

Education Research in African Contexts

Traditions and New Beginnings
for Knowledge and Impact

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CHAPTER 2

Exploring teacher educator views on place and position of indigenous knowledge in the school curriculum using an indigenous methodology

Janet Ronoh, Paul Webb

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge, with its local focus and cultural attribute-sharing community (Petzold et al., 2020; Wheeler & Root-Bernstein, 2020; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999), forms a comprehensive system influencing beliefs and decision-making (France, 1997). There has been a global paradigm shift towards recognising and incorporating indigenous knowledge into formal education systems. However, despite global interest, integrating indigenous knowledge (IK) into formal education faces challenges, particularly in Africa (Msila, 2016; Higgs, 2016). One of these challenges is attributed to the paucity of dialogic indigenous methodologies to generate authentic responses from indigenous stakeholders (da Silva et al., 2023; Kolawole, 2022).

As such, this chapter describes and interrogates a dialogic indigenous methodology that was used to investigate teacher educators' perceptions of indigenous knowledge that could be incorporated into the school curriculum in Kenya and South Africa. The dialogic indigenous methodology that was used was the *Imbizo/Baraza* method developed for Janet Ronoh's 2017 M.Ed. study.

Kenya and South Africa were chosen as the settings for several reasons, not least that they are hubs for the East and South African Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA), a DAAD funded project of which Janet Ronoh was a scholarship holder.

Imbizo and Baraza

Imbizo is a Nguni word for a traditional community gathering called by the chief to solve pertinent community issues. Since the advent of democratic government in South Africa in 1994, the concept of *Imbizo* has been brought into the mainstream (Mabelebele, 2022). It denotes a participatory approach of engagement. It refers to the gathering of people sharing a common nationhood, clan or religion, with a view to discussing issues affecting their development as a group. A *Baraza* is similar to an *Imbizo* and commonly practised in Kenya, which, considering that the Xhosa and

Nandi were part of the Nguni people who migrated from sub-equatorial Central/East Africa along the eastern part of Africa in their southward migration, is not surprising. Consequently, in both instances the *Imbizo* and *Baraza* sessions in this study were called by a senior member of the community (usually the chief, but in the context of the investigation, the Dean of Education in each case) to discuss the prompt stories offered both in the vernacular and English (see below) as well as issues around incorporating indigenous knowledge in the school curriculum.

Both *Imbizos* and *Barazas*, in South Africa and Kenya respectively, advocate for a dialogic community participatory approach in matters of governmental or cultural importance. The underpinnings of the *Imbizo/Baraza* methodology are to provide a safe, comfortable, and culturally recognisable environment.

Research problem

Authors like Higgs (2016) emphasise the importance of addressing issues related to the inclusion of indigenous knowledge (IK) in the school curriculum, particularly within the African context, with questions such as ‘what IK should be learnt?’ and ‘how should knowledge be organized for teaching?’ as well as ‘what and how much of the content of indigenous African knowledge systems should be included in the curriculum?’ and ‘how shall this incorporation take place?’ These are pivotal questions in discussions about curriculum reconstruction in Africa which have not been satisfactorily answered (Higgs, 2016).

In this context, arising from the fact that indigenous people are widely recognised as the principal custodians of their culture and knowledge, finding fruitful methodologies that generate authentic information from indigenous teacher educators for shaping the integration of IK into education is important. However, as noted above, a central challenge is the absence of a clearly defined indigenous methodology for eliciting indigenous knowledge from authoritative sources (da Silva et al., 2023; Kolawole, 2022; Higgs, 2016).

Consequently, this chapter, which is part of a larger study on perceptions of the place and position of indigenous knowledge, interrogates an alternative methodology used for investigating teacher educator perceptions concerning indigenous knowledge for inclusion in the school curricula in Kenya and South Africa.

The question focused on in this chapter is ‘Do academics perceive the *Imbizo/Baraza* methodology used in Ronoh’s (2017) thesis for data generation as valuable?’ In other words, ‘do they consider it to be practically pertinent for research and culturally and contextually relevant?’ The objective of this chapter is, therefore, to highlight whether teacher educators found the *Imbizo/Baraza* method useful as a research methodology when they used it themselves and whether it generated data that could be considered reliable. The reason for seeking answers to the above objective and research question is that the insights gained should provide information that

could assist curriculum developers and teacher educators in making an informed decision as to the value of using an alternative methodology in African contexts when appropriate, namely the *Imbizo/Baraza* method.

