

## **CULTURAL PLURALISM AND THE QUEST FOR NATION BUILDING IN AFRICA: THE RATIONALE FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article seeks to show how multicultural education as a form of education for sustainable development can be used to accommodate the cultural diversity found in many African countries for the purpose of nation building. The article contends that nation building and sustainable development require stable nations in which case multicultural education has a role to play. Multicultural education can be seen as a reform movement that seeks to accommodate society's cultural diversity leading to sustainable living. The concept of culture is discussed at length in order to create a base for the understanding of the concept multicultural education. The article goes on to look at the role of multicultural education in different school curriculum areas such as: language policy, curriculum content, the school environment and the nature of knowledge where cultural diversity has to be reflected. It is the contention of this paper that these different curriculum areas complement efforts directed towards nation building and sustainable development. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of education during this United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. However the paper also raises the view that the promotion of cultural pluralism and sustainable development should not be left to education alone, all social institutions for example politics and religion have to take a part.

**Keywords:** culture, multicultural education, sustainable development, cultural diversity, nation building

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nation building is an important issue on the political agenda of many African countries and should be viewed as an important process that leads to sustainable development. Many countries on the continent have been pursuing this agenda since the attainment of independence with varying degrees of success. If nation building is to be fully realized the citizens of the different countries have to demonstrate unequivocally a sense of oneness and unity of purpose that enables them to overcome some of the barriers presented by the rich cultural diversity of most African countries. To appreciate the rationale for nation building in Africa it is imperative to examine two related concepts of nation and state. A state is a geographical area governed by a sovereign government (Papp, 1988; Harber, 1994). On the other hand, a nation is an imagined community based on one or more of the following: race, ethnicity language, religion, customs, political memory, culture and ancestry (Andersen 1983 in Jary and Jary, 1995: Harber 1994). The concept of nation brings into play the issue of cultural diversity. The United Nations Declaration on Cultural Diversity argues that cultural diversity is as necessary for human kind as biodiversity is for nature (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable-development> Retrieved 24.05.11). Virtually all African nations are single states with cultural sub nationalities (Tlou 1986). Nation building should focus on the accommodation of cultural diversity in the different states. This becomes important when

one realizes that borders bequeathed by the vagaries of colonialism meant that there was little coincidence between 'state' and 'nation' (Vail, 1989).

Africa's colonial past is fraught with examples of how the continent's cultural diversity was manipulated and exploited by the then colonial masters to perpetuate their own interests and hegemony through in some instances pernicious divide and rule tactics. The attainment of independence in all African countries demands that the issue of nation building be on the political agenda permanently, this issue has to be looked into constantly. Education through the school is a social institution that can be exploited to promote cultural pluralism which leads to the appreciation and tolerance of others who are culturally different leading to sustainable living. This contributes to national stability which is an essential ingredient in nation building. This becomes vital when one recognizes that ethnic particularism has consequently continued to bedevil efforts to 'build' nations to the specifications of the ruling party for the past two decades (Vail, 1989). Such an approach recognizes cultural diversity and promotes cultural pluralism which is an approach that tends to reduce intercine intercultural conflicts which destroy a peoples' sense of unity and oneness. Nation building should concern itself with *inter alia* appreciation and toleration of the country's cultural diversity, as well as harnessing the skills and talents of all citizens in the socio economic transformation of their countries. It is the contention of this papers that education as a social institution can be used to accommodate Africa's cultural diversity and aid the process of nation building. The issue is going to be analyzed from a sociological point of view.

### **THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE**

In order to fully appreciate the concept of cultural pluralism a definition of the term culture is in order. Culture plays an important part in sustainable development. The United Nations World Summit Outcome Document 2005 has identified the following interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development, environmental protection, with culture being added (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable-development> Retrieved 24.05.11).

There are many definitions that have been put forward for this term. Due to its admittedly complex nature this concept cannot be defined to universal satisfaction. Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden (1999: 36) define culture as 'the social heritage of people those learned patterns of thinking, acting and feeling transmitted from one generation to the next, including the embodiment of these patterns in material terms'. Tylor in Bellington, Strawbridge, Greenside and Fitzsimons (1991: 116) argues that 'culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.

