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Indigenous¹ Education and Knowledge - a de-legitimised Concept in the “Education for All” Strategies

Annette Kanstrup-Jensen²

“We’re told our old ways and our old knowledge aren’t good any more. The local wisdom and the knowledge passed down from generation to generation are being destroyed...The education system actually helps destroy the old knowledge. Education has been designed to produce people for industry. Learning has become something that is bought and sold. Education is an investment and investors want to get a return on their money. So people who go through schools just end up like cogs in the industrial machine – sometimes without even realizing it. Our capability is actually going down because our self-confidence is ebbing away... We have to survive, but with dignity too”.

(Khun Wibun Khemchaloem cited in Human Development Report, Thailand, UNDP 2003: 6).

Introduction

In this paper the attempt is made to emphasize the differences between indigenous education practices and concepts and the Western imposed cultural ethnocentrism in the South East Asian Region.³ It is my hope that the discussions in the paper will be of interest to scholars and students engaged in development processes in pluri-ethnic societies. The action plans presented in the “Education for All” conferences in 1990 and 2000 are used to illustrate the differences in the concept of education. The plans show that the Western education concept still dominates in the development discourse. These conferences are important as “Education for All” strategies seem to be the main beacon of future development within education, as well as it is significant that other concepts of education than the Western are hardly given any attention in the two declarations.

The point is further made that it is not a purely academic discussion, as the West has the institutional power to impose its hegemony in theory and practice. This notwithstanding, a new discourse is emerging within the research community

¹ Definitions of indigeneity are contested and politicised. An interesting conceptualisation is proposed by Shaw who identifies indigenous population groups as those who are reduced to a non-dominant situation. This position draws on the UN working definition: “Population groups who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they form a part, under the State structure which incorporates mainly the national, and social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant” (Shaw 2002: 57). Most often ‘indigenous’ populations denominate the first inhabitants of a particular state (cf. First Nation populations of e.g. Canada).

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³ The author has worked as education advisor in the region for 3 years as well as the paper builds on the empirical data collected in connection with her PhD dissertation.

which shows sensitivity to the problems of indigenous communities in the context of Third World development discourse.

Background

The empirical research in connection with my PhD dissertation among ethnic groups in South East Asia has demonstrated that the approaches to the study of educational thought and practices are rooted in the Western modernisation tradition, and this educational imperialism is also reflected in the majority-minority power relationship in most developing countries. Many international organisations and researchers as well as local governments and administrators adhere to the paradigm that tends to equate “education” with “schooling” as defined by the West⁴. The issue revolves around the way “education” is conceptualised, whereas many alternative educational systems especially found in the Third World are de-legitimised and deemed inappropriate in the national capacity building strategies. For some – if not all – indigenous groups, “education” is conceptualised as a “learning for life” process that is not confined to a schoolroom and a fixed curriculum, nor dependent on a timetable and ending with exams showing academic results. The ultimate goal of the process in an indigenous community is to integrate the individual into her/his society. This dichotomy between Western originated paradigms and indigenous epistemology represents a constraint in nurturing capability formation of indigenous communities.

Among the central human capabilities that people should be granted is the right to “adequate education”. However, the plethora of declarations on different kinds of rights has left some questions unanswered. The authors of the declarations have assumed that all people share the same beliefs about learning and education, but there is no *universal* justification of the right to education. Another unsolved problem is that there is no universal definition of *the meaning of education*. The Cultural Rights and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples declare that the indigenous people have the right to establish and control their educational systems “in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”. One of the most significant differences between the 1990 and the 2000 EFA declarations is the change in vocabulary: “education” is replaced by “learning”. The question remains though, whether this change of terminology has resolved the conceptual conflict and the lack of recognition of indigenous educational philosophy?

Recognition of indigenous learning practices does not contest the objective of the eradication of illiteracy per se, nor does it argue that indigenous people per definition do not want to be part of a modernised society. What it does contest is that researchers and education planners continue to apply orthodox

⁴ After the economic ascent of Japan, the ‘West’ might no longer be the proper term, but Serge Latouche states: “In contemporary geopolitics the ‘Western world’ refers to the triangle containing the northern hemisphere: Western Europe, Japan and the United States” (Latouche 1996: 27). It might be appropriate to add Australia and New Zealand.

methodologies and mainstream paradigms that are nurtured in conformity with Western norms and professional partiality. The paradigms are reflections of the worldview of the world's economic powers. It can be argued that to comply with the quintessence of the human rights and to consider indigenous learning practices as legitimate, education theorists, planners and development practitioners to a greater extent should be willing to listen to engage in “reversals in learning” (Chambers 1994: 201), to begin listening to the “voiceless” and thus not be reluctant to challenge their Western concept.

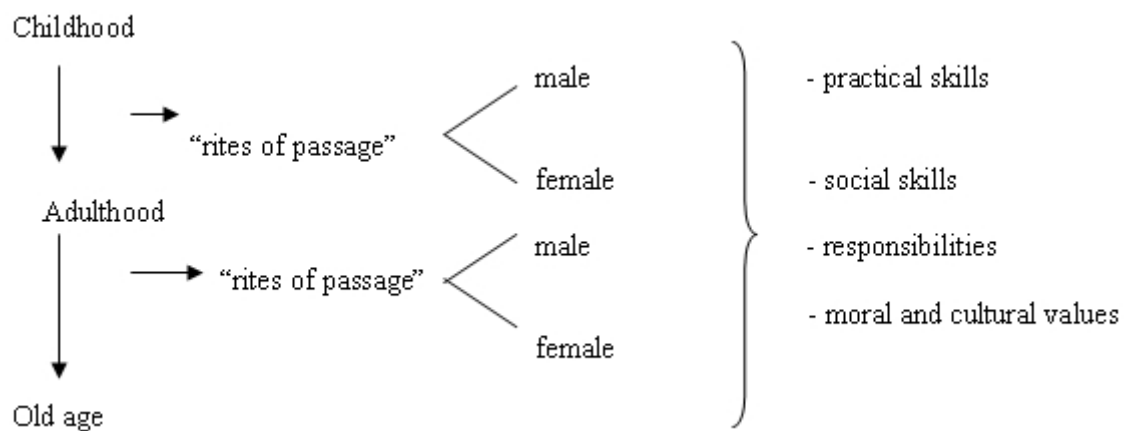
The Constituents of Indigenous Learning

Studies within academic disciplines like e.g. religious sociology and anthropology have substantiated that education among indigenous peoples throughout the world is very similar in purpose, scope, nature and pedagogy. Indigenous education is an integral, valuable and inseparable part of indigenous people's lives that has helped them to survive for centuries. Rovillos expresses the all-encompassing nature of indigenous learning practices by stating: “C’est grace à ceux-ci [the learning practices] que les enfants apprenaient les techniques de défense et de survie, les moeurs et les normes sociales, ainsi que leur histoire et leur culture (myths, chants, danses, légendes etc.)”⁵ (Rovillos 2000: 159).

