

**The Nyae Nyae Village Schools:
15 Years of Mother Tongue Education
for an Indigenous Community**

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Introduction

The Ju|'hoansi are one community of *San*, (also known as *Bushmen*, or *Basarwa* in Botswana). The San are the indigenous peoples of Namibia, who formerly survived from hunting and gathering. Today they live mostly in small, scattered settlements in remote areas, or are farm workers. While other ethnic groups in southern Africa are also marginalized, the San are everywhere at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Many San see the formal education system as their only hope for accessing greater economic opportunity and gaining control over their lives, but the participation of San children in government schools across southern Africa has largely been characterized by very high drop-out rates. There are many reasons why this is so; an important one has to do with the lack of mother tongue, and culturally appropriate education for San children.

The Nyae Nyae Ju|'hoansi live in northeastern Namibia, in what is now the Nyae Nyae Conservancy (established 1998), approximately a quarter of their original territory. Tsumkwe is the main town in the center of the Conservancy, and the location of all government offices and the government school, Tsumkwe Junior Secondary School (TJSS). Tsumkwe town has a population of about 1000, and roughly 1000 more people live in about 35 scattered villages within the Conservancy borders. All of the Conservancy members and most of the village residents are Ju|'hoansi. In Tsumkwe town itself (which is not technically part of the Conservancy) there also live a number of non-Ju|'hoansi, including government employees, development workers, and people from neighboring areas who start small businesses in the town.

The Nyae Nyae Village Schools were begun in 1993 as private initiative to provide the opportunity for Ju|'hoansi(San) children of the Tsumkwe district of Namibia to have access to education in their own language, close to their own communities, for the first three years of education. The progressive and flexible educational policies of the Namibian government has allowed for Ju|'hoan youth from the community to be employed as teachers even if they were not formally qualified, and to obtain their qualifications through in-service training. Language materials have been developed in Ju|'hoansi and are in use in the Nyae Nyae Village Schools, making it the only place where a San language is used for the first three years of education.

These presentations will take a look at the Nyae Nyae Village Schools 15 years after their inception. What is happening now? What are some challenges and successes? What

were the original goals? How have these goals been met? How have they shifted over time? What is the level of community participation in the Village Schools? What processes have the Nyae Nyae community, the schools, and supporting institutions (including the Ministry of Education, donors, and involved Non-Government Organizations) gone through in the past 15 years? How can the Village Schools be an example for other indigenous communities in southern Africa? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this session.

Cwisa Cwi

I am a Ju|'hoansi San from Namibia. I am the first qualified teacher from the Ju|'hoansi San community and I have been the acting Principal of the Nyae Nyae Village Schools since 2006. In these Schools, Ju|'hoansi children are taught in their mother tongue for the first three years of school. This is the only place in southern Africa where San children have education in their own language, so the village Schools are an important example for San throughout the region. In this presentation, I will give some background to the Nyae Nyae area and the Village Schools, and the original goals of the project. I will describe the current situation of the Village Schools, and will discuss some of the challenges and recent successes.

Background and Original goals of the project

The Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project grew out of a collaborative effort between local non-government organizations (NGOs), anthropologists, and Namibia's Ministry of Education and Culture in the early 1990s, just after Independence. The new Namibian government took a progressive approach to education, and allowed for flexible teacher training so that Ju|'hoan teachers without the required qualifications could become teachers in their own communities. In the Village Schools, children are taught in the Ju|'hoansi language, by members of their own speech community, and stay in their home villages, or with relatives. In 2004, the Village Schools were taken over by the (now) Ministry of Education, and the schools are thus no longer considered a "project." There is, however, continuity to the basic concept and approach of the schools. Since 2006 the schools have had a Ju|'hoansi Principal, Mr. Cwisa Cwi.

