

The Dilemma of Language of Instruction and the Provision of Mother Tongue Instruction to Minorities

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African countries, after attaining independence, embarked on reforming education systems, believing they would wipe out poverty and illiteracy and help people move towards self-sustenance. But this didn't happen. Money is spent on curriculum reform every five years, yet the ills of hunger and underdevelopment still persist. Language is central to African development and mother tongue education is fundamental to this. Through the mother tongue development efforts can be explained.

Although multilingualism is a reality for the majority of African nations, it is regarded as an impediment fraught with obstacles such as lack of teachers, teaching materials, the perceived underdevelopment of African languages, mixed speakers in classrooms and the changeover to English medium instruction in many places. But for children entering school, the mother tongue is the only means of communication they possess, the only tool they can employ to settle into the school environment.

On the other hand, in the South African constitution, indigenous languages are included, but the wording is exclusive: "...African languages *and Khoe and San*." Several languages are on the brink of extinction or virtually extinct and funding is very limited, even though attempts are ongoing for some languages to be revitalized with the help of linguists. In Botswana, the attempt to unify the country has resulted in favoring Setswana and English as mediums of instruction. No mother tongue education is offered for minority languages.

In Namibia, after three years of mother tongue instruction, English becomes the medium of instruction in grade 4. There was talk of creating new institute of African languages for language and material development, but nothing came about, because leaders and the public in general equate English with being learned. And commercial publishers and government don't want to touch smaller language populations because of economic considerations, so all is at the mercy of donor agencies. The principal and the pastor are key influential figures in the community, and influence language choices at schools. If they say, "We should get English," everyone agrees. So there are no pedagogy-based reasons for teaching in English, and the teachers are not fluent in English either. In the third year of English-medium instruction, students were still merely identifying items: bottle, tree, chair, et cetera. English medium instruction was taking place through the mother tongue: 90% or more in mother tongue than in English.

The Intersectoral Task Force for Marginalised Children in Namibia must address the issue of learners pushed out of schools by alienating policies and other logistical matters such as long distances to schools and dire poverty. It must be recognized that curricula must integrate local language and culture and that marginalization in this area impacts culture, identity and also livelihood of minorities. National languages must be elevated in status and assigned functional value in the economy. Without this, minorities are abandoning their culture and languages in favor of dominant ones to have access to better opportunities.