The life-long learning process prepares the individual for full membership in the particular community. Ocitti agrees when he calls learning a socialisation or enculturation process whose purpose is ...“the humanisation of man in society” (Ocitti 1994: 14). The “womb-to-tomb” learning encompasses both a vertical time cycle and a horizontal space learning process. The diagrams below are schematic outlines of the way some Hmong and Akha groups in the Lao PDR and Thailand systematise their learning. (The rites of passage are put in inverted commas to illustrate that the Hmong and Akha are not physically injured as is the case in some other indigenous cultures when they pass from one stage to another).

⁵ The author's translation: “It is thanks to these [the learning practices] that the child learned the survival techniques, the customs and the social norms as well as their history and culture (myths, songs, dances legends etc)”.

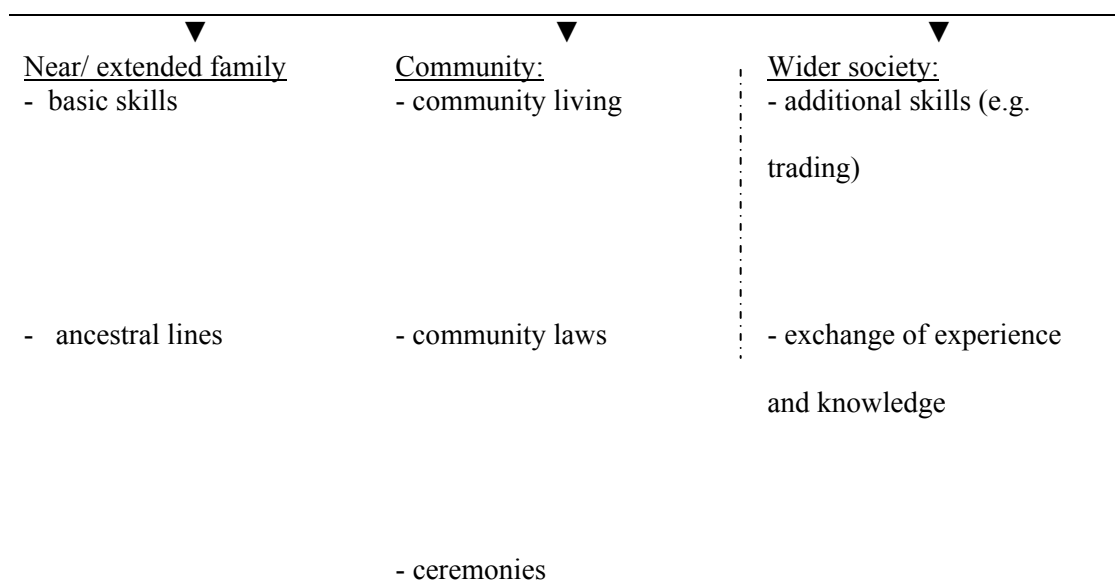
The Vertical Time Cycle:



The gender specific skills and moral values are taught according to the person's age and community responsibilities.

Along with the chronological vertical learning indigenous peoples can be said to undergo an organised horizontal space learning process. Regardless of the person's age, a parallel learning takes place within the family, other community members as well as from other communities. (Ancestral lines refer to the knowledge of the clan history, and the community laws refer to the customary rules that constitute the moral codex that is specific for the particular community).

The horizontal space learning process:



Education in the family for the child encompasses the practical work following the seasons, and later the consciousness of being part of a clan with privileges and duties is inculcated in the person. During ceremonies the elders make the children participate which "...re-enforces the elders' [people over 40] role in teaching as well as it promotes close contact between the young and the old in the communities" ⁶ Thus, teaching the children and the young people is a collective responsibility of the whole village. The horizontal learning process shows that the villagers also appreciate learning from the wider society.

Besides the learning by observing and imitating other people from within and outside the community, myths, songs and games (very often in connection with the ceremonies) constitute other means of learning. The gender-specific games children play all serve as preparation to their future roles in the community.

Thus the "womb-to-tomb" learning is essential for the maintenance of the community, (spiritual coherence: the religious (cultural) belief in and worship of ancestors, economic survival: deep relation with, and respect for, their environment and hence physical subsistence, the political climate: the patriarchal organisation and respected leadership, and finally moral integrity: social behaviour and internal harmony). The person who is "initiated" into her/his new status is taught by different members of the community in different subjects, which gives the members of the community educational roles throughout their lives. In essence indigenous education/learning is a question of acquiring the competences that are in accordance with the nature of the particular social organisation.

It could be argued whether this kind of education that has been transferred from one generation to the other for centuries is still valid and relevant in a rapidly modernising society.

Has Indigenous Education become Obsolete in a Modern(ising) Society?

The estimated number of indigenous peoples in the world varies from 300 to 600 million and it seems worthwhile to discuss whether indigenous education practices have become obsolete. Despite the proved phenomenological similarities between the world's indigenous learning concept and practices, there are interregional differences in the status of indigenous education. Furthermore indigenous learning is a dynamic process. Thus although the following discussion among African scholars could be considered as outdated, it offers an interesting view on the topic and that might still have general relevance.

One school of thought claims that there are serious inherent deficiencies in indigenous African education. Accordingly the nature of indigenous education is

⁶ Data collected in Pa Daeng village 2001, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand by Mrs. Chutima Morlaeku.

seen as a hindrance to overcoming poverty in the African societies – a challenge that modern education in this opinion is more capable of addressing (Mushi 1989: 88). Among the most significant arguments on the shortcomings of indigenous education are:

1. The learning is confined to one's particular clan or tribe with emphasis on specific and immediate relevance. The exchange of experiences with other groups could have created "a common pool of knowledge" (Ibid., p. 88) which might have contributed to a broader understanding of the reasons for poverty, and thereby suggestions for solutions.
2. Mushi underlines the static character of learning as the elders have unrestricted power to interpret the ancestors' value system and natural phenomena, thereby curbing the learner's innate curiosity and her/his suggestions of e.g. how to overcome the evil (Ibid., p. 89).
3. Despite the fact that the ability to reason is an integral part of the learning process, African indigenous education is criticised for placing too much importance on the acquisition of concrete learning skills at the expense of intellectual nurturing which prevents the learner from imagining alternatives, e.g. diseases and famine did not originate from the Gods but might have other causes (Ibid., p. 89).
4. Mushi also maintains that indigenous education promotes gender inequality. The female relatives teach the young girls exclusively about household matters which perpetuates women's situation in these patriarchal communities (Ibid., p. 91).

The major deficiency highlighted by Mushi is that the learners are not encouraged to think critically and "To use Freire's phraseology, the young people were treated as depositories" (Ibid., p. 90). In other words, the learner must adapt to her/his particular society, which maintains the status quo not least with regard to gender inequality. According to this understanding indigenous education does not contain the dynamism necessary for change.

