to an aunt, uncle, neighbour, or older sibling. For some of the San students, social workers assumed the role of parents. A group meeting was most appropriate because, in Botswana, discussion is normally a family affair and rarely an individual's sole endeavour (Chilisa & Preece, 2005).

### *Data: Examples of Stories Shared by Two Participants*

#### *Receiver—Bug Spraying Nightmare*

Receiver is a tall, slim, and dark-complexioned San girl with an enchanting smile. She reminded me of what Ms. Thuso, an English teacher at the school, called *blended San*. Receiver and I walked out to my usual spot on the rickety bench under the big Moseitlha tree. That afternoon, I learned that Receiver was from a family of seven. Four of her elder siblings had failed junior school and, as a result, could not progress to senior school. Her two younger siblings were still enrolled at primary school. The first-born child, a boy, looks after someone's cattle. The other boy was taken to a school in Gaborone by a social worker. At home and in school, her primary language is Setswana. In school, she likes to speak English with her friends and yet she also told me of the problems she has with spelling and writing English words.

"So why do you like English so much?" I asked.

She was interested in learning English so that she could understand what happens at school. All school subjects, except Setswana, are taught in English. Sometimes, when she was with her friends from Kgomodiatshaba, they would practice speaking in English and nobody laughed at them. It was important for her to master English as it would lead to her scoring high marks in school assignments and tests.

When it comes to reading, she enjoys reading Setswana books, especially novels. Her favourite novel is *Ntlo ya Manong* or *House of Vultures*, which is a story of a girl who lived with her parents and always complained that they were abusing her. The girl in the novel left her parents to go and work in town for a company. She was late for work every day and finally lost her job. After that, she resorted to stealing. When she got

caught, she regretted her lifestyle terribly. Receiver learned that it is important to listen to parents' advice all the time as failure to do that can lead to trouble.

The stories that her grandmother always tells her and her siblings are very important because of the messages they convey. This is literacy to her because she can learn from such teachings and apply them to her own life. One of the grandmother's stories is that of the hyena and the hare. In the story, the hyena and the hare were best friends and lived together. One day, they attended a party and started dancing. At the party, the hare ate a lot and as a result he got diarrhea. He decided to go back home without telling hyena. In the evening of the same day, the hare and hyena went out to have more fun. This time it was hyena that left without telling hare. The hare was left looking for the hyena everywhere! The other animals laughed at him for being ditched in this manner and some told him that he deserved the treatment from hyena as he did not show kindness from the beginning.

"In this story I learned that it is important to treat others well and with kindness so that they return the same treatment," reasoned Receiver.

"So, you read a lot of stories in Setswana. Do you read stories in English too?" I asked.

"No. Because I do not understand English," Receiver said. Even when visiting the school library, she borrows only Setswana books. "I am only interested in Setswana books," Receiver said.

She finds science difficult as it does not remind her of her culture. Hence, it has no meaning for her. She gave examples of a science lesson on iron and nitrogen. When they are mixed, she does not understand the whole process of coming up with the end product. I could tell that these concepts were too abstract for Receiver to comprehend.

Unlike science, she finds social studies useful because it has a lot of meaning for her. It relates to her culture. There are references to the San in her social studies textbook. I noticed when speaking about the San people, however, that Receiver distances herself by referring to them as "they" and yet she said it was important to teach about the San people in schools and how they lived long ago. She reasoned that such knowledge should be made known to non-San students. Receiver finds moral education studies easier because it reminds her of the subject religious education. However, she still failed moral education studies because she could not understand the questions posed to her in English. She also likes mathematics but, unfortunately, she is failing and in her last test she scored 30%. She is keen to improve, however.

Another form of literacy Receiver spoke of was the traditional baskets that her mother and grandmother made from grasses they collect by the river far from their village. Her mother and grandmother have promised to teach her how to make the baskets with their many different patterns. Each pattern means something particular. As the women weave, they also sing.



Singing is another form of literacy that Receiver loves. They sang a lot on Saturdays at the hostels. Her sister taught her to sing. Singing is entertaining for her. I also enjoyed her beautiful singing.

