Positioning Diversity in Kenyan Schools

von, Malve

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

‘I always say this: A teacher can change a society.’
(Research participant)

Education can play a central role in providing opportunities and in improving life for all people. Hence, great efforts have been made to realise the United Nations’ Education for All agenda and to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education’ for all (as stated in Sustainable Development Goal 4). In the *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (African Union Commission 2015) education is highlighted as key for empowering the youth and children (and for developing their potential) and for the well-being of all people. However, schools, as the main providers of formal education, have increasingly come into question concerning their role in manifesting and perpetuating social inequalities rather than reducing fragmentations, social categorisations and hierarchies. The Unesco World Inequality Database on Education reveals the vast disparities in countries concerning access to (and success in) education between, for example, rural and urban, female and male, rich and poor, children and youth. The United Nations Development Programme points out that inequalities often start before birth and ‘accumulate through life, often reflecting deep power imbalances’ – with education, education policy and
institutions playing a key role in reproducing or transforming inequalities ‘formed deep in history’ (2019: 10).

In Kenya, severe disparities in education achievement exist between different socially and geographically positioned groups (Ng’asike 2019; Unesco 2020). Monitoring reports show that the best and the worst performing districts in East Africa are in Kenya. Because of its social diversity, inequality and disparities in education, Kenya was a particularly interesting case for this study, which puts teachers at its centre. Teachers’ experiences and professional practices in dealing with diversity and inequality and, thus, their potential for redirecting society towards equality, are the focus of this book.

Social diversity and inequalities as a challenge for education

Questions of social disparity and social cohesion are debated extensively by educationists around the world who seek ways for education systems to respond to the social inequality and increasing social fragmentation that destabilise democracies (Banks & Banks 2019; Spreen & Vally 2006; Walgenbach 2017). Over the past decades, these debates have increasingly employed the notion of diversity as an analytical perspective that has been generated in scientific and philosophical contexts as well as in political and social movements since the 1960s. Diversity emerged as a concept closely linked to the struggle for recognition and participation by marginalised social groups, and inherently connected to questions of social (in)equality. Referring to its origins, Vertovec states:

Contemporary scholarship on diversity condenses and builds upon decades of significant empirical and theoretical work surrounding key concepts like race, gender and sexuality as well as subjects such as discrimination, social movements and social inequality. (Vertovec 2014: 1)

Scientific interest in diversity in education settings relates to the empirical and theoretical analysis of social categorisations regarding
identities and affiliations and their interplay. Thus, group-centred
diversity approaches foreground how education systems and
schools discriminate and misrepresent specific social groups,
and how these structures and mechanisms can be transcended to
achieve equality, more social justice and less discrimination (Banks
2015; Ladson-Billings 2014; Sayed & Ahmed 2011; Walgenbach
2017). This includes efforts to equip schools and teachers to cater
for groups of learners who do not meet what is considered the
‘norm’ in a particular school or education system. Special needs
education, culturally responsive pedagogy, refugee, girl-child or
multicultural education approaches have, among others, shaped
some of the thinking around heterogeneity and diversity in
schools in past decades.

Looking from another angle at discrimination and inequality
in education, power-critical approaches focus on the social
mechanisms, including the power relations and discourses, that
(re)produce inequality between different societal groups – aiming
to deconstruct these mechanisms and dissolve boundaries. These
deconstructionist or power-centred approaches interrogate the
ways in which differences concerning, for example, gender,
etnicity, culture, sexual orientation or ability are constructed and
become significant with regard to education and social inequality.

Intersectionality provides a framework to integrate multiple
axes of difference in their simultaneous and interconnected effects.
It serves as a lens to view group constructions as fluid, temporary
and flexible rather than essentialised and homogeneous. When
focusing on the contested space of distorted power relations and
on the oppressive systems and discourses that produce axes of
difference in a society, schools and teachers cannot be regarded
as neutral players; they must be seen as entangled in these
configurations that produce social inequality.

Synergetically, the two main concerns of diversity in education
are, first, to affirm different social identities and categories
referring to ethnicity, class, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation,
age and so forth – and to acknowledge that these are powerful
in shaping educational processes. This includes rearrangement of
the contents, methods and organisational aspects of learning and teaching towards accommodating this diversity. Second, diversity in education intends to criticise and deconstruct differentiations, categorisations and boundary-making along specific axes of difference with their impact on particular identities, and to sensitise learners about the social mechanisms that produce inequality. This includes the development of diversity-related competencies that aim to combat discrimination, marginalisation and hierarchisation of specific groups and identities in a society.