The Village Schools were started to enable San children living far from the central town of Tsumkwe to get education closer to their home villages. The goal was to use the language, knowledge and skills from their communities *and* to prepare children to be successful in the

government schools. Emphasis is on increasing the self-confidence of both learners and the communities, so that Ju|'hoan children can enter the local English-medium government school, (Tsumkwe Junior Secondary School, TJSS) in Grade 4 with the basic skills necessary to succeed there, and a firm grounding in their own culture. The "cardinal objectives" of the Village Schools Project, as described in the earliest annual reports and other documentation are as follows:

- To use Ju|'hoansi language as the medium of instruction at Village Schools
- To train Ju|'hoan teachers as educators of their own people
- To develop a relevant curriculum and curricular material in consultation with communities
- To continue building, on request, school facilities close to villages so that the young learners can learn and live in their own familiar environment during their first three years of school
- To enable Ju|'hoan children to join government schools in Grade 4 as confident and critically-thinking learners (Brörmann 1993, 1994).

Current situation of the Village Schools.

Today the Nyae Nyae Village Schools consist of six schools, namely:

- Nhoma Primary School
- Den|ui Primary School
- Baraka Primary School
- ||Auru Primary School
- ʔOtchaq|xai Primary School
- ||Xa|oba Primary School

The schools are *only* enrolled with San learners. The medium of instruction is Ju|'hoansi and the second language is English (the official language of Namibia since Independence in 1990). The schools are located a minimum of 40 km and a maximum of 80 km from Tsumkwe and cater for all villages surrounding the schools. The schools are located in very remote desert areas, and some of them can only be reached with 4 x 4 vehicles. The Ministry of

Education makes a vehicle and driver available so that I can visit each school at least once a month – often more.

Teachers

In the initial phase of teacher training for the Village Schools Project (1992-1993), twelve individuals (three women and nine men) were nominated by the communities. These teacher-trainees had formal education ranging from Grade 2 to Grade 11, and none of them officially qualified for teacher training or accreditation. The Ministry of Education agreed to make special arrangements for the accreditation of the first group of teachers from the Nyae Nyae villages. Over time, some of the original trainees have left, some are still teaching, and other Ju|'hoansi have become teachers. Later groups of teachers in training have been required by the Ministry to fulfill the normal requirements to enter into teacher training programmes, but the Ministry has been supportive and accommodating.

Today, there are eleven teachers at the Nyae Nyae Village Schools. Not all of them are Ju|'hoansi, but they are all San and they all speak Ju|'hoansi fluently and have grown up in the area. These teachers are not formally qualified, but they are willing to stay under difficult conditions in the villages to ensure that the Ju|'hoansi San receive education in their own language. The teachers also don't meet the requirements for enrollment with Teacher training, but the Namibian Government has agreed to enroll those who have participated in at least grade 10 in school (some have gone up to grade 12) in the Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) programme. Those who do not have grade 10 are completing their Instructional Skills Certificate, which will allow them to go on to the BETD programme. These teachers spend their holidays in Windhoek taking their BETD courses, which also shows their commitment to the Village Schools and San language instruction.

The Ministry of Education has also shown a great commitment to mother tongue education, and they have been willing to make exceptions for the Ju|'hoansi to ensure that we get more teachers who speak our language. Those teachers who did not attend school up to grade 10 have been enrolled with a program leading to an Instructural Skills Certificate. After receiving this Certificate, they are enrolled with the Basic Education Teacher Diploma, starting in August this year (2008).

Challenges

The Village Schools face several challenges. One important one is food availability.

Each school is given maize meal from the government to cover one meal a day for the learners. However, the lack of food in the village itself means that parents leave the village to collect bush food, and they often take the children with them. Another challenge is the elephants—they sometimes destroy water points and gardens and if hunters have meat available the whole village will disappear to get hold of meat.

Another challenge has been transport, for the children from other villages to get to the Village Schools, and also for the teachers to get back and forth between the Villages and Tsumkwe to collect their pay and buy their food and other supplies. The lack of transport has meant that both teachers and children frequently missed school because they were not able to get back to their villages on time. The Ministry has now acquired a 4x4 vehicle that will be stationed in Tsumkwe, and has hired a driver to use for these purposes. This will solve a lot of problems.

Involving the parents in the Village Schools has also been difficult. We want the parents to come to the school to tell stories, and to come with the teacher and the children out into the bush to show them plants and tracks. If the parents are involved, then we can include the traditional culture in school, and also the children will see their parents engaging with the school and will understand that school is important. But most parents think school is only for teachers and the learners, and they do not participate. The children then also get the message from their parents that school is not that important. This has been a problem for a long time, and we have many workshops and meetings to make them feel more involved in the school.

