

Managing Linguistic Diversity in Literacy and Language Development: An Analysis of Teachers' Attitudes, Skills and Strategies in Multilingual Classrooms in Kenyan Primary Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates teachers' language practices in multilingual classrooms with regard to their attitudes, skills and strategies in their management of linguistic diversity among learners in their first year of primary school. Both the critical interpretive theoretical paradigm adopted and the qualitative research approach employed in the execution of the study presupposed gathering rich data, which a case study design of research assured. The data for the study was gathered from four year one classrooms purposively selected based on parameters that were deemed of interest in this study. These included, but were not limited to, the location of the school, the linguistic diversity among learners in the classrooms and the literacy traditions of the first languages spoken by the learners in the target classrooms. Although the specific context provided real input to the study, the findings may be relevant to language-in-education issues in many other African countries, and even in multilingual communities beyond. The study reveals yawning discrepancies between language policy and practice; between teachers' beliefs about linguistic diversity and their actual language behaviour in the classrooms; and between the definitions of mother tongue provided by the Ministry of Education and teachers' re-interpretations of these definitions in the various contexts studied. The study further indicates that teachers are working in an environment that is not supportive of effective policy implementation. This very limited policy implementation support is reflected in teacher training and preparation, teacher placement criteria, text book production and school examinations. This study indicates that even a sound understanding of linguistic diversity among teachers and their best intentions to give learners a sound foundation, is only the beginning of literacy development of young learners in Kenya. It recommends a new and incisive look at critical aspects of the education system in an effort to synchronise the different levels at which policy and practice need to meet. Various well-informed choices need to be made in the creation of a supportive environment for effective policy implementation. This should include among other things a change in the language-in-education policy to move away from early-exit to late-exit mother tongue education, and more first language maintenance in bilingual or multilingual classrooms. If learners are to benefit from mother tongue instruction in line with current research in the field, much needs to be done. Based on the insights gained in this study, a revision of teacher education curricula to include the management of linguistically diverse learners and improved language awareness is suggested, as is flexible curriculum delivery, scrapping of formal examinations in the early years and introduction of alternative assessment methods in these levels. In later years, bilingual (in some cases even multilingual) tests are bound to lower the drop-out rate and produce more understanding and less rote learning. The aim should be to assure multilingual, multiliteracy development and academic achievement for all learners regardless of their particular linguistic backgrounds.

Key words: linguistic diversity, literacy and language development, teachers' attitudes, skills, strategies, multilingual classrooms, Kenya, primary schools

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