

Embracing indigenous
knowledge and cultural
values to meet Education
For All:
Lessons from Senegal



*Insights from the Culture, Education and
Development programme undertaken by
Grandmother Project – Change through Culture*

Velingara department, Senegal, 2008-2015

Grandmother Project – Change through Culture (GMP) is an American NGO and Senegalese Association created in 2005, committed to promoting health and well-being through the development of programmes that build on positive cultural roles and values. GMP has worked extensively with various NGOs on community programmes that impact children, such as nutrition, health, education, early childhood care and development. GMP's work has been exclusively in non-Western cultures, mainly in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America. A priority goal of the organization is to develop methods and tools to better understand how non-Western families and cultures are organized, and to effectively promote sustainable social change in those contexts.

In non-Western societies, grandmothers play a crucial role in extended families and communities as decision-makers and educators. Yet, they are usually ignored, or treated as a barrier, in development programmes. However, there is growing evidence that GMP's culturally-based and grandmother-inclusive approach is successful. We are always amazed and impressed with the power and influence of grandmothers and with how effective it is to collaborate with them to bring about positive change for women and children in African communities.

Judi Aibel, GMP Executive Director

GMP has found that communities are more engaged and programme results are greater when strategies to promote change take into account roles and values that communities cherish. Positive changes in behaviour and norms are more likely to be sustainable if pushed from within the community itself. Through an action research process of experimentation and learning over many years, GMP used these observations to develop an innovative approach to promoting positive change in communities, called Change through Culture (CtC). CtC is based on the observation that *when programmes acknowledge and reinforce positive cultural resources and community assets, communities are more receptive, involved and open to adopting new socio-cultural norms and practices that can improve the well-being of their children.* The approach is based on four key pillars: 1) building on positive cultural values, roles and resources; 2) active involvement of elders, particularly grandmothers; 3) strengthening intergenerational communication; and 4) using participatory communication/education methods which encourage dialogue, consensus-building and problem-solving.



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Indigenous knowledge: The key to quality education under the SDGs?

This report is intended for NGOs, donors, civil servants and individuals interested in meeting the challenges to deliver basic education sensitive to the cultural values of people living in the Global South in line with the SDGs. Under the MDGs, international education policy focused on achieving Universal Primary Enrolment (UPE). Under the SDGs, access still needs to be addressed as 57 million children are out of school. But, more focus is needed on quality, as low quality schooling leads to poor outcomes, low enrolment and high drop-out rates.

Yet, defining quality is a highly contested issue.

Dominant definitions focus on indicators decided by the international education community, especially acquisition of literacy and numeracy. However, many populations have alternative definitions emphasising indigenous knowledge and cultural values.

The school model diffused throughout the world today originated during the colonial period. It ignored indigenous knowledge (IK), defined here broadly in association with non-Western cultures. This included knowledge of the environment and ways of sustainably extracting useful products from it, musical traditions, moral values, and cosmologies. Knowledge transmission flowed from elders to youth, through everyday practical learning and formalised apprenticeship, initiation rites or religious instruction. In colonial schools, IK was devalued, framed as “primitive” and inferior to “modern”, Western knowledge. Western-style schools disrupted intergenerational paths of IK transmission and were alienating for learners. Those who attended often developed inferiority complexes towards their own culture, and schools often failed in their promise of economic advancement leaving graduates de-skilled for life in their own communities.

Traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development. **UNESCO 1990, World Declaration on EFA, p.6**

The discrepancy between schools’ form and content, and people’s valued knowledge is a major cause of indigenous community disengagement with schooling today. Within the Education For All (EFA) framework it was recognised that quality education should include IK and culture. Yet, under the MDGs, quality education, especially in relation to IK, was neglected in favour of access to schooling. In elaborating the SDGs, a renewed focus has been placed on the need for culture to be recognised as both driver and enabler of sustainable development, including in definitions of quality education.

As IK is produced through ongoing social dynamics, it cannot be abstracted from local contexts and implanted into school curricula. Rather, school systems need to embrace actors who carry and disseminate IK as equal partners in education provision. This raises crucial

questions. **How can learning IK and cultural values be practically operationalised within existing primary school infrastructure? How can populations’ definitions of quality education be reconciled with definitions elaborated by the international education community?**

This brief presents an effective template pioneered during the innovative *Culture, Education and Development* programme run from 2008 by NGO *Grandmother Project - Change Through Culture* (GMP) in southern Senegal. Main outcomes were:

- effective integration of IK and cultural values into school teaching
- renewal of IK transmission within communities and families
- reduction in extra-marital teenage pregnancy and early/forced marriage of girls
- increased school enrolment and attendance rates including among girls
- increased quality of teaching and pupils’ learning in reading and oral expression.