We also talk to them about the importance of education and try to convince them to let the children stay behind in their village to attend school when the parents go out to gather devil's claw, or do other hunting or gathering, or if they go to Tsumkwe. This is another problem, because often the parents will take the children out of school when they leave the village. Then the children get used to coming and going instead of just staying in the school.

Successes

All the Nyae Nyae Village Schools are from grade 1 to grade 3. Here I will present some statistics for the schools as of from 2003: there were 73 learners in 2003, 117 learners in 2004, 97 learners in 2005, 143 learners in 2006, 140 learners in 2007 and in the beginning of 2008 there were 174 learners enrolled with the Nyae Nyae Village School. For grade 4 the children have to shift to Tsumkwe Junior Secondary School which goes up to grade 10.

It has proven to be a great challenge to get learners from the Village Schools to continue their education in Tsumkwe. I am very happy to report to you that for the first time in the history of the Village Schools we are currently have 3 learners in grade 6, 6 in grade 5 and 21 in grade 4. This might not seem very much to some of you but to my community this is a great achievement. To ensure that these learners stay in school we have contracted a young Ju|'hoansi San to stay with the children at the hostel and act as a caretaker and motivator for these young children coming from the villages. This is to make sure that there is someone who talks their mother tongue and is culturally sensitive to their culture which they can talk to about fears and challenges connected to both the school and the social setting in Tsumkwe. This has helped a lot, and we are very proud of the students that we have in grades 4, 5 and 6 at Tsumkwe school.

How have the original goals been met?

Many of the original goals have been met. The Ju|'hoansi language is used as the medium of instruction at Village Schools, and many Ju|'hoansi language materials have been created. We have several Ju|'hoan teachers working as educators of their own people, even though we don't yet have any who are formally qualified. As I noted above, community involvement has been a challenge, but the schools are in the communities, which is an improvement over sending all Ju|'hoansi students to Tsumkwe school from Grade 1. Some of the original schools have closed due to lack of water, problems with elephants, and movements of people, but we have also built new ones. And as I described above, we now have students staying in Tsumkwe up to grade 6, so it seems like we are on our way to having more Ju|'hoan children "join government schools in Grade 4 as confident and critically-thinking learners."

Jennifer Hays

As described above by Cwisa Cwi, the Village Schools are very important, both for the Nyae Nyae Community themselves, and also for San across southern Africa as an example of what is possible for San communities, their children, and their languages. The Village Schools are the only place where San children in southern Africa have access to education in their own language for the first three years of school, and it is the only place where a conscious effort was made to incorporate indigenous knowledge into the requirements for a

teacher training programme. The Village Schools also provide an example of what can be done in a supportive and open-minded political environment. The Namibian Ministry of Education has proven to be flexible and adaptable in many ways over the years, which allowed for an alternative education project to take place within the government structures.

The Village Schools have not been without their challenges, however—some of which Cwisa Cwi describes above—and the difficulties that the project has faced are also instructive. I will discuss the emphasis on formal education to which the Village Schools have had to conform, and will provide some alternative perspectives on the difficulties that many students face in the transition to the mainstream schools.

How have the original goals shifted over time?

The first four of the original goals all have to do with creating a friendlier educational environment for Jul'hoansi children closer to home, incorporating Jul'hoansi language and culture into the curriculum, and ensuring that the teachers come from the community. Although all of these remain important aspects of the project, the emphasis on the transition of the children from the Village Schools to the government school in Tsumkwe became the primary measure of the schools' success. Although originally the Village Schools Project was a donor-funded project managed by a non-government organization (NGO), early on the focus shifted towards the incorporation of the Village Schools into the government school system, which happened in 2004.

There are reasons for emphasis on both of these transitions (those of the children, and of the schools themselves) to the formal education system, and these were recognized from the beginning. If the Village Schools had been designed to remain a private initiative, the teachers would not have been required to have nationally-recognized certifications. However, obtaining certification for the teachers was considered desirable for two main reasons. One was sustainability of the school; donor funding was not indefinite and the Village Schools had to eventually be taken over by the government. In addition, official accreditation would allow the teachers to receive the same status and benefits as other teachers, and also to teach in other schools elsewhere in the country if they decided to do so. After the certification of the initial group of teachers based partly on their traditional knowledge, subsequent groups of trainee teachers were required to follow the standard course for teacher training.