As a general comment to Mushi's viewpoint, Brennan argues that before planning development projects in a multicultural context one must keep in mind that many rural development programmes have been unsuccessful. Brennan asks if the reason could be "...because the methods of implementation were 'Western' and indigenous practices and learning were ignored? Or is it possible that, if the indigenous practices and learning had been sufficiently researched and known, the development project may have been completely re-cast or perhaps not even implemented?" (Brennan 1990: 76). Thus according to Brennan one cannot reject

indigenous learning as inherently inadequate for a dynamic transformation process; it might turn out to be a “two-way street” (Ibid., p. 75).

To the more specific points expressed by Mushi, Brennan has the following comments:

- (1) With regard to the argument concerning the confinement of learning to one's own group, Brennan claims that this only makes the development process more difficult, but “...not less important” (Ibid., p. 76). This argument, however, might seem to be rather vague; for the specific group's practice to be accommodated into a wider development process will depend on e.g. demographic and political circumstances. Ocitti argues that an educational practice restricted to a specific environment is not a deficiency *per se*. He claims that the value of an education system does not lie in its applicability to other settings, but in its relevance for the community or nation “...for which it is intended” (Ocitti 1990: 55). Furthermore Ocitti agrees with Brennan maintaining that the lack of interaction between the clans was not due to deficiencies in the specific education system, but was “...mainly political in nature” (Ibid., p. 55). Furthermore education is not the only factor in a development process (Ibid., p. 56). This argument is applicable to other countries on their way to development.
- (2) Concerning the teaching of ancestral values undertaken by elders as a static phenomenon, Brennan counters that it might be difficult for elders to teach new knowledge, but he argues that only if a person knows her/his own background fully, will s/he be able to assist in a realistic learning process that leads to change (Brennan 1990, p. 76-77). To this argument Ocitti adds that in any society the elders are the most conservative, but that there is no indication that rural, illiterate people are more conservative than the urban “educated” [my quotation marks] population (Ocitti 1990: 57).
- (3) The third deficiency that Mushi emphasises revolves around the lack of intellectual training which pinpoints the Western importance attributed to the written word as the only way to a person's cognitive development. Consequently Brennan deducts that the education hierarchy places oral traditions at the bottom of the hierarchy. In this connection Brennan asks whether a “teacher” is a better catalyst than an elder to develop the child's mind and nurture her/his creativity? (Brennan 1990, p. 77). Ocitti admits that Mushi has a point in claiming that because of the authority of the elders in an indigenous culture, the young people might not be encouraged to be critical. However, Ocitti finds that Mushi is over-generalising, and overlooking the fact that human relations in an indigenous culture consist

of both vertical and horizontal level of communication. It is in the vertical communication where the elders over time teach the young that their minds are not challenged. The horizontal communication, on the other hand, that takes place between the individual and her/his contemporaries, is where creativity is unfolded as well as "...the flexing of intellectual muscles" (Ocitti 1990: 58).

- (4) As for the inequality between man and women Brennan finds that Mushi does not show sufficient awareness of two central issues. Firstly, one has to examine how the roles of the two genders are defined in their complementarity within the particular society. Brennan asks whether an eventual changed economic situation (e.g. if the man is employed outside of the community), would automatically entail a changed role of the women's responsibilities? Secondly, there is no guarantee that Western education will have any effect on the relationship between men and women (Brennan 1990, p. 78-79).

Brennan refrains from judging Mushi's arguments as right or wrong as the latter does pinpoint some shortcomings and limitations of indigenous learning practices. Nor does Brennan claim that indigenous education is the only relevant learning method in a changing world. But what is questioned is, whether Western education methodologies are more capable of overcoming given weaknesses. In addition, Brennan pleads for a re-validation of indigenous education as a determinant for successful development.

Ocitti considers Mushi's article as heuristic, because it should spur to further, non-romanticising research on indigenous education in order to find out what has become obsolete, what should be modified and adapted, and which aspects are still best suited to meet the needs of the people (Ocitti 1990: 64).

Why has indigenous education not become obsolete?

Despite recognised shortcomings, the above discussion demonstrates that the characteristics of indigenous education and its pedagogical approach are not useless and obsolete. Special emphasis should be attributed to the inter- and intra-generational communication levels which make the individual a learner, a teacher and a worker at the same time and thereby becoming a resource person for the whole community. As a matter of fact, contextualised learning might be described as the most fundamental quality of indigenous education. Under such conditions the relevance of the learning systems to people's lives cannot automatically be replaced by a curriculum of formal education.

The poem below illustrates the limitation of formal education as opposed to the usefulness of indigenous learning:

Ils voulaient nous faire aller à l'école
Tourner les pages de leurs livres...
Pourquoi apprendre le langage des livres
Alors que la forêt nous parle?

Les livres ne se mangent pas
Et les stylos et les crayons sont de pauvres armes
Pour tuer le daim des montagnes
Et le sanglier grognant...

(Gilbert Perez cited in Rovillos 2000, p.3) [*Italics in the original*]⁷

The issue of “educational irrelevance” as a part of endogenous constraints for capability formation among ethnic communities has been discussed among educational planners, within academia and in international fora for decades. Newer education assessment reports e.g. in the Lao PDR, where approximately half of the population belongs to ethnic minority groups, continue to pinpoint the problem with textbooks illustrating the majority culture as the only valid one, and not reflecting “the multi-ethnic society” (GoL 2004: 7). Furthermore, one of the recommendations is to “Review curriculum and textbooks for ethnic bias, revise to include representation of ethnic groups and their history” (Ibid., p. 9). Another example is found in the Thai educational goals to be fulfilled by the year 2007 and “...to be adjusted in harmony with globalisation” (GoT 1997: 1); furthermore one of the problems to be solved is the “Inappropriate curriculum and learning/teaching processes which do not correspond to the needs of society in its present stage of national development” (Ibid., p. 2). (Ethnic minority groups constitute less than 2% of the total population in Thailand).

Regardless of the official intentions, there are reasons to be sceptical. In the case of the Lao PDR and Thailand it seems that Habte has a point on this issue in claiming that “One should not expect sensitivities to equity, disparity, poverty etc., from countries whose regimes follow and practice inequality, political domination, military solutions to political problems” (Habte cited in Husén 1979: 91). Education policies for minority groups in the Lao PDR and Thailand are, in principle, both reflections of the dual objective of national integration and preservation of cultural distinctiveness. However, the policies reflect the concern that the national education programmes be homogenised in service of the market.

⁷ The author’s translation: “They want us to go to school and read the pages in their books... Why do we have to learn the language written in books, when we hear the cry from the forest? We cannot eat books, and pen and pencils are useless arms to kill the mountain deer and the grunting wild boar”.

Is States' Perception of Education Obsolete?