SDG4 (Education) Target 7: Ensure that education acknowledges the key role that culture plays in achieving sustainability, taking into account local conditions and culture.

UNESCO 2015, World Declaration on Education, draft Plan of Action for Education 2030, p.11

The Culture, Education and Development strategy: Rationale, Aims & Objectives

GMP began the *Culture, Education and Development* programme in 2008 in the commune of Kandia, department of Velingara, region of Kolda, in Senegal (West Africa).

Senegal is ranked 154th out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI). People have, on average, 4.5 years of formal schooling. Velingara has some of the lowest school enrolment and attendance rates in Senegal, particularly among girls. In 2008, the gross primary enrolment rate in Velingara was 56%, compared to the national average of 70%. Between the ages of 7 and 18 rates of female enrolment fall from 66.2% to 8.2%, compared to 65.3% and 31.5% for boys. Female drop-out is linked to high rates of teenage pregnancy and early/forced marriage. In Kolda, proportions of girls married before 18 are highest in the country at 68% compared to the national average of 33%.



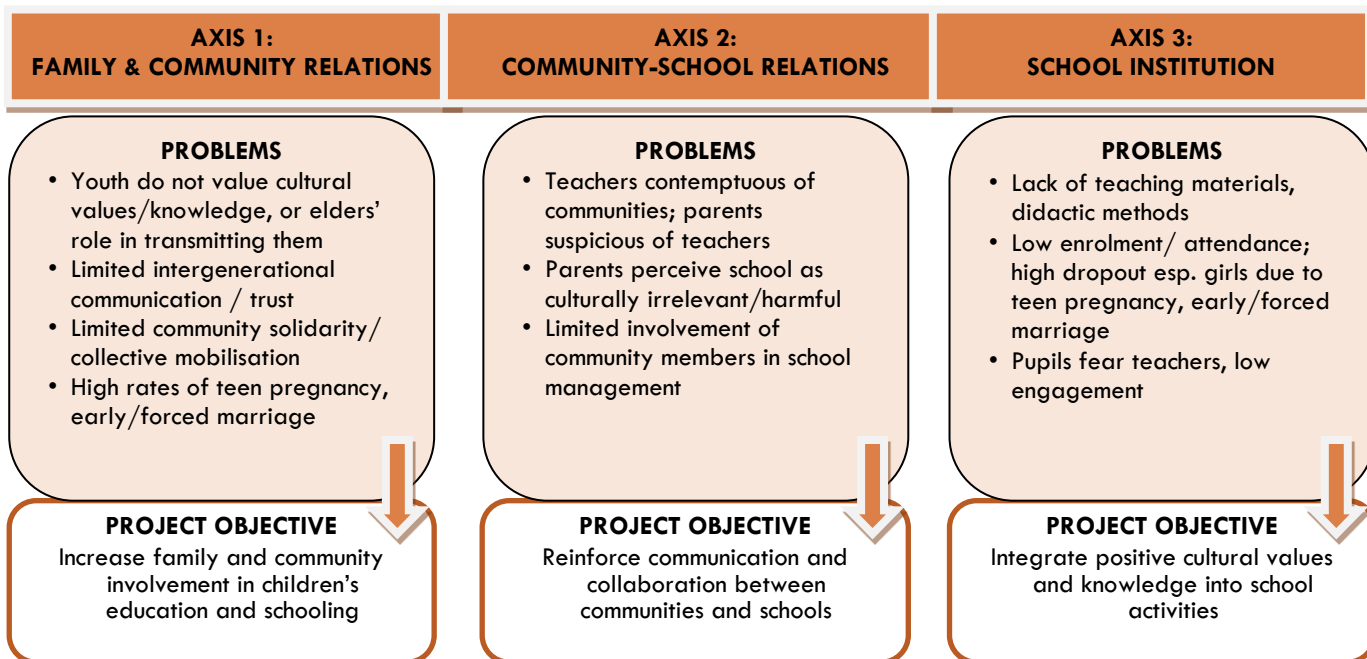
Using participatory methods, GMP found that low school engagement in Kandia was linked to parents' perceptions that schools were culturally inappropriate and threatened IK transmission.

