

Cultural Influence Militating Against Effective Data Collection in the Field: The Case of Two African Countries

Michael Bamidele Adeyemi

*Department of Languages & Social Sciences Education, University of Botswana,
P. O. Box UB 70291, Gaborone, Botswana
Fax: (267) 3815096; E-mail: adeyemim@mopipi.ub.bw*

KEYWORDS Culture. Effect. Belief. Research. Data. Nigeria. Botswana

ABSTRACT This paper investigates the cultural influences/problems militating against effective data collection in the field from the experience of 25 and 27 final year students of Social Studies education in Botswana and Nigeria, respectively. A questionnaire administered on these final year students with some of their accompanying comments indicate the following cultural problems they encountered in the field in order of priority: lack of cooperation to sensitive questions, inflation/deflation of actual data, total non-response, suspicion of the data collectors by respondents, and a sort of traditional diplomacy to answering questions. On the basis of these findings, the pertinent implications for teacher education such as curriculum development, teaching strategies and the need for further research were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Most countries in the world aspire to educate their citizens to participate effectively in their various societies. In line with the United Nations' call that education should be the right of the individuals, Nigeria and Botswana have also been participating in educating children in what is termed the basic education of their citizens. Nigeria, with an estimated population of 140 million people is situated in West Africa while Botswana with an estimated population of 1.7 million people is located in Southern Africa. The choice of these two countries is deliberate because of the author's familiarity with both, having taught and researched in Social Studies education at the University level for at least ten years in each of the two countries. As a result, Social Studies education, its students and the problems associated with data collection in the field will be the focus of this paper.

Social Studies education is offered in the education systems of both countries at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. At the university level in Botswana and Nigeria, the final year students in the BED (Social Studies) programme are expected to submit a research project as part of the requirements for the award of the Bachelor of Education (BED) degree in Social Studies education. This is in addition to an exposure on some theoretical and practical courses during their initial years at the

universities. These courses normally include foundation courses in education, courses on the theory and nature of social studies, teaching practice, if necessary, and some related courses in general education. The research project aspect in the social studies project requires students to use their training in all the courses to have a researchable topic, write the problem statement, generate objectives and if necessary the relevant hypotheses, design the study, collect and analyse data, and provide some findings and conclusions. The final stage is the submission of the finished project to the assigned supervisors of the students for assessment. These social studies students are bound to face some problems while collecting data for their research projects. These challenges or problems of data collection are many, but this paper focuses on the cultural problems militating against the effective collection of data in the field.

Objectives of the Paper

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Investigate the cultural problems associated with data collection in the field; and
2. Provide some implications of the findings for teacher education.

Brief Literature Review

The need to be able to carry out research in

order to build on existing knowledge base and also to contribute to knowledge is regarded as part of education. Dewey (1933, 1938), Engle (1960), Schon (2001), and various government documents (Republic of Botswana 1977, 1994; Presidential Task Group 1997; Republic of Nigeria 1977, 1994, 2001), all advocate for the preparation of the citizen who would be able to think reflectively and participate in a free democratic setting, among others. Social Studies students are by their preparation required to demonstrate the ability to collect data and analyse those data for the advancement of knowledge.

Adeyemi (2005, 2001) and Honey (2000) have highlighted the problems of culture in data collection with reference to some practices in certain settings. While data collection procedures have their in-built challenges during the collection stage, many cultures see certain questionnaire items or interview items 'unwelcome' in some traditional settings. Culture, as described in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1993; 334) connotes the ideas, beliefs and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a society. It is any practice which is tied to the norm of the society to keep it going. For instance, census and other research instruments may require some bibliographic data such as dates of birth, surnames, and numbers of wives and children of subjects in selected samples.

In some African cultures, reliable data on these variables may be difficult to come by simply because of traditional practices. Apart from the fact that many older generations do not know exactly when they were born, culture may frown at asking questions on dates of births, surnames, causes of death of relatives and other 'no-go' data of elders. In many cases, taboos are beneficial to the society to deter youth from misbehaving or engaging in some unacceptable acts. While some of the taboos contribute positively to the effective development of the society, some actually are militating against contribution to knowledge, and in this case, data collection in the field.

The sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, the medical sciences, to mention a few significantly depend on data for the advancement of the society. York-Barr et al. (2001) believe that exploration leads to discovery. To discover, a research has to explore by first of all collecting data, analyzing and then making some findings. In this modern era of finding solutions to

problems, collection of data is highly necessary for arriving at valid conclusions. While the collection of data may be difficult because of certain factors such as fund, equipment, terrain, time, bureaucracy, and large population, the cultural problems associated with data collection in the field forms the basis of this paper. As an instance, Adeyemi (2001: 54) gives an illustration of the problem faced by some secondary school students:

On the collection of data in the locality by secondary students on the topic "Traditional Marriage Ceremonies in my Village", teachers might expect students to design a questionnaire and use resource people, usually elders, as subjects. Some personal data on the elders, such as name, age, the numbers of their wives and children, might form some of the questionnaire items. Although questions dealing with such data may be acceptable in Western societies, there are problems with asking African elders questions concerning their names, ages and the numbers of wives and children they have. For instance, it is rude to call an elder by name. Culturally, he or she is either "mama" or "papa". In fact, many African societies forbid the young ones to ask elders such questions: elders would regard the investigators as uncultured.