Empirical research undertaken by the author and others in the South East Asian Region has demonstrated the relevance of indigenous learning systems. However, studies have equally shown that the various states' perception of education and hence the importance of education for nation building does not take other understandings of education into consideration.

Therefore I find it worthwhile in the following to discuss Khun Wibun's description of formal education as being in the service of the market, because it illuminates the conflictual tendencies in today's world: on the one hand a trend away from centralisation towards diversity where "... the voices of those who were once dispossessed ... silenced by dominant ideologies" are now being raised (Corson 1998: 238). In Corson's view the world has never seen stronger assimilationist forces than within capitalist social forces, and they are especially visible in the sphere of education. As Khun Wibun, Corson has no doubt that the worth of something depends on its market value rather than "...according to any intrinsic and real qualities it might have" (Ibid., p. 239). This viewpoint once again brings the debate back to the discrepancy problem behind the formation of human capital often imparted by formal education versus the formation of capabilities, ideally envisaged to enhance people's choices. In order to fully recognise that cultural diversity demands attention in the development discourse, and that difference should not be equated with deficiency, one could ask whether the Lao PDR and Thailand as well as other modernising states' perception of education are not themselves problematic.

The conventional structure of education for indigenous peoples does not comply with the current key feature of validating cultural diversity. According to Corson, several areas within the educational framework need to be reformed⁸. Education programmes build on external (governmental) structures with the internal (community) hardly taken into consideration. The philosophy of education reflects the dominant culture that furthers homogeneity and repression instead of promoting a liberating and bicultural or multi-cultural educational culture. Curricula that are never neutral and teaching methods that are consensus-seeking instead of transformative buttress a perception of education that is reactive instead of proactive.

Formal education programmes do not constitute a natural and organic part of indigenous peoples' lives. The organisation of education in institutions instead of being centred around the local community and the top-down led structure that does not include the resources of the community, can hardly be said to be in harmony with the contemporary development rhetoric found in the modernising discourse of people working with, speaking of and living off development issues.

⁸ For the conceptual structure Corson draws on Jackie Daigle: "An examination of community-based education models in first nations communities" (PhD dissertation [unpublished], University of Toronto 1997).

There is still a discrepancy between the rhetoric of the cultural assertion and recognition of indigenous peoples' worldviews as pleaded for during the international decade for indigenous peoples and the present reality of a globalised world.

Why has “Learning become something that is bought and sold”?

Khun Wibun's provocative statement stresses the lack of possibilities for most indigenous peoples to have influence on their adaptation to a modernising world. Some of the answers to these questions could be found at a conceptual, a theoretical as well as at a political and economic level:

a) Colonial legacy

The symbolic presence of the West in Third World countries after de-colonisation is still influenced, if not dominated, by Western ideologies and doctrines. The *essence* of colonial Europe expressed itself in philosophy (Enlightenment), religion (Christianity), race (the white man) and economic system (capitalism) (Latouche 1996: 25-26). Naturally this is an incomplete analysis of Western civilisation as an entity in all aspects, and historically Western supremacy has been challenged, but so far without great success.

Consequently, many development activities in Third World countries are presented as clear demonstrations for the glorification of Western science and technology, as well as of Western economic politics and culture as the incontestable “values of progress” (Ibid., p. 17). The adaptation and implementation of Western lifestyles and material priorities have damaging effects on indigenous population groups despite the various countries' different paths to modernity and means of development. Latouche expresses the unevenness as follows: “...those-and they are numerous-who are excluded from the material and symbolic benefits of ‘modernisation’ can and must, if they are to survive as a species and as human beings, find fresh solutions” (Ibid., p. 4).

It can be assumed that also many indigenous peoples want changes and modernisation, but one could fear that they will not be given the opportunity to find their own solutions in the political environment that both includes and excludes them. Education is one of the most fundamental instruments of modernisation, but for ideological and political as well as for cultural reasons there can be discrepancies in the interpretation of the concepts.

One of the fundamental characteristics of human history is that people in all social arrangements have educated their children (Reagan 1996: ix). Knowledge has been passed on from one generation to the next not only to ensure survival, but also to preserve the respective cultures. However, most established literature, courses and conferences dealing with the history and philosophy of education

include few, if any, references to indigenous educational ideas and practices. Although there have been attempts to include the perspectives of minority/marginalised groups in the studies of education it is rarely acknowledged that valuable insight might be gained from serious examination of non-Western experiences themselves. This is an important shortcoming as "...these traditions might be fully and in all respect comparable to the Western tradition in their unique richness and diversity" (Ibid., p. 1).

The methodological problem in most current research, not only of indigenous educational ideas and practices, is related to the reification and de-legitimation approaches. Even well-intentioned scholars are prone to reify the object of their studies – and thereby making it fundamentally alien to its reality. Reification creates confusion and misinterpretation of the phenomenon, as well as subjugating the phenomenon to the researcher's own Western(ised) values and norms. The issue is the way education is conceptualised, whereby alternative educational systems especially found in the Third World are de-legitimised and deemed primitive, uncivilised or irrational by researchers influenced by this tradition. According to Mathur, Johan Galtung epitomises this "...when he says that the West is not even aware of alternative forms of rationality because of its success in destroying other cultures" (Galtung cited in Mathur 1989: 471). It is most difficult to avoid the dilemma created by the strait-jacket of Western dominance, and as Sardar writes, this is due to the fact that the real power of the West lies "in its power to define" (Sardar in Munck & O'Hearn 1999: 44).

Western ethnocentrism

The view of one's own culture as superior to others, referred to as *cultural ethnocentrism*, prevails in most, if not all societies. In practice, however, this translates in simply measuring and evaluating foreign phenomena using one's own socio-cultural norms. This is an issue that has been raised by post-modern critical theory in the past decades. "Indigenous populations had to be 'modernised', where modernisation meant the adoption of the 'right' values, namely those held by the white minority, and in general, those [values] embodied in the ideal of the cultivated European;" (Escobar 1995: 43). As a consequence of basic assumptions, cultural ethnocentrism manifests itself from the very beginning in the themes and topics that many Western scholars choose to explore, the questions they intend to ask, the way the hypotheses are constructed, and they are often affected, though often unconsciously, by idiosyncratic biases. The new awareness has been slowly penetrating research production as well as attempting a redefinition of development. According to Tucker "...the problems of how to engage in a dialogue of equals with Others in a world saturated with Western hegemony have only begun to impose themselves on the concern of Western social science. These problems are nowhere posed more sharply than when we consider the predicament of indigenous peoples" (Tucker in Munck & O'Hearn 1999: 19).