Research design

This descriptive case study is underpinned by the view that the dialogic interaction allows the refining of intersubjective knowledge and informed consensus construction (Lopez de Aguilera et al., 2021). In order to stimulate the dialogic opportunity (the *Imbizo* and the *Baraza*), two short local contentious historical stories, written in English and translated to the local languages, were written as stimulus material for discussion during the *Imbizo/Baraza* interaction (which can be considered as culturally modified focus group discussions). As noted earlier, *Imbizo* is a Xhosa term understood by Xhosa people to refer to a meeting held at the chief or traditional leader's homestead when there is an issue to be discussed openly by the community members. The equivalent of an *Imbizo* in Kenya is called a *Baraza*. In this study, the *Baraza* and the *Imbizo* were used as a methodology for data generating as a form of modified focus group discussion in Kenya and South Africa.

The participants of the *Imbizo/Baraza* were given the stories in both paper-based and electronic text form and asked to read the story a week before attending an *Imbizo/Baraza*. The *Imbizo/Baraza* sessions included a discussion of the story and then discussions were held about the type, place and position of IK that could be incorporated in the school curriculum. This design was used to probe deeper understanding of the views and opinions of participants using the *Imbizo/Baraza* methodology as it allows stakeholders to freely engage in dialogue with reflective insights into their identification with the *Imbizo/Baraza* method when discussing IK and its value in relation to their history and the school curriculum. After the time for reading the stories had passed (a week) the dean at each institution called the participants to join in the *Imbizo/Baraza* process.

Methods

As noted above, the data gathering strategies for the study were *Imbizo/Baraza* focus group dialogues, which were followed by individual interviews of a sample of the *Imbizo/Baraza* participants. The sampling technique used was purposive, with the aim of working with a sample size of 5-10 academics in each of the two universities' Education Faculties/Schools of Education who identify as Xhosa or Nandi. The research employed a descriptive case study research design and relied on qualitative data generated by the *Imbizo/Baraza* discussions that were then transcribed and translated for thematic analysis according to Tesch's method of open coding (Creswell, 2005).

Samples and settings

The study sites were the Nelson Mandela University and Moi University in South Africa and Kenya respectively. The reason for choosing these two universities is that both are part of the DAAD funded CERM-ESA project. Both universities have staff that is generally ethnically/culturally heterogeneous but there is one cultural/language group at each university which is indigenous to that area and also comprises the biggest group at each university. The investigation included 5-10 academics from these cultural/language groups in each of the two Faculties/Schools of Education representing both genders and a range of ages. In other words, the participants were all mother-tongue speakers of isiXhosa (Nelson Mandela University) and Nandi (Moi University). As such, the two universities provided cases of study that have similar institutional structures and situated in areas of each country that has a distinct ethnic majority.

As noted earlier, two short historical stories, written in English and translated to local languages, isiXhosa and Nandi respectively, were provided as stimulus material for the modified focus group discussion. The stories were about culturally sensitive topics and were translated into the local languages to enhance their authenticity and to capture any cultural meaning that might be lost when presented in English. The story items chosen were the historical/political issues of the cattle killing of 1856 by the AmaXhosa in the Eastern Cape of South Africa (for South African respondents) and the Nandi Resistance led by the Nandi warrior Koitalel Arap Samoei against the British in 1905 (for the Kenyan respondents). Both stories have powerful emotional impact and resonance amongst the Xhosa and Nandi people, respectively.

As noted, once the participants had read the story, the Deans of Education in each case called an *Imbizo* or a *Baraza*. The audio recorded discussion was guided by an open-ended protocol provided to the *Imbizo/Baraza* discussion leader (the dean) at the beginning of the sessions that emphasised the importance of everyone in the group contributing equally to the discussion and being included in a culturally 'safe' environment. In other words, being able to contribute within their cultural expectations within a culturally homogenous group (that is, members of the Xhosa or Nandi groupings). The *Imbizo/Baraza* approach was used as an attempt to 'Africanise' what were essentially focus group discussions and the stories were used as stimulus materials to encompass the studies within an indigenous and dialogic context.