The above summarises the dilemma of any researcher who tries to collect data in any 'closed' society in Africa where attachment to old tradition persists. With respect to assumed cultural problems of data collection in the field, how do final year social students both in Botswana and Nigeria fare?

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from 25 final year students of Social Studies education at a University in Botswana and 27 final year students at a University in Nigeria. These subjects were sufficient for quantitative analysis. The methodology adopted is appropriate for this study. The researcher based in Botswana provided a blank paper in form of a questionnaire titled *Cultural Problems Encountered by Final Year Students in Collecting Data for their Final Year Project*. The paper requested the final year students to write as many cultural problems they faced in the field while collecting data for their final year social studies projects. Further, the respondents were requested to comment freely on the cultural influences milita-

ting against effective data collection as experienced in the field and identified on the blank 'questionnaire' by them. Copies of the 'Questionnaire' were mailed to a counterpart in Nigeria who was also teaching final year social studies students to help administer on his students. As mentioned earlier, 25 responses were returned from Botswana while 27 questionnaires were received by mail from Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 52 final year social studies students (25 and 27 from Botswana and Nigeria respectively) provided information on their experiences concerning cultural problems associated with data collection in the field. Data were categorized into themes according to their relationship with the cultural problems. Table 1 summarises the findings from the analysed data.

The most identified cultural problem against data collection in the field, according to the written responses of the social studies students in the two cultures, focuses on the non-cooperation of those under study. All the 25 (100%) and the 27 (100%) final year students of social studies, both in Botswana and Nigeria, concur to the fact that respondents or subjects under study usually do not cooperate while answering sensitive questions or questionnaire items. Comments received from the two cultures by one of the final year students in each culture that follow tend to support this finding.

Botswana

The comment in italics is an answer to a question by a final year student who was researching on 'Voter Apathy in a Selected District' to a prospective aged voter on whether he would participate in the next election by exercising his right to vote.

You are asking me whether I would vote during the next election. Of what use is the vote I cast about three years ago? Has that translated

into a better life for me? At my old age and with the grey hair on my head, I cannot be standing in a long queue as I did last time. Culturally, you should respect old age.

Nigeria

In the same vein, a final year social studies student submitted the response of a subject in her area of study when questioned on his family size.

It is forbidden for you to enter my compound to count the number of wives and children inside here. We are 88 people living here. No more, no less.

The two examples of the comments made by the respondents encountered in the field by the final year students indicate the type of uncooperative attitudes of subjects under study in any research endeavour. Invariably, all the 25 and 27 students in both countries have in one way or the other experienced cases of non-cooperation to sensitive questions. This seems to be a typical experience of data collectors particularly when it does not involve immediate monetary gain or in situations involving data 'cover-up'.

Second cultural influence on data collection has to do with inflation or deflation of data. While 23 (or 92%) of final year students in Botswana encountered this problem, their 26 (or 96%) counterparts also experienced the problem. Questions soliciting the age of respondents were not welcomed in both cultures. To avoid the primary investigator knowing the actual ages of subjects, inflation or deflation of ages was the result. As an example, subjects do not usually give their exact ages. Rather, they deliberately turn to events such as World War I or II, the coronation of a specific traditional ruler, the visit of a queen or king of England to their countries, and also the time of the death of popular warriors to estimate their birthdays, wedding day etc. This method will probably lead to inflation or deflation of ages or the variables being investigated. The

Table 1: Cultural problems associated with data collection in the field

Cultural problems	Botswana	Nigeria	Total	Rank
Non-Cooperation to sensitive questions	25 (100%)	27 (100%)	52 (100%)	1
Inflation/Deflation of actual data	23 (92%)	26 (96%)	49 (94%)	2
Total non-response	20 (80%)	19 (70%)	39 (75%)	3
You have come again	15 (60%)	12 (48%)	27 (52%)	4
Traditional diplomacy to answers	5 (20%)	9 (33%)	14 (27%)	5

identification of this cultural problem on data collection in the field ranks second by the 49 students in the two environments.

The third cultural problem adduced by 20 (80%) and 19 (70%) students from Botswana and Nigeria respectively, focuses on total non-response of subjects. The reason behind the non-response is unknown and this calls for further investigation. One may suspect the position of the respondents to the saying that 'silence is golden' and that 'I have not said that' when a situation becomes a legal tussle, associated with verbal quotation.

The fourth problem relates to a situation where the respondents have been used as subjects before. They have answered questions from investigators in the past and were expecting an improvement in their communities. More often than not, investigators in the field usually 'lured' respondents into answering questions. During census enumeration for example, data collectors usually inform subjects of the pending benefits of census such as infrastructural development in the community. When governments fail to embark on such infrastructural developments, respondents also fail to cooperate during another data collection exercise. Such respondents usually refer to the saying of 'You have come again' to the data collectors. This problem is alluded to by 16 (60%) and 12 (48%) of students in Botswana and Nigeria respectively.