The goal of preparing children to be successful in the government schools early on became—and remains—the central goal of the Village Schools. The transfer of children to

the government school in Grade 4 is viewed as the primary determinant of the success of the Village Schools. The vast majority of students do *not* transfer successfully, however. The reasons for this are numerous, complex, and interconnected; I have discussed them in detail elsewhere (Hays 2007). Two important elements of this "failure" to transfer have to do with the enormous gap between the culture, knowledge and transmission strategies of the Ju|'hoansi and those of the government school, and with the environment in the government school to which they transfer. I will elaborate on these points below.

Other perspectives on the "failure" of Village schools students in Tsumkwe school.

Above Cwisa Cwi emphasizes the recent successes of the Village Schools. Here I will discuss the other side of that—the ongoing apparent "failure" of most of the VS students once the transfer to Tsumkwe school in grade 4. This is not meant to disparage the Village Schools—to the contrary, I argue that some successes of the Village Schools may be overlooked because of the emphasis on transition to the mainstream government schools.

As Cwisa describes above, it is only in the last few years that students from the Village Schools have begun to complete grade 4 at Tsumkwe, and some have even gone on to grades 5 and 6. In past years, the fact that VS students did not do well at the Tsumkwe school was taken as an indication that the project was "failing." The fact that students are now beginning to pass grades at Tsumkwe school is certainly an improvement, for many reasons. At the regional level, for the Village Schools to be seen as a model for mother-tongue and village-based education for other San communities, and for it to be attractive to governments and donors, it is important that it is seen as improving performance in mainstream education. It looks like this may be happening. This apparent shift may also be an indication that the environment at the Tsumkwe School is becoming more friendly to San students, and this is also a positive development.

I would like to point out, however, that the failure of Village Schools students to stay at Tsumkwe school should be seen less as a problem with the Village Schools, than as a *mismatch* between the home life of the villages and the culture of the government school. There are many ways in which traditional Ju|'hoansi approaches to learning and cultural values conflict with those of the government school. For example, traditional Ju|'hoansi learning is generally self-motivated; children decide when they wish to participate in activities or at what point they want to actively improve their skills in a certain area. This contrasts with a system in which children are expected to be at school every day, and where simply 'not wanting to go'

is not recognized as a valid excuse for non-participation.

Furthermore the language of education switches to English in grade 4 at the government school, which most students are not ready for. Part of what the VS are supposed to do is to balance this approach, and at the same time prepare them for Tsumkwe school. One problem is that for many students, 3 years is not long enough at the Village Schools. Many students in grade 4 who leave Tsumkwe and return to their villages go back to the Village Schools, and just do another year or 2 there there (sometimes students say they are in grade 4 or 5 at the Village Schools, even though technically they only go up to grade 3). When asked, parents and other community members frequently say that they want the Village Schools to go higher. Although these requests are often dismissed, they are not at all unreasonable. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that, ideally, children should have education in their own language for several years. Three years is not long enough to learn a new language well enough to understand instruction (especially when it is only learned as a subject and other exposure to it is limited).

For some students, the decision not to remain at Tsumkwe school may also be a strategic choice about which kind of knowledge and activity will afford them the best social and economic options later in life. At the Village Schools, children stay in their villages and thus have the opportunity to spend time with elders and parents and participate in activities including hunting and gathering, and to gain knowledge and understanding of the bush. When children go to the government school in the central town of Tsumkwe, however, they are away from their parents and elders for significant periods of time and there is little occasion for them to learn or practice traditional skills. Although it is no longer possible to survive solely from hunting and gathering, these skills remain important to survival in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy for many of its inhabitants. For those who are not employed full-time (which is most of the Conservancy inhabitants), bush foods provide a necessary supplement to erratic government rations and store-bought food purchased with occasional income from tourists, craft sales, or odd jobs. Furthermore, traditional skills can also provide access to paid employment, for example as a community game guard, or as a guide for tourists. The movement in southern Africa to develop qualifications for traditional skills is also beginning to recognize animal tracking and other bush skills and to develop accreditation standards for them. If this trend continues, the acquisition of knowledge of traditional skills like tracking may be increasingly recognized as a kind of alternative education. This does *not* mean that formal education is not important for the Jul'hoansi, only that other forms of

learning must also be recognized.