Only the vernacular was used for discussions, a meal was served consisting of traditional cuisine, and all present at the *Imbizo/Baraza* were encouraged to participate and share their positions on the story that they had read as well as on issues of the relevance, place and position of indigenous knowledge in the school curriculum. No non-Xhosa or Nandi people were present. The sessions were recorded, then transcribed and translated by Xhosa and Nandi home language speakers.

The stimulus

The Xhosa story, written in English by one of the authors of this chapter, was translated by an isiXhosa native speaker and proofread by an elder isiXhosa speaker (respected and knowledgeable community member) to ensure that meaning was not lost in the process of translation. The English version of the Nandi resistance story, also written by one of the authors, was translated by the other researcher who is a Nandi native and who has full command of the Nandi language. The translation was proofread by a Nandi elder to ensure that meaning had also been preserved in the process of translation.

Conundrum of the cattle killing

The story used, namely the 'Conundrum of the Xhosa cattle killing', is a version of a well-known Xhosa historical event written in English by Jeff Peires, an eminent historian and advisor in Xhosa cultural issues (mostly royal genealogy). The story is about how two strangers appeared to two girls, one named Nongqawuse, in a field near the river. The strangers told the girls to go home and tell the whole Xhosa nation that their ancestors would rise from the dead and healthy, great herds of fat cattle would appear, the grain pits would be filled, and the white man would be driven from Xhosa land into the sea forever, but only if all living cattle were killed and no new crops sown. When Nongqawuse went back home and told this to her uncle, Mkhalaza, whose reputation as a prophet was growing, the word was believed and spread. Xhosa King Sarhili kaHintsisa ordered the Xhosa people to kill their cattle with the expectation of a great uprising on 3 January 1857, when the sun would rise in the west.

On the expected day, nothing happened. The sun rose in the east. Thousands starved to death; survivors set off for the white towns where they signed contracts with Sir George Grey's administration for farm labour in exchange of food. The Xhosa people lost much of their land to the colonial government.

This cultural story has deep resonance with the Xhosa people and that is why it was used as a stimulus to encourage the participants to reflect on their indigenous experiences and focus on valued isiXhosa IK, talk about where in the curriculum IK should be positioned in the recognised subjects and grades, and suggest principles that should guide its integration in the curriculum.

The Nandi resistance

The Nandi resistance is a story that is told by Nandi elders about how the Nandi community resisted colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a military conflict between the British army and the Nandi community warriors that took place between 1890 and 1906. The Nandi were a dominant community that resisted the British efforts to build the Uganda railway through their land in

1899. The Nandi community used guerrilla warfare to attack and raid the Europeans through the leadership of the Nandi prophet Koitalel Arap Samoei.

Koitalel became a powerful Nandi leader who led an eleven-year resistance movement against the railway construction. The British Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen believed that the death of Samoei would lead to the death of the Nandi resistance and, on 19 October 1905, Koitalel was asked to meet Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen under the guise of negotiating a truce. However, when the Nandi arrived to meet, he was assassinated in cold blood together with his 22 chief advisors.

The Nandi became disorganized after the death of their prophet, they were overpowered by the whites and relocated. It is believed that this led to the unjust eviction of the Nandi people from their original lands to the reserves and finally they lost their land to European settlement. As with the Xhosa participants, this story was used to get participants to think and reflect on valued IK experiences in the Nandi community and their place and position in the school curriculum.

Data analysis

As noted earlier, the research employed a descriptive case study research design and the data generated from the *Imbizo* and the *Baraza* and the individual interviews were categorised, coded and thematically analysed using the Tesch method (Creswell, 2005). Biographic, close-ended and Likert scale questions used in the larger study by Ronoh (2017) provided descriptive statistics but are not commented on in this chapter.