The final category of the problems is on the traditional diplomacy to answers by respondents. Africa is a continent that is very rich in proverbs, which can also be referred to as the 'sayings of the wise'. The problem of getting specific and straightforward answers to questions becomes problematic because an investigator may find it difficult to ascribe particular answers to questions. One is left to 'decode' and further translate what the respondents actually mean. Collection of data on such a sensitive topic as 'Mortality in the Family' is bound to attract suspicion and a sort of non-cooperation. Answers to causes of death of the number of family members who have died during a specific period of time may be difficult to come by, depending on the respondents. Let us take the scenario below where an investigator is asking of the time of the death of an elderly family member:

Final Year Social Studies Student: When did Mr. A die?

Elderly Respondent: Mr. A did not die. He

only changed his physical body on the day of the coronation of the present traditional ruler.

Final Year Student: What does 'changing of the physical body mean?

Elderly Respondent (Speaking in the Yoruba language of Nigeria): *Eni ku, eni ku*. He called the eldest son of the deceased, showed him to the final year student and said – *Ewo enu ile, ewo enu oko*. The literal translation here is that the deceased did not die at all. By showing the eldest son who looked exactly like the deceased to the investigator translates to the belief that the deceased is still very much alive.

To be able to obtain reliable data based on the traditional diplomacy by the elderly respondent as to the time of death of the deceased, further investigation is necessary to arrive at the day of the coronation of the present traditional ruler. The answer to the time of death of the deceased is becoming more complex because the investigator must carry out another research to determine the day when the traditional ruler was coronated. One other unanswered question is 'Did Mr. A die or not?' This type of cultural problem in data collection was identified by 5 (20%) and 9 (33%). In certain cases, data collection is difficult as a result of traditional belief related to 'certain no-go' information areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the cultural influences inhibiting data collection in the field may not be problematic in certain cultures of the world, they still persist to a large extent in some developing world. These problems may have direct impact on the proper interpretation of research findings in many cultures of the world. In order for teachers to be aware of this pit falls, there are implications for the pre-service and in-service education of social studies teachers and teachers in general. The findings of this paper calls for improvement or reform in the following key areas: curriculum development and the need for further studies.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum of teacher training institutions should take cognizance of the taboos and the cultural practices of communities. Topics and themes on the different communities in which the teachers will serve upon graduation, should be handled in the pre-service and in-service

programmes of the teacher candidates. Elements of the culture and how to demarcate facts from taboos and the art of decision making should form part of the curriculum of the teacher training institutions. The different strategies of dealing with controversial issues in the classroom situation may also form part of the teaching process while documents such as the syllabi, the teachers' guides, the scheme of work and how to effectively evaluate the outcomes of the teaching-learning process may receive emphasis. Courses related to cultures and belief systems of communities should form part of the curriculum of the teacher training institutions.

Need for Further Investigations

There is hardly any community that does not have its belief system. Definitely, the African belief system has some impact in the way data collection is effected in some countries. A call is being made on further research in African belief system and the way different beliefs and practices can impact on collection of data and the results emanating from the findings. It is not being suggested that beliefs and taboos in African are by themselves negative, what is being suggested is how the practices can enhance the positive research environment. The following questions are worth investigating. To what extent are taboos hindering or contributing to development research in a given community? Are the cultural practices of the community complimenting the national vision? How are the practices in one community similar or different to those of the other communities? Are there certain gains that can accrue to the inhabitants? These and other related questions

may go a long way in contributing to the much needed data on various local communities.

REFERENCES

- Adeyemi MB 2005. Teachers and the cultural barriers impeding reflective practice and inquiry in junior secondary schools in Botswana and Nigeria. *Journal of the International Society for Teacher Education*, 9: 42-54.
- Adeyemi MB 2001. Limitations of the inquiry technique in the teaching of social studies in African schools. *Journal of Professional Studies*, 8: 50-57.
- Dewey J 1933. *How We Think*. Boston: Heath.
- Dewey J 1938. *Experience and Education*. 6th Edition. New York: Macmillan.
- Engle SH 1960. Decision making: The heart of social studies instruction. *Social Education*, 21: 301-306.
- Honey J 2000. The language of social studies teaching in Africa. In: MB Adeyemi (Ed.): *Social Studies in African Education*. Gaborone: Pyramid Publishing, pp. 25-33.
- Longman Group Ltd. 1933. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Essex, England: Longman House.
- Presidential Task Group 1997. *Long-Term Vision for Botswana*. Gaborone: Presidential Task Group for a Long Term Vision for Botswana.
- Republic of Botswana 1977. *Education for Kagisano. (Report of the National Commission on Education)*. Gaborone: Government Printer.
- Republic of Botswana 1994. *Revised National Policy on Education*. Gaborone: Government Printer.
- Republic of Nigeria 1977. *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: Government Printers
- Republic of Nigeria 1981. *Revised National Policy on Education*. Lagos: Government Printers.
- Republic of Nigeria 2001. *Vision 2020*. Abuja: Government Printers.
- Schon DA 2001. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- York-Barr J, Sommers WA, Ghere GS, Montie J (Eds.) 2001. *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide to Educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.