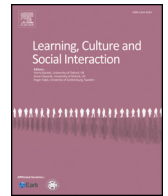




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Basotho herders learn through culture and social interaction

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ABSTRACT

Livestock herding practice is globally viewed as a male responsibility which males learn at a young age and hence, limits education access. The study probes the cultural influence of herding on male herders and perhaps its influence on their learning preferences and styles. The study further explores the resourcefulness of social relationships in enhancing further literacy learning among the herders. Drawing on the social capital concept, this study seeks to explore its instrumentality in influencing learning. The interviews; transect walks and photo voice were employed to collect data on a group of 30 purposively sampled adult male Basotho herders. Results show that; herding is a rich learning resource of indigenous knowledge (IK). The study suggests a holistic non-formal education (NFE) provision that embraces the herders (lifestyles, social networks as well as IK practices) and a need for NFE policy and practice to explore the relevance of social literacy in its programming.

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1. Introduction

Lesotho is a small mountainous Kingdom of an approximated area of 30,355 km², located in Southern Africa and completely surrounded by South Africa (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW), 2009). Approximately 80% of Lesotho's topography is over 1800 m (GOL, 2012). There are four major geographical zones in Lesotho, of which 80% is mountainous and used for livestock grazing. The lowlands cover 10% and are mainly used for agriculture. The foothills and Senqu river valley share the remaining 10%. The collective population of Lesotho is called Basotho, estimated at just over 2 million (Bureau of Statistics (BOS), 2010). There are two official languages – Sesotho and English.

UNESCO (2012) identifies poverty as a major global concern preventing access to education. The same concern applies to Lesotho whose international ranking for development indicators shifted from 120 out of 162 countries in 2001 to 162 out of 187 countries in 2014 and a further decline of 161 out of 188 countries in 2015 (UNDP, 2014; UNDP, 2015). Lesotho is classified under the low income countries with a per capita income recorded at \$2 and an average national poverty line of 54%. A further approximated 70% of the rural-based populace is reportedly poverty-stricken. The main sources of economy are subsistence farming, manufacturing and to a limited extent; the migrant remittances from the South African mines (GOL, 2012).

The landlocked nature and the limited natural resources have highly contributed to Lesotho's economic dependency on South Africa with approximately 80% of commodities imported from South Africa while the latter buys only a quarter of its exported goods, which continues to place Lesotho in a position of ever-increasing poverty. In Lesotho's context males are perceived as providers for their family, irrespective of their age. Therefore, when a family's financial situation is at stake, a male child in the family becomes the first resort to look for employment in order to supplement the family's income either in the mining industry in South Africa or as livestock herders (Mahe, 2009; Makoja & Zwilling, 2005; Rayner, 2010).

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Culture contributes to the realisation of the self as it reflects the intertwined behavioural patterns that define social practices and belief systems (Bourdieu, 1985) and hence constructs a unique social identity. It embodies certain societally appropriate norms that are specific to its members for them to realise and abide by. This argument is further supported by Ntšihlele (2003: 3) who identifies cultural games and songs as vehicles for the transmission of new knowledge: (cultural norms and values) and identity learning.

Schematically, games are the actualizations (expressions/explanations) of personal and collective experiential understandings.... In this way, games both stand for and communicate cultural ideas.

On the other hand, Nkopodi and Mosimege (2009) allude to the potential role of daily interactions as a learning resource which however remain overlooked by the marginalised populations. Their argument, identifies the potential resourcefulness of the indigenous African game of *moraba-raba*¹ in promoting basic numeracy skills in that, the game is embedded with enormous mathematical concepts that engage the players in communication and interaction.

Like many African countries, Basotho are a patriarchal society characterized by engendered social roles and responsibilities as part of their socialisation to transit into adulthood phase. Most of the learning is acquired informally from their elders, family members and social institutions such as family and initiation schools. For Basotho males, culture influences the social construction of their masculine identity where they learn the socially acceptable roles and responsibilities of 'Basotho men'. Male socialisation is further reinforced through traditional institutions such as initiation schools and livestock herding where they learn to be providers and protectors of their families at a very young age (Makoa & Zwilling, 2005; Morojele, 2009; Pitikoe & Preece, 2016; Preece, Lekhetho, Rantekoa, & Makau, 2009; Setoi, 2012). These responsibilities have far-reaching implications on the educational opportunities of male herders. Therefore, a deeper understanding of these could help inform how to address the challenge of enhancing Basotho male herder through increased access to quality education.