Findings

The data suggest that the two cultural stories captured the participants' attention and stimulated discussion on IK and the school curriculum during the *Imbizo* and *Baraza*, and that the *Imbizo/Baraza* processes were a useful methodology in terms of generating dialogic interaction towards indigenous knowledge. As one *Imbizo* participant said:

"It brought back old memories ... what the Imbizo did was to get us think about it again and look at it from different angles and get to hear what the other people think about the story because that is what is being lacking everybody else has his own ways of interpreting the story." (The conundrum of the cattle killing)

Another participant expressed how the *Imbizo* allowed free sharing of ideas about and perceptions of indigenous knowledge. He said:

"Okay starting with the Imbizo itself, Imbizo ... [silence] as an indigenous way of meeting and gathering information and ideas was very much meaningful to me. It sets ... a tone where people can express themselves freely and ... it allows for example for the outflow of ideas from one's mind and in the process, it affords one an opportunity to get

to know how do other people that are part of Imbizo perceive what you understand as an individual. So, it ... it allows for some kind of sharing of ideas. Yaah."

A majority of the participants agreed that as one can best express experiences in the way they were learnt, and because most people learn IK and culture in indigenous languages, it was good that they were able to express themselves in their mother tongues. An *Imbizo* respondent affirmed that by saying:

"Obviously it is clear that if we were talking about our African experiences [during Imbizo], and those experiences cannot be carried on or expressed in English language. Because what happens is ... the terminology you know, and the way you remember or the way you experienced that. You know you would still need to find a way of explaining it in English which is not really what you wanted to say."

In terms of the *Baraza*, one Nandi participant said:

"I think we were able to discuss better our cultural experiences and indigenous knowledge that eeh that we went through while we were young on the same level."

Another Kenyan said:

"I remember asking my colleague the English name for 'teliat' [traditionally dried meat] and 'irokwet' [a medicinal herb] and he said that you can't find an exact substitute word in English. Language was not a barrier to our discussion and so for me I think the Nandi part of the discussion helped us to share our understanding of ... okay ... Nandi values yaah and cultural knowledge deeply."

A Nandi academic argued that such forums can be used to come up with knowledge that can be proposed to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) for integration.

"Actually ... Baraza like the one we had can be used by the senior faculty members to propose to KICD the common IK content and knowledge that can be integrated in the curriculum ... syllabus, otherwise the coming generation will have lost that knowledge as you can see. You can see even some lecturers are finding a problem with indigenous eeh language."

All of the South African participants attested that when they used their indigenous language in the *Imbizo* it inspired them to trace their cultural roots and IK, as noted by Msila (2016). They also proposed that a follow-up *Imbizo* and a joint book and newsletter publications of indigenous knowledge that arose from their discussions be considered.

"There are important views that have been raised here [in the Imbizo]. If we just leave them, they will disappear into thin air."

“Beyond this Imbizo we can sit and plan how we can capture all these and make it a project.”

“We must meet and have our own Imbizo and extend this discussion. I propose a book. We can have solid chapters.”

“We can have a book with stories aiming at little children. And we can have an academic book.”

“It’s our history [Nongqawuse and the cattle killing story]. The only problem is that it was not written by and owned by isiXhosa speakers.”

The following is a response from a participant in the research process and it highlights the forum that the *Imbizo/Baraza* process affords:

“Old folks no longer tell these stories to children. Not much has been written clearly about such stories of the Nandi community. What is available is in a few books available to scholars only. No forum for internalizing those [sic] kind of knowledge.”

Another participant commented on the lack of documentation of indigenous knowledge:

“I remember our parents telling us tongoch? cho!! [an introduction part of a Nandi riddle] and sometimes I would like to remember some of those Nandi riddles but there is no document that you can reference such important knowledge in school.”

In terms of the reliability (or authenticity) of the findings on the types of indigenous knowledge that could/should be incorporated in the school curriculum, the concordance with the findings of other research in this area (e.g. da Silva et al., 2023; Webb, 2013) reflects the efficacy of the *Imbizo/Baraza* methodology. Similar themes were brought up as documented in the literature.