Most Ju|'hoansi consider *formal schooling* and *traditional knowledge / skills* —and the opportunities that each provide—to be “two different things.” Although the emphasis of evaluations of the Village Schools have been largely upon the transition of the students to the formal government school, and achieving formal qualifications for students, the students, teachers, and communities also recognize other goals and benefits of the project. In practice, many of them are choosing traditional knowledge and activities over participation in school. In order for any effort to address the educational situation of the Ju|'hoansi to be successful, these decisions must be understood and respected, and the best way to balance traditional knowledge with access to mainstream opportunities must be determined.

How can the Village Schools be an example for other indigenous communities in southern Africa?

The Village Schools have long been a visible and important project for other southern African communities. The primary focus has been on the lesson from the Village Schools that mother tongue education for the first three years is possible for San languages. San and communities across southern Africa are making strong requests for education in their own languages. So far, for most, this is not available. Although the reasons given for this are often practical—it is too difficult, too costly, there are not enough trained teachers—in reality it is primarily a question of political will. The Village Schools illustrate that, where the political will is there, ways can be found to produce materials within reasonable budgets, train teachers, and solve other problems. Given the utter lack of education in San languages in Botswana or Angola, and until recently, South Africa, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the example set by the Namibian Ministry of Education in supporting and accommodating the Village Schools. The Ministry has even begun planning to include Ju|'hoansi-language education at higher grade levels as well, though it will take time to develop the materials and for enough teachers to be trained.

The development of Ju|'hoansi language materials has included both the translation of mainstream educational materials, and the collection of stories and artwork from the community which have been made into Ju|'hoansi readers. This community-based materials development is an important element of the project, and one that provides a good example of how this can be done. The existing Ju|'hoansi materials can also be shared with other communities in Namibia and those in Botswana, Namibia and Angola who speak the same or

related languages.

The Village Schools also demonstrates the need for patience with community-based education initiatives—especially pioneering ones like this one—and the need for very careful community consultation. The Nyae Nyae community, like all San communities in southern Africa, is navigating a very difficult transition, and education plays a critical—and complicated—role. It can take time to see results from a project like the Village Schools; furthermore, the results may not match the original goals and expectations of the projects. The processes of the community need to be respected. New goals may emerge, and old ones may shift—the project must be able to accommodate such changes.

Finally, another lesson to be learned from the Village Schools is that to increase the participation of San in the government schools, the focus must be not only on preparing the San students but also on ensuring that the government school provides a welcoming learning environment. San students across the region have demonstrated their unwillingness to remain in hostile school environments where they are bullied, their possessions stolen, and where their language and culture are denigrated. Increasing numbers of San students at Tsumkwe school is an indication not only of the Village Schools' effectiveness, but also of improvements at the government school itself.

What other recommendations can be made about education for indigenous peoples in southern Africa?

There is a great need to improve the formal educational institutions that are available to San students across the region. Almost invariably, the schools available in the remote areas where San communities live are those with the poorest conditions and the highest levels of physical and sexual abuse of students. Simply trying to increase the numbers of San students in such schools is not going to improve their situation, as the students themselves well recognize. One benefit of the Village Schools has been that the intense focus on education in the area has also led to the improvement of the government school, which has in turn led to an increase in students attending.

At the same time, there is also a pressing need to provide more access to *informal* education, especially for those who have reached an age when it is no longer considered acceptable for them to participate in formal schooling. Both formal and informal education need to be grounded in the language, knowledge, and cultural values of the communities, and must reflect the reality of their lives. Importantly, they must provide access to skills that

indigenous peoples themselves consider to be important to them. Finally, it is important to remember that access to culturally-relevant education for indigenous peoples is a right—and approach it as such, not as something impossible, impractical, or inconvenient.

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