These definitions underpin the view that culture is a way of life of a people. In this context it encompasses a number of issues such as behavior, lifestyles, customs, habits and knowledge forms of the people concerned. Culture should then be seen as a design for living, it comes to represent innovations made by people in order to adapt to their environments. It includes a body of knowledge that people utilize to solve recurring problems on a day to day basis. It is important to bear in mind that culture influences the way people interpret social reality and people from different cultures do no interpret social reality in exactly the same way. Culture plays an important function since the culture to which one belongs becomes the root of the individual's identity, because culture gives us a sense of power and confidence by giving us the basis of achieving our goals, determining what is desirable and undesirable and developing the purpose of our life (Pai

and Adler, 1997:24). Therefore, culture provides the blueprint that determines the way an individual thinks, feels and behaves in society (Gollnick and Chinn, 1994). It therefore follows that the way an individual behaves is to a large extent influenced by the cultural upbringing of the individual.

There are two concepts that are related to culture that need to be elaborated. Culture is also made up of norms and values. Norms are general behavior guidelines that spell out what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in society. Different cultures emphasize different norms in different situations and this brings diversity to the fore. Values are ideas about what is desirable and worthwhile. Different societies due to the nature of their environments emphasize different norms and values thus emphasizing diversity.

Culture has two components these being material and non material culture. Material culture is visible. It refers to those objects and artifacts that do not occur naturally in the physical environment for example computers, automobiles and many others too numerous to mention. It includes those things made by people to solve the problems of living. Non material culture has to be learnt and it includes things such as language, values, beliefs and customs just to mention a few. Usually this part of culture is not visible. Both material and non material, culture differs from place to place and thus from culture to culture. This is due to the observation that every human group has developed its own historically distinct social traditions comprising everything from tool making to the conception of the supernatural (Vander Zanden, 1988). Culture is therefore manifested through an infinite number of ways through social institutions and these include values, non verbal communication and language (Gollnick and Chinn, 1994)

### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Culture is not homogeneous even for members of the same society. If culture is seen and considered as a mechanism that enables people to adjust and adapt to their environments it follows that environments differ and consequently cultures differ. This gives rise to the presence in society of some social groups who although participating in the larger societal culture or macro culture maintain their own norms and values that lead to their identification as distinct social groups. Such cultural groups form society's sub cultural groups or micro cultures. Andersen and Taylor (2003) argue that sub cultures are groups whose values and norms of behaviour are somewhat different from those of the dominant culture. It is these differences that tend to produce problems that at times destabilise nations threatening the whole process of nation building and sustainable development. It also brings about the issue of how other societal members react to societal sub cultures which are different from the dominant culture. In this regard ethnocentrism is an issue that has to be considered. Ethnocentrism is prevalent in many countries and societies. It is a feeling by some societal groups that their cultures are superior in comparison to others and this has disastrous consequences for society. Ethnocentrism is the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one's culture (Macionis, 1994). Such a practice produces unnecessary interethnic tension and strife which is not conducive for effective nation building not only in Africa but also elsewhere. Inter ethnic strife and civil wars tend to result in practices that impact negatively on the environment threatening sustainable development in the process. Sub cultures are based on factors such as race ethnicity, religion, social class, gender and so on. An individual can belong to a number of sub cultural groups at any given time. However Ghosh (1996) argues that concepts of race, ethnicity, gender and class are social constructions which serve to separate certain groups from others whose identities are defined by the groups in power in order to safeguard their positions of privilege. It follows that these concepts can be changed to create a conducive environment for everyone in society thus promoting

social stability. Multicultural education seeks to change the perceptions and attitudes that people in society have towards sub cultural groups in an attempt to reduce ethnocentrism, xenocentrism, prejudice and racism which are inimical for nation building.