However, seen in the context of the assumed binary opposition between modernisation and tradition, cultural ethnocentrism does not necessarily only reflect Western capitalist hegemony. Internal cultural imperialism prevails in any political system, as "...formal schooling is both determined by and a determinant of the political system" (Fägerlind & Saha 1985: 123). Education, especially as related to nation-building, can be seen as serving three main purposes: "1) as the main agent for political socialisation of the young into the national political culture, 2) as the primary agent for the selection and training of political elites, and 3) as the main contributor to political integration and the building of national political consciousness" (Ibid.: 125). Education prepares children for citizenship in a particular political context, inculcating the civic values that are prevalent elements in a particular political ideology. In other words education can be conceptualised as an attempt to maintain the political status quo and homogenise the population. The problem in many Third World countries is that this official indoctrination may conflict with indigenous values taught in their cultures.

The emphasis on modernisation of science and knowledge leads to a second kind of ethnocentrism, *epistemological ethnocentrism*. It is not so much related to individual assumptions and biases, as to conventional suppositions that are common to an entire domain of study. This kind of ethnocentrism expresses itself in paradigmatic constructions:

"A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and weakness – their strength in that it makes action possible, their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm".

(Patton cited in Lincoln & Guba 1985: 15)

The above definition is drawn from Thomas Kuhn's research on the role of paradigms in scientific research. "These [paradigms] I take to be universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn 1996: x). In the global context, however, "universally" seen in most conventions and declarations must be interpreted as "Western". This is a potential source of tension and misunderstanding as the dominant paradigm in a field of study during a given historical period establishes the parameters within which accepted research is allowed. Researchers, students and development practitioners usually do not question the relevance and the legitimacy of an accepted paradigm, nor do administrators. In accordance with this internalised knowledge foundation they

form a “scientific community” and “...define the kinds of problems to be investigated, the kinds of assumptions and concepts to be employed, and the kind of research methods to be used” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996: 17). In the context of indigenous educational practices the object of research has for many years been reduced to the study of “socialisation” carried out by e.g. sociologists as well as of the “acculturation” phase referred to by many anthropologists.

Critique of Western concepts

The critique that can be raised at the modernisation approach is that the scholars belonging to that school have tended to equate education with “formal schooling”. One reason being, according to adherents of this paradigm, that education “...generally is more strongly directed to some segments of the population, for example urban youth from higher status backgrounds” (Fägerlind & Saha 1989: 52). From the very beginning, the conceptualisation of the process of modernisation and development was modelled on the experience of the advanced capitalist nations. An example is UNESCO’s Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) in the 1970s, which was mainly concerned with “...inserting or adapting the new literate to capitalist social relations rather than raising the critical awareness of his role and position in society” (Mbilinyi et al. 1982: 57). Another objective of the programme was the intention of making the new literates ‘masters of milieu’, meaning adapting them to modern behaviour at work and introducing them to modern technology. However, a self-critical report from UNESCO questioned the notion of ‘mastery of milieu’: “To what extent has the new literate become dependent on which external socio-economic processes and forces? Has literacy enabled the new literate to know and understand these processes and forces? To come to grips with them? To have a voice in controlling them?” (Ibid., p. 57).

The present paper by no means contests the objective of the eradication of illiteracy, but only questions whether paradigms developed in a Western context automatically are the most appropriate for planning education for indigenous peoples. A critical approach asserts that paradigms assuming that people hold modern attitudes, values and beliefs about e.g. work, quality of life and control of one’s environment are inappropriate in dealing with indigenous peoples. The idea of education as linked to an institution that teaches children of certain age groups a fixed curriculum at specific times often alienates children from their cultural background, the “womb-to-tomb” learning process. The focus on “modern” literacy and a literary tradition entails that many interesting and important aspects of the indigenous concept of education have been considered as falling outside the parameters of “legitimate” research framework.

Notwithstanding the complexity of the indigenous question, the researcher equipped with well-defined Western paradigms, thus appears to be academically

invulnerable. It also entails that s/he will be reluctant to recognise that the boundaries for her/his expectations might be changed, and thereby force the researcher to accept that previous assumptions concerning the conceptualisation of education are insufficient. Most of the existing writings within the field of indigenous education "...were in disarray in that they did not reflect any conscious trend or the 'true state of the art'" (Ocitti 1994: 5).

Theoretically, cultural ethnocentrism has a tendency to present indigenous education systems as "underdeveloped" and "traditional" and without internal dynamics. The epistemological ethnocentrism that equates education with "schooling" is a distortion of proven usefulness in Third World countries. In fact "...indigenous knowledge is threatened by inadequate, inaccurate and inappropriate conceptions of knowledge and the propagation of these conceptions throughout educational practice" (Kroma 1995: 13). New approaches and re-conceptualisations are needed, and an increasing number of critical researchers are questioning mainstream educational research and replacing it with alternative approaches.

A shortcoming of this approach is however, that the so-called alternative strategies are still mainly conceived by Western(ised) development thinkers, although some have slowly begun to recognise the cultural heterogeneity in the Third World and the challenges it can cause for mainstreaming development efforts. Pieterse points out that a state in its reconstruction towards modernisation has "a multicultural foundation", and "Cultural heterogeneity is a source of creativity and dynamism and arguably the ultimate source of economic growth and human betterment" (Pieterse 2000: 199).

b) Unresolved challenges in the "Education for All" strategies

One of the consequences of the Second World War was that the notion of human rights was put on the global agenda through the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The victory of human freedom was celebrated and the principal objective of development was declared to be human well-being. A series of UN conventions established the principles of people-centred development. The post-war period was also the time of struggles for independence in many developing countries. The liberation struggles in the colonies were not just for political freedom, but also for improved social welfare. The purpose of the following discussion is to explore some of the unsettled issues in the "Education for All" strategies also seen in the light of various rights declarations.

Education as a Human Right

The right to have a good health, to be adequately nourished as well as to have adequate shelter are among the central human needs that people should be granted according to Martha Nussbaum. The fourth of the 10 functional

capabilities she claims as a universal value for all human beings is “...an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training” (Nussbaum 2000: 78-79). Nussbaum adds: “Literacy is a concrete specification for the modern world of a more general capability that may have been realized without literacy in other times and places” (Ibid., p. 77-78). Adequate education, literacy, basic mathematics and scientific training in the above quotation is presumably encumbered with western determined contents, but Nussbaum’s modifying statement could be interpreted as a recognition of an educational practice, an oral tradition, that has been valued from pre-modern times, and a capability that for some population groups might still be valuable. Capabilities can be thought of as human rights, because they fulfil a similar role in the formulation of constitutionally guaranteed principles. There are however theoretical, linguistic, philosophical and conceptual difficulties associated with the interpretation of human rights (Ibid., p. 97).