The school has done enormous damage. Our culture has been neglected and we have lost touch with our roots. Without a cultural grounding, we cannot use schooling to develop our country.

Ibrahima Diao, World Vision Senegal

Parents linked extra-marital teenage pregnancy to reduced transmission of cultural values which would enable girls to protect themselves. Feeling desperate, parents used early or forced marriage as a preventative strategy. Based on communities' definition of problems and the solutions, GMP elaborated the *Culture, Education and Development* strategy along 3 axes. The programme was implemented in 32 villages, involving 121 teachers and 4090 pupils.

CULTURE, EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



The Culture, Education and Development strategy: Activities undertaken

Axis 1: Family and community relations

Intergenerational fora on social cohesion and children's education were organised in each village. Teachers and community leaders met during two days to discuss problems relating to children's education, development and well-being. The fora took place twice a year, and were often the first occasion during which community members and teachers were able to meet together to discuss problems and formulate solutions. **Days of Praise of Grandmothers** were held as an occasion for community members, teachers and religious leaders to unite in celebration of grandmothers' role in family and community development, especially children's well-being and education.

What is an "intergenerational forum"?

Twenty or so community members of different ages and both genders meet to engage in dialogue on determined themes. Discussion takes place separately in peer groups, for instance between grandmothers or adolescent boys, who then reunite to share their ideas in plenary.



Axis 2: Activities to strengthen community-school relations

Workshops between teachers and grandmothers were organised to reinforce trust and collaboration between them, to create an environment within families and schools which promotes schooling, especially of girls. **Grandmothers were invited to participate in classrooms**, to support integration of cultural values and IK into school teaching. Their knowledge sharing mainly takes place through telling of tales, proverbs, riddles and moral stories. Teachers and school directors meet with grandmothers in advance to plan pedagogical activities together.

Teachers, administrators and community members collaborate to organise **pedagogical cultural activities in their villages** to reinforce teaching of positive cultural values through traditional means of tales,

One person alone can do little. A child is like a cooking pot. You need three stones to support the pot so that it cooks well. In the same way, children need to be supported by parents, grandparents and teachers in order to succeed. **Diabou, grandmother**

proverbs, riddles, dances and games. Village activities included a "night of tales" where grandmothers and children shared stories and riddles around a fire, and performances by girls and boys of initiation dances, traditional costume and hairstyles.

Axis 3: Activities at the level of the school

Teachers were invited to **training sessions on integrating cultural values into their teaching**. The objectives were to increase teachers' interest in integrating cultural

How can someone who plays all these roles be excluded from defining and implementing school programmes? I have realised that grandmothers play the same role as teachers, and even go beyond. They play an essential role, and I ask myself why they weren't involved before. **Bouraima Baldè adjunct school director in Kérévane village**

knowledge and values into school activities to support the national curriculum, discuss the role of the teacher in terms of community development beyond the school

setting, and assist teachers in getting to grips with new teaching materials. The training approach used is based on adult learning principles, including role plays, reflection, etc. Thanks to the training teachers learned new skills, but more importantly reflected upon their own attitudes towards local communities and their cultural heritage.

Meetings between school directors were also organised. These sessions served as training and for directors to share their experiences and ideas, and contribute to the ownership and institutionalisation of the project by the Ministry of Education at



departmental level (*Inspection de l'Education et de la Formation*).

Five bilingual booklets in French and Pulaar (the local language) were produced based on interviews with community elders, teachers and pupils. Pictures were provided by local artists. The themes relate to cultural values, IK, and traditional modes of teaching, all of which are lacking in the current curriculum. The booklets include: The role of grandmothers in African society, African values for children of today, African tales for children of today, African proverbs for children of today, and Children's rights and responsibilities.



An **interactive game, 'Who Are We?'** was designed to encourage reflection among children of their cultural identity. It entails discussing proverbs and values, reflection on the relevance of cultural knowledge in everyday life, promotes discussion on intergenerational relationships, and reinforces teamwork, collaboration and solidarity. Local musicians composed **songs in praise of grandmothers** which were taught to children by teachers and grandmothers, and sung in schools and during community events.