Interrogation of data from both cases (South Africa and Kenya) revealed that participants generally understood IK as local knowledge unique to a culture, a way of knowing, experiential knowledge and ‘special’ knowledge embedded in local languages, and that the participants valued local languages, history and culture, agricultural and environmental skills, herbal medicine and science and technological skills. Themes such as arts, language and science also emerged. Suggested principles that could guide integration of IK into school curriculum were also presented. Principles noted included political influence, knowledge demarginalisation, knowledge relevance and developmental appropriateness. Lastly, as noted earlier, the value of the *Imbizo/Baraza* as African methodologies emerged. Generally, there was a call by the respondents for inclusion and appropriation of various IK items in the school curriculum content, all of which appear in literature on indigenous knowledge (da Silva et al., 2023), including emphasis on the need to establish

intercultural dialogue between traditional community leaders and educators and the need for an indigenous dialogic methodology (e.g. Cortesão & Cuale, 2011).

A participant said, “*language was not a barrier to our discussion and so ... the Nandi part of the discussion helped us to share our understanding of ... okay ... Nandi values yaah and cultural knowledge deeply*”. All of the Kenyan participants commented positively on the *Baraza* approach to IK research, stating that it upholds the heritage of the community in the academic field. They proposed that the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should take advantage and use such forums to select common relevant IK content for integration into the school curriculum.

Generally, participants from both cases revealed that it is difficult to share IK experiences and culture purely in a second language like English because culture is symbolic (Shava, 2016), and said that even if it can be done, “*you find that the context of the knowledge like the proverbs, folktales, riddles etc. gets distorted*”. All of the participants called for the use of the African methodologies to enhance and contextualize African research. These findings concur with Higgs (2016), who points out that an African philosophy of education needs to empower communities to participate in their educational development by enhancing the experiences of the learners and teachers. The participants’ conception of the *Imbizo/Baraza* as an African methodology conforms with Shizha’s (2013) notion that pedagogical practices that integrate history are conducive to a reconstructed curriculum that incorporates reality as perceived from different culturally historical moments.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the value of utilizing indigenous methodologies, such as the *Imbizo* in South Africa and the *Baraza* in Kenya, to gather insights on indigenous knowledge (IK) in the context of the school curriculum. The South African participants unanimously regarded the *Imbizo* as a novel and appropriate means of collecting information on IK, emphasising its contextual relevance and effectiveness compared to standard focus-group interviews. They appreciated how the *Imbizo* facilitated a dynamic exchange of IK ideas among participants, fostering a deeper understanding of common IK issues. As one participant reflected, the *Imbizo* reignited memories and offered diverse perspectives on shared stories, enriching their interpretations.

Moreover, participants highlighted the significance of using their indigenous languages during the *Imbizo*, as it facilitated a connection with their cultural heritage and stimulated discussions on IK. This aligns with Msila’s (2016) assertion regarding the importance of language in tracing cultural roots and preserving IK. Additionally, participants proposed follow-up *Imbizos* and collaborative publications to document the IK discussed, recognising the need to safeguard and disseminate this knowledge.

Similarly, in the Kenyan context, the *Baraza* emerged as a fitting method for exploring participants' attitudes and experiences related to IK in the school curriculum. Like their South African counterparts, Kenyan participants emphasised the importance of using their local language, Nandi, during discussions to authentically convey traditional cultural concepts and experiences. They viewed the *Baraza* as a means of upholding community heritage within the academic realm and suggested its integration into curriculum development processes by institutions like the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD).

The findings from both cases underscored the limitations of conveying IK solely in a second language like English, as it may lead to the distortion of cultural nuances and expressions. Participants advocated for the utilization of African methodologies to enhance and contextualize educational research, aligning with the principles of an African philosophy of education outlined by Higgs (2016). This resonates with Shizha's (2013) perspective on pedagogical practices that integrate historical and cultural realities into curriculum development, emphasising the importance of acknowledging diverse cultural perspectives.

In conclusion, the utilization of indigenous methodologies such as the *Imbizo* and *Baraza* offers valuable insights into IK and its integration into the school curriculum. These approaches not only facilitate meaningful dialogue and knowledge exchange but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage within educational contexts. Moving forward, there is a need for continued exploration and adoption of African methodologies to enrich educational practice and empower communities in shaping their educational development.

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