Conference Examines Educational Issues in Africa

Declining enrollments, growing inequality for female pupils, cutbacks in teacher training programs and general funds for education, lack of commitment by political leaders—all these paint a depressing scenario of education in Africa. But there also are signs indicating a more promising outlook. Joel Sarnoff, a consulting professor at Stanford University and specialist in educational inequality in Africa, tried to provide a balanced view in his presentation, "Education for All in Africa: Still a Distant Dream."

Sarnoff was the keynote speaker at the Education in Africa conference held at the end of March and organized by IU Bloomington’s African Studies Program (ASP), with partial support from the Ford Foundation and the Indiana Consortium for International Programs (ICIP). Other speakers were drawn from among the faculty and doctoral candidates in IUB’s School of Education, as well as other ICIP institutions.

The conference opened with welcoming remarks by John Hanson, ASP director, and by Virginia DeLancey, associate director and conference organizer. The first panel, "Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into African Literacy Programs," was led by Harbans Bhola (IUB) and featured talks by Khaura Murtadha-Watts (IUPUI and IUB) and doctoral students Nolutho Diko and Sonjai Reynolds. Concerned with arresting "cultural erosion," they urged that oracy, oral traditions, traditional belief systems, and parental participation be more integrated into modern educational systems in Africa.

The second panel, chaired by Martha Nyikos (IUB) addressed some of the social, linguistic, and economic factors contributing to educational inequality. It included papers by Marcia Segal (IU Southeast) collaborating with Martin Amin (University of Yaoundé on literacy in urban schools in Cameroon; Auma Okwany on the recent dramatic drop in enrollment rates in Kenyan cities and the enormous problem of "street children;" and Ibro Chekaraou on the need for mother tongue education in Niger.

The final panel, chaired by Robert Arnone (IUB) featured four speakers demonstrating how African arts have an educational role to play. Papers were by studio artist Kofi Boateng (University of Science and Technology, Ghana), on how art communicates traditional knowledge; by Judith Greau (Indiana State University) on contemporary Zimbabwean wood sculptors depicting highly political themes; and by dele jegede (Indiana State University) on the political expressiveness embodied in Nigerian textiles. Mary Goetze (School of Music, IUB) offered a fitting closure to the varied themes of the conference: within a few minutes, she had the audience standing, rhythmically moving, and humming a traditional African song.

—Cornelia Lindenau
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