The presence of different micro/ sub cultures in the same society and country gives rise to the concept of multicultural societies. Most if not all countries and societies are multicultural. Multiculturalism is the recognition of society's cultural diversity coupled with efforts to promote the equality of all cultural traditions (Macionis, 1994). In this context all cultures are taken to be equal and valid; no culture should be taken to be more superior than the other. Multiculturalism is a right to a difference (Ghosh, 1996). The concept of cultural pluralism is also synonymous with multiculturalism. Cultural pluralism refers to the presence of many cultures in society and these cultures co exist in a supportive and conducive environment. Andersen and Taylor (2003:245) state that 'cultural pluralism refers to a situation where different groups in society maintain their distinctive cultures while co-existing peacefully with the dominant group'. Hazard and Stent in Pai and Adler 1997:217) argue that:

'Cultural pluralism is a state of mutual co- existence in mutually supportive relationship within the boundaries of frameworks of one nation of people of diverse cultures with significantly different patterns of beliefs, behaviour and colour and in many cases with different languages.'

In this situation cultural differences are perceived in an egalitarian mode rather than a superior inferior mode. Such a situation enhances intercultural understanding, tolerance and appreciation of cultural differences which is essential for nation building. The education system particularly the content of the school curriculum has to reflect society's plural character positively if it is to make an impact in nation building and sustainable development.

The concept of sub cultures is incomplete without discussing the issue of ethnicity. In most cases sub cultures evolve around ethnicity. Ethnicity is an important issue as ethnic diversity makes African countries vulnerable to tension, malintegration and fragmentation (Olorunsola, in Tlou, 1986). Ethnicity is an issue that needs serious considerations in nation building. This is so because the problem is that the primary loyalty for many people will be at the level of the traditional nation or ethnic group rather than the new state (Harber, 1994). Such a state of affairs presents problems for nation building. Many ethnic groups have a sense of people hood and many of them consider themselves to be a nation. Ethnic groups can be identified chiefly on cultural grounds such as language, folk practices, class or religion (Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden, 1999). Thus ethnic groups have a consciousness of their common cultural bond. This ethnic diversity can be accommodated in different countries resulting in a state of cultural pluralism. The education system should set an example by accommodating cultural diversity and providing a conducive environment for all cultural groups as this promotes sustainable development. This is the essence of multicultural education. Ethnic identification may grow stronger when groups face prejudice or hostility from other groups (Andersen and Taylor, 2003). This does not ensure social stability as many political states periodically experience ethnic strife that derives from the minority status of some groups (Hughes Kroehler and Vander Zanden, 1999).

Some ethnic groups are also minority groups in the different countries. Sociologists define minority groups not in terms of numerical inferiority but in terms of the amount of power and influence that their members hold. For example, during the colonial era in Africa and elsewhere the local indigenous population was the minority group despite the fact that they

enjoyed numerical superiority in comparison to the colonisers. Vander Zanden in Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden (1999:46) argues that a minority group is a social group whose members experience discrimination, segregation, oppression and persecution at the hands of another social group, the dominant group and lack the power to change their situation. Minority groups therefore have less power and influence than the dominant group. Indigenous minority groups are generally marginalized. Even with the attainment of the independence some ethnic groups continue to be minority groups and this threatens the internal stability of many countries. Upon the attainment of independence African states composed of many traditional cultures and facing high popular expectations in severely restricted economic circumstances were therefore fragile and potentially unstable (Haber, 1994). Multicultural education seeks to accommodate these differences in order to enhance intercultural understanding, intercultural literacy as well as intercultural competency which are all important in sustainable development and nation building.

### **SOCIETAL REACTION TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

The question that can be posed at this stage is 'How has society reacted to cultural diversity? In the colonial era the colonizers expressed attitudes of prejudice, discrimination and negative stereotyping of African indigenous cultures. The ideology of the day emphasized the superiority not only of the white race but also the superiority of western culture. Hence colonial society was dominated by a monocultural, ethnocentric and Eurocentric view of society. Such a biased view seems to have been influenced by modernization theory. This biased view was reflected in the content of colonial education and hence such a system of education has been seen as a form of cultural imperialism.

Prejudice is judgment based on group membership or social status. Allport and Devine in Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden (1999: 216) define prejudice as 'attitude of aversion and hostility towards members of a group simply because they belong to it and hence are presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to it.' Prejudice becomes an attitude with an emotional bias. Blumer in Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden (1999) identified four feelings that characterize dominant group members, which are sources of prejudice. Dominant group members have a sense that they are superior to members of minority groups: they have a feeling that minority group members are by their nature different and alien, they have a sense that dominant group members have proprietary claim to power and privilege and a fear and suspicion that members of minority groups have designs on dominant group members. Prejudice then harms the relations between and among the different ethnic groups further threatening the stability of African nations. Reduction of prejudice is yet another aim of multicultural education.

