

Handout for The Undefended Childhood Conference, Michigan State University, 2008
**The Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project:
Indigenous Community-Based Education in Namibia**

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Children of Ju/'hoan San of Namibia were identified as "educationally marginalized" when Namibia gained independence from South Africa (1990). I outline the history of the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project (VSP) begun then in the Ju/'hoan communities of northeastern Namibia. The VSP was an ambitious, experimental approach to providing the formerly hunting and gathering Ju/'hoan San (known to many as the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert) with appropriate, accessible, and effective primary education in their mother tongue. The San's educational issues present in microcosm class and racial issues dividing them from an equitable share in the future of their new nation.

I describe the necessary orthographic, grammatical, dictionary and curriculum work carried out in the Ju/'hoan language to make the Village Schools Project possible. I also outline the training of local teachers carried out within the Project, and present a bibliography containing the materials produced by and about the Project. In the Conclusion, I outline practical suggestions for use of the experiences and materials of the VSP by other communities with educationally marginalized children. In particular, I suggest, the example of the VSP may be instructive in neighboring Botswana, where San populations are still forced into mainstream schooling in Setswana and English, despite rising support for mother-tongue educational opportunities (Bieseles and Hitchcock, 2000).

Achievements of the Namibian Village Schools Project provide useful examples and positive suggestions for the educational future of both the Ju/'hoan who live on the Botswana side of the international fence shared with Namibia, and other minority-language communities. In particular, the VSP experience underscores the need for any such project to take time to adjust to the pace of a local community. It foregrounds the need to understand local cultures of communication as well as local languages. Further, the VSP holds cautionary lessons for us about the dangers of "top-down" educational planning for children in vulnerable communities. Last, the cultural and educational spin-offs of the Village Schools Program (rapidly spreading literacy, including computer literacy; creative conservation of cultural heritage; and empowering connection to the World Wide Web) are helping to defend San childhood and adulthood in profound ways.

References:

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