Chapter 4

Crucial Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Formal Education Systems

Claudia Koehler
University of Frankfurt a.M., Germany

ABSTRACT

The chapter emphasises the important role of indigenous knowledge (IK) in formal education systems. If formal education does not take appropriate account of IK, learners will not be able to connect their learning experiences with their social and cultural environment. This impacts negatively on their ability to apply education for the construction of their life pathways. The chapter argues that in different countries, formal education has been shaped and dominated either by the majority population or by a ruling group and as a result is based on the respective groups’ epistemologies and ontologies as well as their language. This has led to a separation of IK from the type of knowledge mediated through formal education. The consequences of this separation and the resulting argument for the significance of a strong integration of IK into the body of knowledge mediated through formal education as a prerequisite for relevance and usefulness of education is discussed on the level of the student and on the level of development.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is defined in this chapter as a global concept referring to knowledge that arises out of the respective cultural, historical and social backgrounds of indigenous peoples, in other words prior knowledge that is primarily shaped by the family, community and the environment, e.g. informal mediators of education, and based on their ontologies and epistemologies. The definition of Emeagwali (2014, p. 1) is further applied which conceptualized IK as “the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality, without the interference and imposition of external hegemonic forces. IK Systems are not confined to the material sphere, but often interconnected with spiritual and non-material realms of existence.”

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0838-0.ch004
The chapter argues that through the process of the introduction and increasing relevance of formal education systems, IK, which is primarily mediated through informal actors, has become excluded, mainly through colonialism, from the type of education mediated through formal education. This is primarily due to the fact that in different national contexts, formal education has been shaped and dominated either by the majority population or by a ruling group and as a result is based on the respective groups’ epistemologies and ontologies as well as their language. This is the case for multiple regional scenarios, e.g. America, Australia, formerly colonised countries in Africa, and Europe in the context of the increasing diversity of its populations due to immigration movements. The chapter places a focus on the latter two: immigration countries in Europe and formerly colonised countries in Africa.

The objectives of the chapter are:

1. To demonstrate the consequences of this process on the level of the student and on the level of development, and
2. To demonstrate an alternative to the described Eurocentric education in an approach to education which considers multiple knowledge systems and appreciates diversity.

After outlining the background, – the mediation of (Indigenous) knowledge, the disconnection of formal education and IK, and the multiliterary approach, the relevance of IK in formal education are discussed. Firstly, this will be on the level of the student (based on a discussion of the theory of risk factors and interpretational shortcomings, the building of education on IK, and multilingual instruction in school), and secondly, on the level of development. The discussion concludes with an explicit call for a strong integration of IK as well as diverse languages in formal education so that education becomes relevant for all students and useful for the construction of life pathways and to enable equal and inclusive societies. Furthermore, some promising initiatives for reaching this goal are outlined and research gaps are identified.

BACKGROUND

Mediation of (Indigenous) Knowledge

IK equips individuals with the essential skills and knowledge for life in their communities. It is the immediate source of epistemologies (the understanding of how to know what to know) and ontologies (the understanding of what to know) of communities. IK also enables interactions with other knowledge and value systems. Comparing the function of IK in this sense with the definition of education as “the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life” (American Psychological Association, 2015), strong similarities between both are apparent. It is therefore worth to take a look at the historic parallels of both.

Throughout most of human’s history, education was mediated non-formally, nearly exclusively through the family and the local community. In the pre-colonial societies of Africa, for example, the mediation of education was a task of the whole community, the village, and immediate as well as extended family members. The elders taught children the history of their ancestors and the traditions and customs of their community. A type of formal learning took place in initiation schools after puberty where reli-