Discrimination on the other hand refers to unfair treatment directed at someone. With the attainment of independence in most African states prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping of other social groups and in particular ethnic minorities has not totally disappeared. Such a state of affairs is harmful to effective nation building in Africa. It produces inter ethnic strains which lead to intercultural misunderstanding and conflict.

More often than not this has resulted in civil wars in some countries if the events in the Great Lakes region in the last few years are anything to go by. What is then needed is a strategy that promotes and upholds cultural pluralism. A multicultural school curriculum that acknowledges and appreciates society's rich cultural diversity appears to provide part of the solution in this regard.

### **APPROCHES TO ADDRESSING CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

There are a number of approaches that have been developed in an attempt to address society's cultural diversity. Such approaches include assimilation, pluralism and integration. This section deals with the first two.

Assimilation has been found to be synonymous with the 'melting pot' ideal. It is the process whereby groups with distinctive identities become socially and culturally fused (Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden, 1999). In this model sub cultures are abandoned and people accept the functionalist view of a society held together by value consensus and is compatible with the modernization paradigm. The Portuguese colonial *assimilado* policy is an example of this model. There are two types of assimilation these being forced and peaceful assimilation. In the former sub cultural norms, values, beliefs and customs of minority sub cultural groups are outlawed while those of the dominant culture are upheld. In peaceful assimilation sub cultures accept the dominant culture on their own volition. Given the view that culture gives an individual his or her or her cultural identity assimilation presents a number of problems in modern day Africa. It may further heighten inter ethnic clashes. It appears assimilation lacks the depth to recognize the impact and influence of society's cultural diversity.

Cultural pluralism or multiculturalism is a model that has gained popularity in number of countries world wide. Multiculturalism recognizes cultural diversity present in society. This approach acknowledges cultural diversity and each culture is considered to have its own merits. The different cultures exists side by side understanding each other ways sympathetically. This model emphasizes cultural relativism as opposed to ethnocentrism. Culture relativism views the behaviour of people from the perspective of their own culture; it employs a kind of value free or neutral approach (Hughes, Kroehler and Vander Zanden, 1999). Two forms of pluralism have been identified these being equalitarian and inequalitarian pluralism. In the former cultural diversity is recognized and members of sub cultural groups are given an opportunity to participate in the various institutions of society. This promotes societal cohesiveness and unity of purpose which are prerequisites for effective nation building and sustainable development. The education system can assist in upholding society's plural character by way of a multicultural school curriculum. This becomes the rallying point for societal cohesiveness.

#### **RATIONALE FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN NATION BUILDING**

Multicultural education should be viewed as a form of Education for Sustainable Development. Education for Sustainable Development is concerned with moving towards a more sustainable society by changing attitudes, values and actions ( Wade and Parker, 2008). It also implies providing the learners with the skills, values and knowledge to live sustainably in their communities (<http://portal.unesco.org/en/er./php URL-ID=5427&URL.DO-DO-TOPICURL-SECTION=200html>. Retrieved 24.05.11).

Multicultural education has been defined in a number of ways. It is an approach and a reform movement that seeks to accommodate cultural diversity in the classroom. Baptiste in Squelch (1998) says that multicultural education is the transference of the recognition of a pluralistic society into a system of education. Banks and Banks (1989:3) state that multiculturalism is an idea, an educational reform movement whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students exceptional students and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school'

Manning and Baruth (2000) argue that multicultural education is both a concept and deliberate process designed to teach learners to recognize, accept and appreciate differences in culture, ethnicity, social class, religion, ability or disability and gender. As a reform movement it acknowledges that there are certain discriminatory practices in education that have affected the potential of pupils to achieve. These discriminatory practices are based on race, gender, social class, ethnicity, disability just to mention but a few. It becomes a form of empowerment that in the ultimate analysis promotes equalitarian pluralism. Multicultural education contributes to nation building in at least three ways. Firstly, schools are societies in microcosm, as agents of secondary socialization they should prepare children for participation in the larger society equipping them with skills to effectively executive their adult roles. Since society is characterized by cultural diversity children should learn to accommodate, tolerate and appreciate cultural diversity at an early age in school. The school becomes an important institution in this regard since a major pedagogical principle is that desirable values and attitudes should be taught during the formative years (Tlou, 1986). At the same time Parsons in Haralambos and Heald (2004) maintains that the school acts as a bridge between the world of the home and the wider society. This reinforces the view that schools are societies in microcosm. The underlying goal of multicultural education is to effect social change and this incorporates three strands of transformation which begin with the transformation of the self, schools and schooling and finally society (Ghosh, 1996; Gorski, 2000).