Livestock herding also caters for economic needs, and it is practiced in two ways by Basotho. The herders either, commute daily from home with the livestock to the veld in the morning and return later in the evening or temporarily relocate from their homes to spend some time in the cattle posts with the livestock (Makoa & Zwilling, 2005; Nthunya, 1996; Pitikoe, 2016; Pitikoe & Preece, 2016; Ratau, 1988). The cattle posts are further divided into two categories in order to accommodate the climatic changes. The first category comprises of the summer cattle posts which are located on the mountain peaks where grazing lands are fertile for livestock. The second category comprises of the winter cattle posts, which are located closer to the communities for ease of access during the heavy winter snowfalls. In spite of the cultural perception of herding, the mainstream education does not fully cater for the males' educational needs upon their return home. (Dyer, 2014; Ratau, 1988). Dyer also argues on the re-enrolment challenge experienced by the nomadic children upon return home which later results in high drop-outs. This situation significantly impacts on Basotho males, as indicated by Setoi (2012), who demonstrates that more girls participate in education while the boys are often recruited as herders at a very early age, disrupting or rendering their education non-existent. Some males remain herders as adults and, because of their lifestyles, they are marginalised from adult education opportunities.

The descriptive studies conducted in Lesotho narrate the life histories of Basotho herders and reveal among others; the young age at which herding is assumed, the challenges that come with the herding lifestyle and their low educational backgrounds (Mahe, 2009; Makoa & Zwilling, 2005; Rayner, 2010). Generally, these stories resonate with the backgrounds of many Basotho males where emphasis is on the humble life beginnings of most herders coupled with a negative impact of herding on male access to education. Rayner documents stories of three herders: Mojalefa who started looking after livestock at a very young age; Motlalepula aged 16 years who dropped out of high school; and Matsoso a former herder, helping other herders to learn.

Rayner opines that the nature of the herding responsibility deprives Basotho males of education about life skills and sexually transmitted diseases regardless of their possibility of being sexually active, which was indicated in the story of Motlalepula Mohapinyane. Motlalepula states that he dropped out of secondary school after completing Form B – equivalent of Grade 9 in South Africa, his knowledge of HIV was very limited coupled with his inconsistent use of condoms. The herding responsibility did not give him much choice to leave the animals in order to attend the local HIV and AIDS activities (Rayner, 2010).

Makoa and Zwilling (2005) construct a collaborative story, in which Zwilling, an expatriate who had befriended a former herder Thabo Makoa documents on paper the herder's narration. The story of Thabo Makoa shows how, in spite of lack of schooling, he assisted by the expatriate to further his studies until he attained vocational education to an instructor in one of the vocational training institutes of Lesotho. This exposure further opened doors for him to visit the expatriate abroad.

These two herders did not have similar up-bringing backgrounds. Thabo had assumed the provider role for the family by becoming a hired herder at the age of three years following his father's death at the expense of his education. While Motlalepula on the other hand had been exposed to some form of literacy though he later dropped out (Makoa & Zwilling, 2005). Examples such as Thabo's story are regarded as the worst forms of child labour (US Labor Department, 2011).

These stories indicate that Basotho males are tasked with the responsibility to provide for their families at a very young age at the expense of their education. In the end, they either enter their adulthood stage as complete or semi-literates (Mahe, 2009; Makoa & Zwilling, 2005; Rayner, 2010). Mahe argues that regardless of their low literacy levels, the herders have life ambitions as presented in the story of the 32 years old Julius Matsoso Majoro.

¹ *Moraba-raba* - A traditional board game played by males using stones of different colours which represent cows. It is mainly taught to herdboys to teach them mental intellectual and strategic thinking skills

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