*Drought—I Wish I Had a Friend*

What I particularly liked about Drought was her openness. She was like an open book. While chatting with her it became obvious that she is a loving girl who reaches out to others all the time. However, she would get rejected and called an ignorant *Mosarwa*. What hurt her most was that even students from her village of Kgomodiatshaba call her *Mosarwa* and yet when she calls them *Mosarwa*, they become angry. She remembers a time when she first started school at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School and how she would follow students from her village around school all the time. At the time of my research, she was a friend to Keteng, a girl from Thamaga near the city of Gaborone, who shared her toiletries. I wished, for her sake, that the friendship lasted.

Whenever I looked at her I wondered whether the strange marks and sores on her face, hands, and legs were the reason why other students rejected her. She told me that when she was in Standard 7, a piece of grass got into her eye and, ever since that time, she has been getting strange marks on her face, hands, and legs. Each mark begins as an itchy sore and then develops into a blister. After the sore has healed, ugly marks remain all over her body. After some time, the itchy sores surface again, with blisters following. The first time I saw her I thought the spots were some soot she had put on her body.

When the schools were to close, her mother promised to take her to the traditional doctor. Drought enlightened me on how traditional doctors administer healing on their patients. Patients are given some charms that they breathe into. After that, the doctor takes the charms and throws them into the chest of the patient and after reading the charms he tells them what is wrong with them. Not all traditional doctors go into trance when they administer healing; some do, and some don't. As the doctor performs the healing and goes into trance, there is singing and clapping of hands. Drought's father is one such doctor.

Unfortunately for her, he cannot heal her because a traditional doctor does not administer healing to his children. She remembered the times when she and her sister, Dintle, went with their father to look for traditional plants used for healing. One day Dintle stole some of their father's medicine and he was angry as some medicine can kill. Her father is so powerful that he has medicine to catch witches and he once caught a witch in the village as she was warming herself at some home during winter. This incident surprised everyone and embarrassed the witch greatly.

Drought believes strongly in traditional healing. She reasons that ignoring this fact can be fatal. She remembers the time her mother was bit-

ten by a poisonous snake. Her father made cuts on her mother's skin and the infected blood came out. Her father then put a grasshopper on her hand and as soon as it finished drinking the poisoned blood, it fell down dead. Then her father removed one of the snake's fangs from the wound. This saved her mother's life. "Students in school need to know what to do when bitten by snakes and other poisonous creatures," she said. Her mother has taught her the different plants that are used for healing small children and one of the plants is called Borumolano. She does not know how to mix the herbs and administer healing but her mother has taught one of her sisters.

Drought also expressed that teachers should connect their teaching to what is happening in students' cultures. For example, in a Setswana lesson, a teacher can ask students, "What happens when a girl bathes at night?" The lesson explains that a girl needs to put some burnt coal in the water when bathing at night to avoid ending up as a spinster. A boy who sleeps until the sun is out will not marry. Drought regretted the fact that young people are losing their cultural ways of knowing and that this is compounded by the fact that they ignore the advice of elders. Traditional knowledge can benefit transfer-in students as they are ignorant of cultural knowledge in general. For example, *transfer-in* students do not know about Lerufa, an underground bulb that contains a lot of water. Drought stated that knowledge of plants like this is important for survival, especially in the very hot Kalahari Desert.

#### *How Was the Data Analyzed and Interpreted to Write Narratives?*

I kept in mind a metaphor used by Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 155) of narrative being like "a soup" while analyzing the data to write narratives. All the ingredients that make a delicious soup have to be included and in the right amounts. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the ingredients in our narrative pots can differ. In my narrative pot, the main ingredient was people accompanied by details about time, place, weather, humour, songs, tales, and, of course, conversation. I did not employ the conventional method of coding for themes across transcripts when constructing the narratives because "those themes separated people's words from their spoken and heard context" (McCormack, 2000, p. 283). My intention was to paint with words the lived experiences of the participants as vividly and truthfully as possible. My approach to writing narratives was first and foremost to use the data to find answers to my two research questions.