Secondly, multicultural education seeks to enhance the potential of all children to learn despite their social characteristics. This is seen as a way of developing the talents and skills of all societal members thus widening the pool of talent available to society. This enables society to develop and harness the talents of all its members in the process of nation building and sustainable development.

Thirdly, multicultural education seeks to reduce prejudice and tension between different groups. This comes about when different social groups discern that their experiences and accomplishments are represented and incorporated in school curriculum materials. Smock and Bentsi- Enchill in Harber (1994) for example argue that in bringing students into contact with members of other ethnic groups heterogeneity in the classroom can foster toleration and lead to friendships across ethnic boundaries. Thus education has a key role to play in preventing conflict in the future and building everlasting peace (UNESCO, 2000). It becomes a way of promoting social stability and sustainable living. Prejudice tends to affect the experiences and accomplishments of some groups in society resulting in inequalitarian pluralism.

Multicultural education seeks to achieve a number of goals. It seeks to empower minority groups so that they develop economically and socially and also contribute economically, socially and culturally to the development of the wider society of which they are a part. Banks and Banks (1989) argue that it seeks to transform schools to ensure that culturally diverse students will experience an equal opportunity to learn as well as helping students to develop positive attitudes towards different cultural, racial, ethnic and religious groups. This means that in schools children are given an opportunity to appreciate cultural diversity which is an enduring characteristic of multicultural societies. Squelch (1989) states that multicultural education is committed to an education that is free from discrimination and prejudice which members of cultural groups experience in schools and society. This promotes equalitarian pluralism as all social groups are given an opportunity to participate in the institutions of society. Equalitarian pluralism appears to be a stabilizing force in a culturally diverse society. Education for cultural pluralism is broader in scope and stems from the rejection of

the melting pot ideal by ethnic minority groups. It seeks to accommodate student's cultural diversity by incorporating their experiences into the school curriculum.

In terms of the Dakar Framework of Action most African governments are committed to the policy of Education for All (EFA) as well as the universal completion of primary education by 2015. In this regard education comes in handy as it can be used to promote and uphold cultural pluralism through the school. In Africa the school has been seen as the key social agency for incorporating disparate cultures into the formal polity (Harber, 1994). These two goals spelt out in the Dakar Framework of Action may well remain a pipe dream unless the process and content of education upholds the principle of cultural pluralism and thus incorporates the experiences of all social groups into the curriculum.

### **ISSUES IN MULTICUTURAL EDUCATION**

Multicultural education has to address a number of issues in an attempt to contribute to nation building and sustainable living in Africa. In terms of the Ahmedabad Declaration of 2007 through education human lifestyles can be achieved that support ecological integrity, economic and social justice, sustainable livelihoods and respect for all life (<http://www.aries.mq.edu.au/pdf/AhmedabadDeclaration.pdf> Retrieved 24.05.11.)

The school curriculum has to address a number of issues such as: the nature of knowledge, curriculum content, language policy, school environment as well as the involvement of the community in school activities. In the process of addressing these issues the education system promotes cultural pluralism which has an impact on how pupils perceive those who are culturally different.