Focusing specifically on the nexus of diversity and education, this book analyses diversity in schools and the ways in which teachers perceive, experience and respond to social diversity in their professional practice. The theoretical concepts used to look at the research problem are set in the critical interpretivist paradigm in which reality is seen as being subjective and constructed on the basis of power relations:

- **Intersectionality** interrogates the structures and discourses that produce social boundaries and categorisations that intersect and emerge as powerful with regard to inequality and discrimination in education.
- The **postcolonial lens** offers perspectives that consider colonial continuities to be a still-influential, powerful oppressive system when looking at diversity and education in Kenya – aiming to find areas for decolonisation.
- **Critical diversity** and **critical pedagogy** focus on process orientation for strategies and solutions: how educational practice can be geared towards (more) social justice and equality.

Drawing on these theoretical avenues, the aim of this book is to gain deeper insights into the ways in which teachers perceive and experience diversity, and how schools accommodate diversity in their institutional frameworks and practices.

The concept of **diversity** has been criticised for its openness and lack of theoretical and conceptual clarity (Vertovec 2014).
Pointing to the need for contextualised research, ‘we must move past intuitive notions of what diversity means for teaching and teacher education to more research-based approaches to innovation and improvement’ (Ladson-Billings 2011: 396). Given the lack of clarity and analytical rigour, as well as the dearth of research on what diversity in educational contexts implies, I have chosen a grounded theory case study design to approach my subject of interest. This develops diversity categories and conceptualisations relevant to the specific context from the data – instead of interrogating predetermined categories of difference.

Through initial discussions with Kenyan teachers about challenges concerning various issues of social inequality and diversity, it became clear that these factors significantly affected the professional practices of teachers in Kenya – and that severe inequalities concerning educational opportunities exist, depending on specific social identities and geographical positions. One component of diversity stood out in the Kenyan context: the axis of difference concerning ethnic group affiliation, and its politicised ethnicism (referred to as ‘tribalism’). As Nyairo points out, postcolonial Kenya is grappling with ethnolinguistic group affiliations that are ‘repeatedly misrepresented as a marker of fixed identity’ (2015: 273), reducing individuals to the representation of ethnic blocs in many spheres of public life, and shaping their chances in various ways. These representations often go hand in hand with politicisation, ethnic stereotyping, tensions and conflicts over resources and political power. Nderitu also emphasises the role of tribalism when thinking about diversity in Kenya:

Kenya eats, sleeps and dreams ‘Tribe’. ‘Tribe’ is the determining factor for many social, economic and especially political decisions in Kenya … Due to the history of a Kenya that is defined by ethnic divisions, ‘tribe’ has become the organising principle of politics. (Nderitu 2018b: 20)

Consequently, these divisions also affect educational institutions (Alwy & Schech 2004). At the same time, the country’s sociocultural
and epistemological diversity can be seen as an abundant resource with significant potential for human development.

Kenyan education policies stress the role of education in general, and schools in particular, in promoting peace and appreciation of the country’s diversity. The Kenyan Ministry of Education (MoE) wants schools to become ‘channels of cultural integration’ and promoters of diversity in unity, nondiscrimination, peace and inclusion (Republic of Kenya 2012: 14). The guiding principles and national goals of education also emphasise the role of schools in fostering the appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity and in eliminating hate speech and tribalism. Hence, Kenyan schools are tasked to find ways to conciliate its (culturally, linguistically, socio-economically, etc.) diverse society – to achieve the country’s goal that education be a major contributor to building an inclusive, democratic and nondiscriminatory society.

Thinking and theorising about diversity in an African context, with its history of colonisation and anti-colonial struggles, can be daunting because many of the social categories and discriminatory practices found today can be traced back to their invention and misuse by European colonisers. This also applies to the rigid ethnic identities that were defined, ascribed and used for various divide-and-rule purposes and policies by the colonisers (wa-Mungai & Gona 2010). This study draws on postcolonialism to interrogate today’s social categorisations as being closely connected to Kenya’s history of racial oppression, colonisation and anti-colonial struggle. The postcolonial lens, with its central notion of othering, offers a tool to scrutinise colonial continuities in teaching practice and institutional frameworks. The relevance of including postcolonialism relates to interpretation of the findings and also, to reflection on the research process itself. My position as an outsider to the research context (being a white German academic moving in the distorted power relations between the North and the South with the former’s long tradition of exploitation and knowledge extraction for the benefit of Europeans) requires conscious reflection on the intentions, methods and outcomes
of the research process. For instance, one could argue that the concept of education as schooling is not, in itself, an African concept. Precolonial African education systems were replaced by imported formal Western education in the form of schooling and enforced by the colonial powers (Ki-Zerbo 1990). After colonial rule, the Kenyan government and education ministry made some effort to integrate indigenous knowledge and mother tongue-based teaching into the school system as basis for nondiscrimination and inclusion. However, the Western system and languages still prevail in formal education settings (Owuor 2007) and are, in most cases, determinants of the opportunities people have in life. Consequently, postcolonial educational inequality remains a serious problem given that education, globally and locally, is deeply involved in political struggles over the distribution of resources and plays a major role in dividing societies into the haves and the have-nots. Formal education confers ideological and structural power to control the means of producing, consuming and accumulating symbolic and material resources (Brock-Utne 2002; Ginsburg & Lindsay 1995). Therefore, selection, exclusion and conformity need to be investigated as integral parts of any formal education system.