Some of the problems connected with the plethora of declarations of different kinds of rights are how the term “universal” should be interpreted and hence whether the term “universal education” can have any meaning. In a historical perspective “universalism” is a legacy from the colonial period; the mandate of the Covenant of the League of Nations⁹ just after the First World War continued to legitimise the developed world’s intervention in developing countries by claiming that, apart from the economic and political interests, there were “...supposed to be universal values – civilization, material and moral well-being, social progress” (Rist 1997: 62) from the “enlightened” world that should be conveyed to extra-European peoples. Universalism was synonymous with European¹⁰, and apart from the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Eurocentric focus on the rights of citizens can be traced as long back as to the Magna Carta from 1215 (England), and the Declaration of the Rights of Man from 1789 (France).

Nearly two hundred years later the latest international declaration on universal human rights was written in the aftermath of the Second World War. The authors of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights might have assumed that the term “universal” could be applied unchallenged. However, despite the attempts to reconcile conflicting cultural and ideological tensions in a preceding symposium, one of the subjects in the declaration, the Universal Right to Education, is still debatable.¹¹

⁹ The League, established in 1920, was the first formalised attempt to create an international body to secure peace. It included representatives from states throughout the world, but the United States of America was not a member. The League was dissolved in 1946 and provided a model for the United Nations Organisation (Carruthers in Baylis & Smith 2001: 56).

¹⁰ From the 16th to the 20th centuries the European states were colonial powers.

¹¹ Joel Spring states that the U.S. Congress in the 1950s refused to ratify the declaration due to the lack of consensus on the term ‘universal’ (Spring 2000: ix).

Article 26 of the declaration states:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be accessible to all on the basis of merit.

and it continues:

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)¹²

These clauses have left some questions unanswered. The authors have assumed that “...all people share the same beliefs about learning and development” (Spring 2000: 2):

a) there is no universal justification of the right to education. Can the right to education for all the world’s peoples be justified regardless of differences in cultural, religious and political circumstances in the world’s countries? Or as Brunner phrases it: “Should education reproduce the culture, or should it enrich and cultivate human potential?” (Brunner 1996: 80)

And another unsolved problem:

b) there is no universal definition of the meaning of education. Is there a universal concept of education applicable to all cultures, does education have the same meaning in every culture? Which kind of education will be most appropriate to guarantee the full development of the human potential?

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990

These problems were left unresolved in the hope that the world at some stage would reach a common understanding, but the philosophical and ideological divergences continued with undiminished strength throughout the Cold War period. Therefore the expectations to the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 were high. However, the considerable number of delegates from national governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and education professionals did not succeed in agreeing on “...an adequate and complete justification of the right to education and definition of education” (Spring 2000: 6).

¹² Retrieved 29 January 2005.

The most significant difference between the two declarations is the changes in the vocabulary: education is replaced by “educational opportunities” and “learning”. This could be considered as an opening up for other ways of conceptualising education and thereby avoiding any controversy concerning the understanding of “universality” as a concept created and monopolised by the West. The first two clauses in Article 1 in the framework for action of the declaration illustrate the linguistic softening:

1. Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving, and the basic content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably, changes with the passage of time.
2. The satisfaction of these needs empowers the individual in any society and confers upon them a responsibility to respect and build upon their collective cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritage... to further the cause for social justice...ensuring that commonly accepted humanistic values and human rights are upheld...

In article 3, clause 4 the target groups are specified, and now includes, among others, indigenous peoples.

An active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities. Undeserved groups – the poor, street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation – should not suffer any discrimination in access to learning opportunities.

(UNESCO: World Declaration on Education for All 1990: 3)

In principle these clauses give more space to interpretation and recognition of cultural diversity. The emphasis on “quality of their lives”, “develop their full capacities”, “participate fully in development” as well as the intention to protect and nurture “humanistic values” and “empowers the individual” are borrowed from the vocabulary of the development discourse in the decade when theories such as the human development paradigm became the prevailing approach.

The ambitions for educational development at national and sub-national level were high as described in the Conference’s Framework for Action. The

Framework stresses the importance of community intervention, and universal access to “basic” education -without defining what that entails- should be reached by the year 2000. Reduction of the disparity between male and female literacy rates, emphasis on the poor and disadvantaged and revision of curricula were considered as the most important steps ahead (UNESCO: WCEFA, Framework for Action, 1990 p. 3-7).

However, as Joseph Müller states:” None of the targets of Jomtien has been fully achieved” (Müller 2000: 29). The Jomtien conference was not to be considered as a “...single event but the start of a powerful movement” (Ibid., p. 30), and the most significant follow up was held in 2000¹³.

The Dakar Conference on Education for All in 2000

The purpose of the Dakar meeting was a confirmation of the visions introduced at the 1990 conference and to review the assessment of the progress made during the Jomtien Decade and to renew the commitment to achieve the Education for All goals and targets now by the year 2015 (Ibid., p. 31). There are only few differences in the renewed Framework for Action. The elimination of gender disparities as well as improved access to education for disadvantaged, vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities has been more explicitly emphasised. The supple wording from the Jomtien Conference is continued in the Dakar declaration, but the participants did not find it important or possible to reach clearer definitions of education, “appropriate learning” and “quality in education” (Ibid., p. 19-22).

The Ecuadorian researcher Rosa María Torres expresses an interesting critique of the two conferences, which encompasses the divide between a problem solving and a critical approach. Her main objection is that she finds the initiative “...more along the lines of the tradition of *preserving* and *improving*, rather than the challenge of *rethinking* and *transforming*” [italics in the original] (Torres 2000: 141)

The word “rather” could suggest that Torres assumes that e.g. some, if not all, indigenous peoples want to be modernised. The critique concentrates on the indicators used in the assessment of the expected progress from 1990 to 2000: number of enrolments in schools with no recognition of the learning that takes place outside schools; indicators of learning are limited to the formal education sector, isolated from other areas (health, nutrition etc.); indicators for children’s and adult education still focus on literacy and indicators of education are still after 10 years centred on formal qualifications (Ibid., p. 142-143)

¹³ UNESCO has established a consultative EFA Forum to keep the EFA movement alive through a series of worldwide meetings that have taken place since 1990: 1991 in Paris, 1993 in Delhi, and 1996 in Amman. The mandate of the Forum is to support national initiatives as well as to encourage multilateral and bilateral donors and NGOs to involve themselves in the education policy in Third World countries (Adult Education and Development 55/2000: 30-31).

R.M. Torres pleads for a broader concept of “basic education” and a revised vision of the EFA initiatives if the intended goals are to be met. She highlights especially the dialectical relationship between teaching and learning in the sense that, traditionally, learning is assumed to take place automatically if the focus is on the teaching methods. Govinda from the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, agrees. To enhance the dynamic aspect of the change that the initiative is supposed to achieve, the aggregate indicators should be replaced by process indicators: “...such as changing policy environment, supportive legislative measures, civic society responses, intensified actions/programmes in the field, local community consultation processes, and improvement in the quality of teaching-learning processes” (Govinda in NORRAG NEWS 2000: 50).