### **THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

Multicultural education as a reform movement needs to critically question what is taken as valid knowledge in society. Knowledge or what counts as knowledge is not value free and it is embodied within a certain cultural context. Marxist theory emphasizes that in every historical epoch dominant ideas are ruling class ideas. This represents discrimination in terms of class. Young (1971) in Leach (1994) argues that knowledge is organized and controlled by those in position of authority who select what to teach and to whom. The views of dominant group ignore the view that knowledge is socially constructed and what is taken as valid knowledge is a selection from a number of possible options available. This has a bearing on the content of the school curriculum where the experience and accomplishments of other groups are left out. The knowledge forms of the different sub cultural groups including ethnic minorities should feature prominently in the school curriculum as a way of promoting cognitive justice. It enables issues and problems to be looked at from the point of view of the different sub cultural groups. Thus multiple solutions to problems faced by society can be generated further aiding efforts towards nation building. Leach (1994: 218) argues that 'theories of neo colonialism and cultural imperialism point to the continuing of western educational norms and values which project the superiority of western 'metropolitan' forms of knowledge over the indigenous knowledge forms and skills of the periphery. The emphasis on indigenous knowledge forms should also assume a pluralistic character and ensure that sub cultural indigenous knowledge forms are also incorporated in the school curriculum. Thus Giroux in Gollnick and Chinn (1994: 13) observed that 'schools culture functions not only to confirm and privilege students from the dominant classes but also through exclusion and insults to disconfirm the histories, experiences and dreams of subordinate groups' In this regard curriculum reform is called for. For example in Zimbabwe it has been found that the education system can best be described as



Eurocentric in its cultural content and orientation (Report of The Presidential Commission Into Education And Training, 1999). This observation seems to emphasize the need to accommodate the cultural diversity found in society

### **CURRICULUM CONTENT**

The content of the school curriculum should reflect diversity in terms of ethnicity, social class, race, disability and gender. All these different groups that comprise society should be portrayed positively in the curriculum materials. Duncan (1986) states that a variety of social groups should be evident in the visual images, stories, historical or geographical or whatever type of information disseminated by the school. Therefore multicultural education has to permeate the whole school curriculum rather than be doled out in a one course teaching unit. In this way the content of the curriculum reflects the plural character of society and this can be seen as a way of contributing to the building of a multicultural society. For example in the Zimbabwean context the experiences of minority groups such as the Tonga , Venda, Kalanga, Sotho, Nambya and others should be included in the curriculum and instructional materials used countrywide. It is not sufficient to present the experiences of the different ethnic groups positively. Harber (1994) observed that it is important to be realistic and to openly recognize that cultural diversity exists, but also to do so positively and tolerantly and to describe links between ethnic groups and the significance of the nation state as well. In this regard curriculum content should then seek to integrate the different ethnic groups into the nation state. In Zimbabwe the national broadcaster used to host a programme on television on totems and tribes. One of the panelists a former Minister of Education Sport and Culture made an effort to show how the different ethnic groups in Zimbabwe were linked through totems. Such an approach tends to foster national unity, which is essential in nation building sustainable development, peace and stability within and among countries. The same scenario should prevail in all African countries. Such an approach enhances intercultural understanding which should result in the reduction of prejudice, ethnocentrism, xenocentrism, discrimination and stereotyping all of which are detrimental to efforts directed towards national building. At the same time it creates an enabling environment which enhances the potential of pupils to achieve. Gollnick and Chinn (1994:297) observed that ‘if students seldom see representations of themselves, their families or their communities it becomes difficult to believe that academic content has any meaning or usefulness for them, it will appear that the subject has been written and delivered for a different group of students’. Society may therefore not be able to benefit from the talents of all its citizens.

### **LANGUAGE POLICY**

The issue of language has generated tension in a number of African countries given the linguistic diversity prevalent in a number of countries. The questions that arise are: ‘Whose language shall be used as the official language? Whose language shall be used as a medium of instruction in schools? These questions show that the issue of language policy is not only a sensitive issue but also a complex one. In some countries children and adults in some instances are forced to be trilingual and even multilingual in instances where the mother tongue is not the official language or the vernacular language spoken by majority of people outside the home. Language plays an important role in peoples’ lives. . According to Mazrui (1993) language is sometimes regarded as a reservoir of culture which controls human thought and behaviour and sets the boundaries of the world view of its users. Language as a carrier of culture influences one’s world view. Mampane (2006) argues that a community without a language is like a person without a soul.