McCormack (2004, p. 1) offers a process of "storying stories" for those who have collected stories and want to construct interpretative narratives to answer their research questions. McCormack (2000, 2004) recommends the use of multiple lenses. These lenses are (1) active listening; (2) narrative processes; (3) language; (4) context; and (5) moments. These lenses were used in my research, as follows.

1. Active listening refers to a process for immersing oneself in the data. My immersion began when I started listening to the live stories of the participants. Each evening after being at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School, I listened to the digital recordings of interviews, classroom observations, and explanations of photographs as I transcribed the data. This all occurred while in and out of the Botswana context. I constantly listened to the tapes while reading along using the transcripts. I wrote memos to myself in the margins about content that pertained to the research questions.
2. Narrative processes refer to how the research participants told their stories. Part of my active listening involved noticing why, how, when, and where a particular story was told. For example, the participants enjoyed telling me stories that were narrated to them by their parents or grandparents. They would then tell me the story as it was told to them, taking the role of the different characters (for example, the story Knowledge shared with me about Tomatoma and his evil grandfather).
3. Language refers to the researcher noticing how the participants chose to speak about themselves and others. Part of my active listening involved noticing what was said and how it was said. In addition, I took notice of what was not said (i.e., the absence of references to themselves as San or Basarwa). I also noted specialized vocabulary such as *gwagisa*, meaning *to be bullied*, and other frequently used words. Examples from the San students' stories included, "I find English difficult", "I don't read English books", and "they laugh at us in class." Attention to language assisted greatly in identifying important elements in participants' lives (at home and in school).
4. Context refers to noticing the circumstances within which participants talked and told their stories. Interviews were not necessarily private but people came in and left during the interviews. For example, during one of my interviews with Drought, the Boarding Master and a friend came to chat with us and asked Drought questions about her mysterious sores. Sometimes during interviews, groups of students waited on the sidelines for their friends.
5. Moments refers to noticing when something unexpected happened. My active listening involved identifying moments that were interesting, important, tense, shameful, or joyful. For each narrative, I chose titles which evolved from a significant moment.

McCormack (2000, p. 282) explains that, "these lenses are the dimensions people use to construct and reconstruct their identity and to give meaning to their lives". This approach worked very well during the research, as San students told many stories about their lives at primary school, at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School, and at home. Through these stories, the San students revealed their views on what is of value to them. Accord-

ing to Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 19), "life is experienced on a continuum ... what we may be able to say now about a person or school or some other is given meaning in terms of the larger context..." The larger context of the status of the San in Botswana needed to be taken into consideration in writing the narratives. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 140) advise that in writing narratives from data, one should try "to compose a text that at once looks backward and forward, looks inward and outward, and situates the experiences within place". For example, in coming up with my narratives, I had to keep going back to the field notes and strove to capture the shared stories as well as I could. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher, in writing the narrative inquiry, should think of the audience and also how best to represent the lived experiences of the participants.

I was mindful throughout my writing of the interpretative narratives that I had to communicate with multiple audiences (readers in Botswana, the United States, and Canada). Hence, I was faced with tension as I thought about voice and how best to present the stories collected at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. For example, as a researcher, I was aware that although my intention was to emphasize and portray my participants' voices, there were instances when my voice entered the narratives (for example, when I wrote about the participants and how they were mistreated by other students).

Once the narratives were written, I then used a coding approach to identify themes across the narratives. Specifically, I looked for themes related to each research question. I used this analytic process to write more explicitly my findings for each research question. For example, one theme that I found across the narratives was the San participants' eagerness to become literate in English. Another theme I noted across narratives was talk about reading and other social activities being boring. I wrote words in the margins of the narratives code for the recurring themes.

### *Findings*

The purpose of this study was to investigate San students' formal schooling and literacy (ways of knowing and reading the word and the world) at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School in Botswana, Southern Africa. My role in the study was that of participant-observer. I gathered information through informal interviews with six co-participants (I regarded them as active partners in the research process), four other participants, and an interview with parents. In addition, I conducted classroom observations, innumerable informal observations, and collected students' photographs taken by my co-participants. The narratives I wrote from these data show that San students experience many systemic and personal problems during their formal schooling. In addition, I sought to understand what literacy means to them by answering the

two research questions of the study. The themes that emerged in response to the major research questions and from the students' narratives are discussed as follows.