R.M Torres advocates for more emphasis on the “*value and meaning of learning*” [italics in the original] (Torres 2000: 146). In order to do this, Torres finds it crucial to reassess the theoretical and practical meaning of lifelong learning by accepting that learning is not restricted to teaching or schooling, but the educational processes should as well be linked to social processes i.e. work, culture and daily life in general. The reaffirmation of the focus on learning is according to Torres the challenge ahead, and she argues for a new conceptual and operational framework (Ibid., p. 146-154). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that the language used in the two declarations does open up for a broader interpretation.

Main outcomes of the two “Education for All” conferences

Fifteen years after the first conference on Education for All, the problems concerning the justification for “universality” as well as the definition of how to understand “education” still remain unresolved. Thus, there are at least two conclusions that can be drawn from the above. One must be considered as negative and the other can be considered as positive.

First, the insufficient results in terms of the number of out of school children has increased by 13 mills. from 1990 to 2000 (King in NORRAG NEWS 2000: 1). In this regard it should be acknowledged, though, that several factors must be seen as contributing to this state of affairs: population growth, more complicated education needs e.g. information on HIV/AIDS and a changed dynamic relationship between education and political and economic processes in developing countries. However, the conceptual critique put forward by Torres’ mirrors the epistemological ethnocentrism that delimits education to “schooling” that reflects the Western understanding of the concept. The weight put on quantifiable indicators such as the emphasis on enrolment rates, statistics on efficiency, teaching performance, formal qualifications, education as isolated from other areas of daily life, are all measurements that are embedded in the

Western education culture, where education is supply-driven and to a great extent the responsibility of state institutions. Despite the focus on *quality* in the educational rhetoric over the decade between the two conferences, Torres draws attention to the lack of indicators in that respect. According to her the quantifiable indicators and “the race for numbers” reflect a restricted and conventional approach to education, more “associated with *expansion* than with *transformation*” [italics in the original], and that the time has come to “...build new scenarios and relationships, and define a new common sense for education and education reform” (Torres 2000, p. 148-149).

Thus the claim for a wider concept of education is the second conclusion that can be drawn from a scrutiny of the two declarations, an interpretation that might inspire some hope. The initial guiding principles and visions of the EFA Conferences invite all concerned with education to define a new, expanded paradigm for education. According to Torres a new operational and conceptual framework building on integration will help to transform Third World societies. At the operational level she pleads for an increased linkage between the different spheres that influence the lives of individuals and groups and hence the sectoral thinking must be rejected. Education should aim at preparing people for active citizenship in terms of insight in the socio-political and economic structures, as well as being considered as an integral part of a specific group’s culture.

For this to occur, Torres argues that it is absolutely crucial that the concept of education be broadened. The focus must shift from education to “learning” and not only rhetorically. This entails that all learning resources be respected: apart from the school it encompasses families (incl. inter-generational learning), nature, the whole community, media etc. It must be recognised that learning starts at birth and is demand driven, and not only the responsibility of the state. The rethinking of the concept also recognises that “...each group and community has specific realities, needs and resources that will shape specific educational and cultural projects” (Ibid., p. 151). Hence the expanded version of Education for All “...recognises the validity of all types of knowledge, including traditional knowledge” (Ibid., p. 152). Torres claims that for basic education to contribute to alleviation of poverty as well as to obtain social and political justice and equality, it is vital to develop a new mindset concerning education. (Ibid., p. 146-154).

Progressive educators like Rosa María Torres are willing to take the mainstream understanding of education a step further and re-interpret deeply rooted concepts. They acknowledge that “education”, “learning” and “knowledge” can mean one and the same according to the cultural milieu, and that different cultures, including indigenous cultures’ understanding of education as well as the value of their educational practices should receive recognition.

Cultural Rights and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Several international instruments, dating from the last 20 years of the 20th century, challenge the Western hegemony with the intensified focus on cultural diversity and recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. A scrutiny of selected international Human Rights Covenants, Declarations and Conventions from 1976-1995 illustrates a clear progression in the language over time from asserting indigenous' people's "...right to enjoy their own culture" to "...exercise control" and encouragement to "...revitalize their cultural traditions and customs". The intentions of validation and legitimisation of indigenous practices is followed by a demand for official informative and non-discriminatory picture of the different cultures. The respective governments' obligation to co-operate with indigenous peoples in the planning and implementation of all development-related activities is a further step towards full recognition of cultural disparity.

The good intentions in these declarations were followed up by the end of the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples in November- December 1998. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) convened a working group with the purpose of elaborating amendments to the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.¹⁴ Many delegates stressed the importance of involving the indigenous peoples themselves in activities that directly affect their cultures and livelihood. The Danish delegate emphasised that securing the rights of the indigenous peoples might be a difficult process, but "...it could not be completed without the full participation of those concerned, namely the indigenous peoples" (UN/ECOSOC 1999/82: 8). The High Commissioner also underlined the need for dialogue among all involved parties and "...encouraged governments to adopt a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples before the end of the Decade (2004)" (Ibid., p. 9). Few will contest the aspect of justice in the normative statements of the articles as well as the fairness of the appeal to governments, but they evoke more questions than they provide solutions.

Constraints in the Achievements of Cultural and Indigenous Rights.

The interpretation of rights declarations as well as achievement are problematic issues. Rodolfo Stavenhagen draws attention to the difficulties in the achievement of cultural and indigenous rights in multicultural societies, and asks in which areas it would be possible for minority and indigenous groups to exercise autonomy. He emphasises at least two constraints in this connection. The first problem derives from the difference in definitions. "Culture" can be defined as "accumulated material heritage" alias "cultural capital", or "the process of artistic and scientific creation" alias "cultural oeuvres" (Stavenhagen 1997: 152, 153); but Stavenhagen broadens the definition to "...the sum total of the material and spiritual activities and products of a given social group which distinguishes it from other similar groups" (Ibid., p. 154). This definition adds to the complexity

¹⁴ 47 governments, 47 indigenous organizations and 19 non-governmental organizations attended the meetings (UN Economic and Social Council 20 January 1999: 1).

of the question of rights. Stavenhagen points out that by using this broader definition it is difficult to encompass cultural rights in an adequate way in the existing declarations of rights. The principles of non-discrimination and equality as formulated in the various declarations "...basically relate to the rights of individuals" (Ibid., p. 157), and the applicability to other cultures than the Western has until recent years remained unquestioned. His argument is that for the declarations to be applicable in multicultural societies a collective approach is required. This again engenders the problem of "...who can claim these rights and to whom they are applicable" (Ibid., p. 157). Even if the rights of various minority groups appear in international declarations, it is still unclear what the different terms denote.

A second problem is linked to the cultural heterogeneity in many countries. The groups in the respective societies that wield power are normally the ones who "...decide the form and content of educational and cultural policies" (Ibid., p. 159), (cf. Fägerlind & Saha). The political power defines the national culture, and as Stavenhagen phrases it: "... then expects all other groups to conform to this model, even if that means, in the long run, the destruction of other cultures" (Ibid., p. 159).