There is need for policy makers in the different African countries to seriously consider an appropriate language policy that reflects the linguistic diversity of their countries. This is so because to kill a language is indeed to kill a culture

because it is language that allows humans to build cultural modes of their world and transmit them across generations (Chima in Chiwome and Gambahaya, 1998). In other words minority languages should be given prominence and the education system should take the lead by giving children an opportunity to be taught in their mother tongue. It should be noted that imposed policies, taking the language of the dominant group leads to the alienation of cultural identity (Verma and Bagley, 1982). Imposed language policies are a form of cultural imperialism which contributes to the extinction of minority languages whose people are assimilated into other cultures (Mampane, 2006). Such a state of affairs threatens the stability of culturally diverse nations and sustainable living.

Squelch (1998) argues that whilst a single national language might be used as a common language shared by all and as a medium of instruction in schools opportunities need to be created for various groups to learn their language because of its cultural importance. A number of policy initiatives to address the language issue have been made in a number of African countries. However Bagmbose in Kamwendo (1997) observed that language policies in Africa in general are characterized by such problems as vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuations and declarations without implementations. Such a state of affairs is not conducive for the successful implementation of cultural education

### **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

It has already been stated that schools are micro societies as such they should reflect the characteristics of the larger society. In plural societies the school should reflect society's multicultural character. The total school environment should be a conducive place for all students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Ghosh (1998: 70) observed that some students in Canadian schools experience a hostile school climate when they are excluded from the culture of the school through messages that they are unimportant and have second class status. This observation is applicable to Zimbabwe as well as a number of African countries. Simon in Gollnick and Chinn (1994) has identified the characteristics of a multicultural school as: composition of school staff that reflects pluralistic composition of society, equal opportunity to achieve for all social groups, unbiased school curriculum that incorporates the contribution of all cultural groups, instructional material that are free of bias, cultural differences being treated as differences rather than deficiencies and students using their own cultural resources. The school in this case becomes the practising venue which enables students to appreciate cultural diversity of the wider society. It enables pupils to undergo some transformation in the way and manner they treat cultural differences. The school has an important part to play in the promotion of cultural pluralism. A number of writers have suggested that ethnically mixed schools make a valuable contribution in furthering national unity in Africa (Harber, 1994).

It has been argued in some circles that schools in most African countries are multiracial and therefore multicultural. There is need to recognize and that it is one thing to be multiracial and another to be multicultural. Schools should therefore show positive commitment to all aspects and characteristics of multicultural education in different school activities.

### **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

The involvement of the community provides an opportunity for cultural diversity to be seen at work. It is also another way of reinforcing developments in multicultural education taking place in the classroom. Parental involvement in the affairs and activities of the school should reflect cultural diversity. Parents can be involved through a number of activities

which include some of the following: voluntary work, participating through parental associations, fund raising, resource persons in the classrooms. Parental participation in these activities should include all parents despite their sub cultural backgrounds. In fact this should give parents an opportunity to co-operate and work with others who are culturally different further contributing to sustainable living. Therefore community helpers and speakers should represent the diversity of the community (Gollnick and Chinn, 1994). By so doing parents may be able to overcome barriers presented by cultural diversity in the community leading to a situation where they tolerate and appreciate cultural differences. This development has a spill over benefit that may filter into the community and contribute to nation building.

## **CONCLUSION**

The accommodation of cultural pluralism is an important process in nation building. It sets an enabling environment for sustainable development. During the colonial era Africa's rich cultural diversity was exploited by the then colonial masters to further their own political interests. In the post independence era this cultural diversity has at times tended to threaten efforts directed at nation building and sustainable development through intercultural conflicts. This highlights the importance of an approach through education that promotes the appreciation and tolerance of cultural diversity in an attempt to uphold cultural pluralism and the presence of a multicultural society. The inherited school curriculum in most countries needs to be overhauled to pave way for multicultural education. Multicultural education is a form of Education for Sustainable Development and presents an opportunity to accommodate cultural diversity which is reflected in the school curriculum. In this regard multicultural education becomes important in nation building and the maintenance of cultural pluralism. After all culture has been identified as one of the four pillars of sustainable development. Therefore the different areas of the school curriculum need to reflect the plural character of society. Most if not all African countries are signatories to the Dakar Framework of Action of 2000 which emphasizes Education for All. In this regard African countries should strive to exploit education as a vehicle in building multicultural societies which ensure peace, stability, intercultural understanding and sustainable development. However, the promotion of cultural pluralism should also be undertaken by other social institutions such as politics and religion among others.

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