*Theme 1: What are San students' understandings of their learning experiences in school and how do these impact students' identities (based on memories of primary school and on current attendance in junior secondary school)?*

The participants in the study repeatedly expressed a desire to learn in order to pursue a career. Happy had high hopes of being a nurse, Drought of being a researcher on San children's education, and Trust had dreams of becoming a soldier one day. However, they all faced many systemic challenges at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. They had to leave their parents to go and stay in boarding schools, both at primary and secondary school. In the hostels, life was not easy for San students as they were crowded in one room. In most cases, I found that a room had 12 to 14 children, with very little space between the beds. This concurs with findings by Mazonde (2002) who observed that San children live in low quality hostels. The six San students I came to know hated living in the student hostels. They shared rooms with other Botswana students who were more privileged than them and who looked down on them. The non-San came from neighbouring villages such as Malolwane and Mochudi. The students who came to the school on transfer from Gaborone were known as *transfer-ins* and were seen as more privileged by other students, especially those from very remote areas such as those of the San.

Boarding schools are not unique to Botswana. Native Americans, First Nations Canadians, Aboriginal Australians, and Indonesian children endured the horror of separation from their families, which was a completely new experience for them (Smith, 1999). This was done deliberately to *remove the Indigenous from them* and immerse them in Western culture. Although these types of boarding schools are a phenomenon of the past in most Western countries, the San in Botswana and Namibia still endure the hardships of attending school far from their families by living in low-quality hostels.

#### *Poverty and Dependency*

Extreme poverty made the San children stand out from other students at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. They never had enough toiletries. During my visits on Saturdays, I observed how San students wore the same clothes Saturday after Saturday. Wagner (2006) has also written that San children go to school without proper school clothes. I found that clothes were important to their identity and feelings of belonging. Five of the participants told me that their parents did not work and, as a result, they had no money to buy them new clothes and toiletries. The San children and others like them in need relied on the government and social workers for toiletries and clothes. However, what they received was never enough.

*Name Calling and Verbal Abuse*

Name calling and verbal abuse by non-San was common at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. This is something that has been acknowledged in the literature (le Roux, 1999). In this study, all six participants complained of being called names. Drought for example, complained of being called *Mosarwa*. Receiver hated being called *Long tail*. Hence, it is not surprising that school was a hostile environment. This issue is especially problematic since the San culture values peace, respect, and harmony (le Roux, 1999; Shostak, 1981, 2000; Wagner, 2006). Corporal punishment was another thing that the students hated. The students told me that their parents did not beat them at home. This non-violence has been mentioned by le Roux (1999). It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the participants reported to be missing home a lot. For example, Happy told me that she misses home a lot. At home she feels needed and competent.

*Teacher Frustrations*

Non-San teachers added to the San students' school frustrations. They had a condescending attitude towards them and did not see any good thing in them. Teachers' negative attitudes alienated the San students even further and made them hate school even more. Generally, the San participants preferred primary school teachers to secondary school teachers. It is then hardly surprising that all six participants reported fearing the teachers. This fear affected their interactions with teachers and prevented them from asking for the extra help that they desperately needed. All six participants preferred primary school to junior secondary school because they had many friends in the primary school and they did not face as much abuse. Also, they performed much better at primary school and their teachers were more understanding. At Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School, it did not help that some teachers were frequently absent from class; both Happy and Trust complained to me about this issue. It is not surprising that junior secondary school was described as boring by Drought, Receiver, and Happy. When teachers have low expectations of students it has often translated into lower student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). Drought mentioned that, in class, the teachers made learning hard for them (students from her village of Kgomodiatshaba) because when they raised their hands to answer questions, some teachers did not call upon them.