Cultural heterogeneity causes great dilemmas in most cases of development. In the process of social change the governments strive towards homogenisation of the national culture, not least because of the pressure to adopt Western concepts in connection to adapting economic globalisation.

c) Neo-colonial demands

The third possible answer to Khun Wibun's statement could be sought in the world's political and economic configuration. The neo-liberal agenda places demands on state policies in the developing world, not least in the South East Asian Region with rapidly emerging markets. The state's claim to be the only legitimate body with the capacity to carry out education has created a hierarchy of knowledge, and the legitimacy of indigenous learning concept and practices is being further jeopardized by the present economic and cultural globalisation process. At the same time the quest for emancipation of oppressed groups is of more relevance at this time than ever before. The revival of the education discussion of critical pedagogy from the 1970s as crucial for the development of human potential applies to both the developed and developing world. The neo-liberal agenda has left its mark on the pedagogical debate. The visions for education are imbued with narrow demands of qualifications, competence building and competition mentality. According to Jan Hoby the education system is under massive attack from big international institutions such as OECD¹⁵ and

¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. International organization of 24 industrialised countries, which coordinates member states' economic policy strategies.

WTO¹⁶. Through legislation and agreements they push governments to standardise and adapt education systems to the neo-liberal agenda all over the world. Thus the countries' curricula are a direct result of this interference, and it is difficult to disagree with Hoby who finds it to be an unjust system, that dehumanises oppressed groups in any society.¹⁷

The promotion of “universalism” through market-friendly mechanisms by various international actors and agencies affect local and regional development on many levels, not least the strategy of human capital formation through educational programmes. The fourth globalisation process¹⁸ imposes itself through already existing channels of power. The main state actors at the global level are Japan, Germany and the United States. Together with the non-state global players, the Transnational Corporations (TNCs), and semi-state actors like the WTO, IMF¹⁹ and the World Bank and various UN agencies, are active worldwide. These global actors “...have been expanding their activities in accordance with their own interests and perceptions of human progress” and “...with capitalist values that they assume are good for all humankind” (Theeravit in Kaosa-ard & Dore 2003: 50)

The aid business with the IMF, World Bank and AsDB²⁰ as the most momentous lending and donor agencies is controlled by the capitalist West and Japan. The conditions attached to the loans and grants are most often claimed to be in the interest of the recipient countries. However, considering the lack of development space for marginalised people, the motives behind this substantial foreign aid is often badly disguised Western neo-liberal imperialism, and foreign aid is regarded by some political scientists as a Trojan Horse (Theeravit in Kaosa-ard & Dore 2003: 69).

How to avoid the “ebbing away” of indigenous people’s self-confidence?

Khun Wibun’s fear of loosing the indigenous identity could be prevented in different ways. To assist indigenous peoples in preserving their cultures by acknowledging their education concepts, several initiatives from various actors could be taken into account. Some approaches might apply to indigenous peoples

¹⁶ World Trade Organisation.

¹⁷ Jan Hoby: “Paulo Freires socialistiske ideer for et andet uddannelsessystem” [Paulo Freire’s socialist ideas of an alternative education system]. (Retrieved from www.kritiskdebat.dk/artikel.php?id=207 14.Oct.2005 p. 1-4).

¹⁸ According to Joel Spring the world has lived through 4 stages of colonisation with various actors. 1: Christianisation (Spanish Empire), 2: Civilising mission (British Empire and French colonisation), 3: Development and modernisation (United States Imperialism), 4: Transnational co-operations (Spring 2000:41).

¹⁹ The International Monetary Fund was established under the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, and has been operational since 1947.

²⁰ Asian Development Bank was founded in 1966 to stimulate growth in Asia and the far East by administering direct loans and technical assistance.

in general, and some initiatives might be determined by their status in the particular country.

“Indigenous peoples” has become an appealing term, and due to the attention from non-state and inter-state organisations it has become an international, legal concept. For some indigenous groups e.g. the Sami peoples in northern Scandinavia, their strong organisation and the support from international organisations have contributed to the creation of an institutional indigenous space (own university etc.). It should be remembered though that this particular group lives in developed, democratic countries where the state economically and politically “can afford” to leave space for indigenous groups. For indigenous peoples living within poor developing countries the reality is different. Some indigenous groups in other parts of the world have created their own associations whose purpose it is to advise the particular communities to adapt their lifestyle to a modernising world while at the same time preserving their cultural heritage. For these associations to have any effect they normally need support from different civil society organisations which can be problematic. In many- if not most - developing countries where civil society is very weak, local NGOs may not be allowed or they are strongly controlled by the state, and foreign NGOs operating in the country can be accused of neo-imperialism as they, to a great extent, derive their funds from the big donors and hence follow the ideology of domesticating indigenous peoples instead of nurturing a bi-or multicultural society.

At the state level a relaxation of sectoral thinking in many countries’ development processes could open opportunities towards a better use of both national and local resource persons and hence involve indigenous peoples in their own future. This again demands more room for manoeuvre for progressive educators, which might be utopian in very poor countries where the state’s institutional structures contribute to a perpetuation of a supply-driven education. A new mind-set where education becomes demand-driven is not sufficiently encouraged by the donor agencies on which most developing countries education programmes depend.

A liberation from mainstream thinking in terms of the many variations of “race for numbers” in education reports of different kinds from national and international consultants would enhance the chances for other concepts and practices of education, not only to be heard but to be validated. In that connection the indefatigable attempts from an increasing number of researchers and development workers within education who take time to listen and analyse the indigenous practices and conceptual relevance deserve attention from a wider audience who takes the spirit in the declaration of human rights seriously. Nonetheless, the economic and ideological role of donors in connection with international conferences on education issues should not be underestimated. The Education for All conferences held under the auspices of UNESCO promotes

supply-driven education and thereby sanction the beliefs that the state is the only provider of legitimate education.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the lack of legitimacy of indigenous education practices and concepts in education strategies in the South East Asian Region, and most likely in most developing countries, can be seen as a reflection of the dichotomy between an economistic and a humanistic approach. On the one hand the cultural and epistemological ethnocentrism, die-hard paradigms of the West and neo-colonial economic world order have contributed to increased polarisation and unevenness among the various cultures in the developing countries. Simultaneously, the West allocates funds to the developing world only on certain conditions, such as the observation of human rights, although problems in that respect have been left unresolved. On the other hand we see an indigenous discourse that contests the supremacy of the dominant paradigms, a discourse that is accepted as morally legitimate and a discourse, lead by indigenous intellectuals, who demand an equal say in their own development is gaining increasing recognition. The acknowledgement of cultural heterogeneity as a counter-hegemonic reality and hence legitimisation of indigenous education would turn the development discourse towards a more humanistic approach.

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