In so doing, this study of diversity in postcolonial Kenyan school contexts from the teachers’ perspectives follows a critical paradigm and intends to instigate transformations towards decolonising education and towards social justice. My involvement over several years in university-based cooperation projects between German, South and East African universities and our joint activities in teaching, learning, capacity building and teacher professional development in the ‘East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management’, provided the basis for this study. It also facilitated constant exchange and discussions about teacher education, curriculum development and education research in African contexts.

The main questions that emerged for me from this cooperation and exchange were the following:
1. How is diversity experienced and interpreted by teachers in their professional practice in postcolonial Kenya?
2. What are the drivers, strategies and consequences of experienced diversity in Kenyan schools?
3. Which strategies for schools and teachers can be recommended to help reduce the reproduction of social inequalities in schools?

To achieve a contextualised understanding of the meaning of diversity from the teachers’ perspectives, I use Vertovec’s (2014) framework, which distinguishes between the configurations, representations and encounters of diversity. To find answers to the questions above, I interviewed Kenyan teachers (in public primary or secondary schools), using elements of narrative inquiry and the problem-centred interview technique. In the narrative section of the interviews, the teachers talk about their biographical experiences of diversity, discrimination and exclusion based on their own identities (see Chapter 4). These narratives offer insights into the representations and encounters of diversity in the Kenyan context; they can also be regarded as a resource for teachers in their professional teaching practice. The problem-centred interview section focuses on the teachers’ diversity-related experiences and professional practices as teachers in various Kenyan schools (Chapter 5). The data were organised, coded and theoretically sampled according to grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2014a), which falls into place with the critical interpretivist paradigm. This process guided the way towards the development of a grounded theory of diversity in education in postcolonial Kenyan school contexts focusing on the teachers’ professional practices.

The book is presented as follows: Chapter 2 sketches the theoretical avenues for researching diversity in education in order to flesh out the critical interpretivist paradigmatic stance and sensitising concepts relevant to the research. The sensitising concepts helped clarify the notions of diversity and relevant theories that I used as a lens to guide the construction of a grounded theory.
In order to demarcate the case, namely schools and teachers in postcolonial Kenya, Chapter 3 outlines developments in the Kenyan education sector, as well as education disparities and axes of difference that can be identified from the literature. It includes findings of previous empirical research on diversity in education in Kenya, identifies the research gap and discusses the methodological and ethical implications for this study.

The findings from the interviews with the teachers concerning the configurations, representations and encounters of diversity in the Kenyan postcolonial education context are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 focuses on the research participants’ diversity experiences growing up and going to school; Chapter 5 presents their diversity experiences and practices as professional teachers. The categories that emerged from the data as significant axes of difference and social categorisations (including the ways in which they have affected the teachers’ lives, education and teaching) are described using examples of the different types of diversity encounters.

Chapter 6 comprises the construction of contextualised theory from the categories found in the data in relation to the theoretical lens of the study. To develop the theoretical model, I used the coding paradigm suggested by grounded theory scholars Strauss and Corbin (1998), which provides a structure for putting the central findings in relation to each other. The theoretical model developed to answer my research question includes

- context factors and how they affect the schools and teachers in terms of diversity (these offer insights into the configurations of diversity in the Kenyan school context);
- causal factors or drivers for the question of how diversity is experienced by teachers in schools (these offer insights into the representations of diversity in the Kenyan school context);
- intervening conditions (conceptualised as the teachers’ biographies) and strategies with regard to diversity, including their consequences (these offer insights into the encounters of diversity).
The final chapter, Chapter 7, synthesises the results and the study’s contributions to the related debates. It draws conclusions about the potential implications of diversity in education in a more general sense. It also highlights recommendations derived from the findings – and signals new avenues for future research.