*Identity Crisis*

Negative learning experiences affected the participants' identity, except for Mr. President. Five of my participants felt uncomfortable with being associated with San culture. It was only Mr. President who took pride in being San. Indigenous children are socialized to believe that their traditional ways of knowing and reading the world are inferior and archaic (Bray, Clarke, & Stephens, 1986). As a result, the participants did not want to be

recognized as Khoesan because that is essentially being recognized as Basarwa or Mosarwa. Hence, as a researcher, I developed a discourse to avoid the words *Mosarwa*, *Basarwa* and *San*. I used words such as these *students*, *our friends*, and *your friends*. All six participants had Setswana names and for the purposes of this study, I translated them to English pseudonyms. According to le Roux (1999), Setswana names help the students to fit in or blend in to school easily.

#### *Solidarity*

Carrying out research at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School revealed some of the coping strategies that San children use in Botswana. I found many positive things that the San students did with each other for solidarity. The boys, for example, had created their own sports field that they called *Germany*. While the other students trained in the official sports field, *Germany* was a safe haven for the San boys. The girls loved to sing and dance. Sometimes after or during afternoon study and on Saturdays, they would sit together in their little groups and play *diketo*, share stories, or go out to the thick bush behind the hostels and look for wild berries and fruits. They did all of these activities to avoid the boredom at school.

The students moved in groups, depending on where they came from. Those from the settlement of Kgomodiatshaba moved and studied together and the ones from settlements such as Bodungwane and Leshibitsi also did the same. In class, San students sat next to each other. Only in a few cases did some non-San Botswana sit next to San students in class. I observed in class that there was no group work, as most of the classroom instruction was through the lecture method. In the library, the students sat in their usual groups and shared newspapers and books.

*Theme 2: What do San children value and find meaningful in their home and school environments? How does this relate to the possibility for literacy learning?* Initially, when talking to the participants and informants (San and non-San), they understood literacy as being school success, or getting high grades. With further questioning, however, the meaning of literacy extended to their home cultural environment. Looking across the stories of the participants and informants, literacy generally is viewed as anything that conveys an important message. For example, the students shared interesting stories with me and they found value in these stories. This concurs with Shostak (1981, 2000), who lived among the Kung! and who expressed that San people love to tell stories. Recently, Pauline Wiessner, a professor of anthropology at the University of Utah, found this to be true (Driefus, 2009). The message in the stories taught them how to survive, good morals, and the importance of honesty, respect, and Botho. Singing and dancing was considered to be literacy to all six participants. The songs are important for the messages they convey. For example, Drought sang a song warning Botswana to be careful and not commit passion killings.

Receiver sang a song about her favourite teacher, Lebati. Playing was another form of literacy at home and in school. Happy, Drought, and Receiver loved to play *Koi*, *Morabaraba*, and *Diketo*.

Formal education, noted in much of the Indigenous research, often does not produce a holistically-educated child who is morally, physically and intellectually upright. To many Indigenous peoples of the world, goodness of character is viewed to be fundamentally important (Moshia, 1999; Reagan, 2000; Smith, 1999). The home literacy of the six participants in this study meant a great deal to them. For them, such knowledge is important and, as Mr. President and Drought said, it should be included in formal schooling.

### Concluding Remarks

The six participants in the study repeatedly expressed a desire to learn and pursue careers. However, they all faced challenges at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School. They had to leave the comfort of their homes and stay in boarding schools. Life in the hostels and in the classrooms was far from easy. They faced extreme poverty and social ills, such as name-calling and verbal abuse from non-San students in the school. The students' identities were compromised as it was considered to be taboo to be San. In addition, the students had to learn in two foreign languages: English and Setswana. Their San languages were not an option. In classrooms, San students' prior knowledge and rich culture of storytelling was ignored and the teachers failed to draw from San culture in their teaching. From the study, it is clear that San students are denied a voice in Botswana classrooms; it is then not surprising that they find formal schooling meaningless and continue to drop out of school.

Carrying out research at Letsatsi Community Junior Secondary School revealed, however, some of the coping strategies that San children use in Botswana. I found many positive things that the San students did with each other for solidarity. Clearly, amid their many problems, the spirit of solidarity and resurgence to persevere was evident.

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