Positive impacts of the Culture, Education and Development strategy

Axis 1: Changes in family and community relations

Community members report that the project brought the **return of respect for elders** and encouraged

Before, grandmothers were considered to be witches. Now, they are at the heart of education, health and protection of children. **Diabou Diamanka, grandmother**

closeness and communication between generations. The traditional role of elders, especially grandmothers, in educating children has greatly increased. They have returned to using traditional educational

techniques (tales, riddles, dances, games). Children appreciate elders' role and approach them to learn.

An important effect of increased intergenerational communication, especially between young girls and

There are no more teen pregnancies here any more! The project has really helped. Grandmothers have discussions with mothers and girls, they took action to prevent it. Before, we married girls young but we don't do it anymore. Now girls marry at the age of 17 or 18. **Mamadou Mballo, village chief**



Before, we used to teach and go straight home. We never thought to get involved in village activities. But now that has all changed! There is closeness now between the community and teachers. **Ibrahima Diao, pre-school director**

grandmothers, is the **decrease in teen pregnancy**. Grandmothers now organise discussions with young girls to advise them. Increased intergenerational communication, reduction in teen pregnancy, and greater awareness of the negative effects of early and forced marriage following intergenerational fora have all contributed to the **abandon of early and forced marriage**. There has also been a **reduction in corporal punishment as a method of educating children**, in favour of dialogue.

Axis 2: Changes in community-school relations

There have been significant **improvements in school-community relations**. Teachers and parents now trust each other and collaborate on the shared goal of children's education. Teachers participate more in social activities in the villages and make courtesy visits. Pupils and teachers are also closer.

Parents support children's schooling more. They help by preparing food, raising funds, or cleaning/repairing classrooms; and are more active in formal management structures like the Parents Association and School Management Committee.

Teachers and grandmothers together

Axis 3: Changes at the level of the school

Integration of IK, cultural values and resource persons into teaching mean **school activities are more relevant, motivating and interesting for pupils, teachers and communities.** Teachers and parents agree that **all children of primary school age are enrolled in school and attend.** Teachers and parents



When the grandmothers come to class, the children pay great attention, there is total silence. We were amazed and thought of increasing these sessions to recuperate distracted children. **Diata, teacher**

cooperate more which has lessened drop-out. **Teen pregnancies and early/forced marriage have virtually disappeared** from all communities, which helped maintain girls in school.

My son is too young to attend school, but he is now so motivated that I enrolled him in the first grade. The teachers did everything to help, including buying the exercise books. These days if you want to punish a child you say 'You won't be allowed to go to school!' and they cry!

Moussa Mballo, male elder

Teachers also report **improvements in teaching and learning quality.** By providing additional teaching materials, GMP enabled them to **diversify their methods.** Booklets in particular were appreciated for addressing a lack of reading texts. Teachers have noticed **improvements in pupils' learning.** Thanks to the participation of resource persons in classes, and integration of cultural values, **they pay greater attention in class.** They **understand better** because of explanations in local language which are then translated into French, and by using the booklets. **Levels of reading and dictation among pupils have also improved.** With better relations between teachers and pupils, pupils feel more confident expressing themselves. Teachers have also found that the game 'Who Are We?' has greatly **improved debating skills and oral expression.**

Key strengths of GMP's Culture, Education and Development strategy

Effectiveness in increasing education quality	The strategy has proved effective in addressing community definitions of quality education. Integrating IK into school teaching has also increased enrolment and attendance, and school quality as defined by the international community in terms of teaching practice and pupils' acquisition of core skills. These findings are therefore significant for actors wishing to harness culture for quality education and sustainable development in the context of the SDGs.
Sustainability	GMP promotes project sustainability by using action research principles to elaborate solutions which address communities' priorities. Rather than providing investment in physical infrastructure, it focuses on building <i>social infrastructure</i> , such as social cohesion, community solidarity and self-reliance, to support community mobilisation for sustainable development.
Replicability	The strategy is replicable as GMP does not promote a new curriculum which abstracts IK, but instead brings a toolkit of activities – based on dialogue between community members and teachers – which enables people to elaborate activities which integrate IK into existing school curricula, tailored to different contexts.

Research for this report was collected in Velingara in January 2015 by Mr. Hamidou Soukouna and Ms Anneke Newman.

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Anneke Newman is a British anthropologist who has spent five years conducting a PhD on educational decision-making among families in northern Senegal, including their engagement with non-Western forms of education. She has worked as a research consultant for GMP since 2011, as well as for other community development and education-based NGOs in the UK and Africa.