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**Preferred Language of Instruction in Schools in South Africa: Findings from
the South African Attitudes Survey (SASAS)**

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Human Sciences Research Council

Paper presented at the conference organized by Limpopo Legislature on Language
policy in schools held at the Ranch Hotel, Polokwane 1st Dec 2006.

Introduction

Education, including training, is a large and diverse area with which every citizen interacts, often repeatedly and in different roles. The range of educational issues concerning citizens is correspondingly extensive. Nevertheless, given that education has been a highly contested area in South Africa, with education often taking a central place in the struggle for freedom (Kallaway 2003), it is surprising that there is a dearth of material on attitudes to education.

In the early 1990s, in the context of the changes of the time, writers began to focus on the policy challenges of the emerging new dispensation (as in Unterhalter, Wolpe & Botha 1991). As the new regime consolidated and began to put its mark on many spheres of social policy, writers continued to focus on questions of educational transformation, but with increasing attention to 'reality' as well as 'vision' (the words are those of Morrow & King 1998. See also Kallaway et al. 1997). As the intractability of problems became clearer, there was however an increased focus on the legacy that continued to determine educational experience and set the parameters of feasible change (Hyslop 1999; Kraak & Young 2001; Kallaway 2002; Chisholm 2004). Within this broad discussion, various sub-themes preoccupy educationists and the South African public.

In the South African context, the question of language has been obscured by the apartheid balkanising of African societies, politically, culturally and linguistically. The attempt to force Africans into ethnic boxes gave own-tongue education a bad name. Nonetheless, with these ulterior motives removed, the research consensus is that first-language

instruction at junior levels is the pedagogically correct route. There is also official commitment to this strategy. Even so, there is a substantial public commitment to English, though considerably less so amongst Afrikaans-speakers. Thobeka Mda has recently neatly summarised the arguments in this sphere (Mda in Chisholm 2004), and the issue can be traced back in, amongst others, works by the Department of Education (1997 and 2002), Heugh (1998), Mda (1997), and PRAESA (1998).

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to assess the attitudes of South Africans towards the language of instruction in various levels of the education system. More specifically the study sought to find if there were statistically significant differences among key demographic characteristics and the preferred language of instruction in the education system. The key demographic variables considered in the analysis are, environmental milieu, province, race, household monthly income, personal monthly income, age, highest educational level completed and gender.

METHODOLOGY

A causal comparative research design was used and data collected using a questionnaire. In a causal comparative research design, the events being investigated have already occurred and are therefore studied retrospectively. The target population of the study was all South African citizens ages 16 and above. This includes people living in households/ structures/ hostels/ but excludes those living in special institutions, hospitals, and prisons.

A sample of 5000 individuals aged 16 years and above was initially selected from households in 500 Enumerator areas (EAs) but only 4980 participants were realized. In each EA, ten households were selected using systematic random sampling technique and one individual aged 16 years and above, selected at random from each household. There were more participants from the urban (N=3402) than from the rural (N=1578) areas. Compared by gender, there were more female (53.2%) than male (46.7%) respondents that completed the questionnaire. The sample was also representative by race with the African Blacks being the majority (76.4%), followed by White (11.6%), Coloured (8.8%) and Indians/Asians (2.8%). A summary of the distribution of the participants by key demographic characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the key demographic variables

Demographic variable	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Province	WC	548	10.8
	EC	593	13.2
	NC	470	1.9
	FS	437	6.2
	KZN	798	20.1
	NW	396	8.3
	GT	590	22.4
	MP	553	6.6
	Limpopo	595	10.4
	Total	4980	100.0
Environmental milieu	Urban formal	2805	57.9
	Urban informal	597	8.0
	Tribal	959	28.9
	Rural formal	619	5.3
	Total	4980	100.0
Gender	Male	2009	46.7
	Female	2969	53.2
	Total	4978	100.0
Race of respondent	African/Black	3052	76.4
	Coloured	813	8.8
	Indian/Asian	482	2.8
	White	623	11.6
	Other	10	.3
	Total	4980	100.0
Personal total monthly income	No income	1651	39.7
	R1 - R500	665	13.3
	R501 - R1500	1071	20.1
	R1501 - R5000	445	8.3
	R5001+	238	4.2
	Refused	769	14.4
Total	4839		
Highest qualification completed	No schooling	415	8.4
	Primary	1112	22.6
	Gr 8-11	1775	36.1
	Matric	1147	23.3
	Tertiary	427	8.7
	Don't Know	45	.9
	Total	4921	100.0
Age categories	16-24 years	1038	20.9
	25-34 years	1194	24.0
	35-49 years	1539	31.0
	50 + years	1197	24.1
	Total	4968	100.0

Data was collected using a questionnaire that was developed to collect information on wide range of social issues including education. The questionnaire was pre-tested (piloted) on 60 individuals aged 16 years and older. Pre-testing was critical for identifying problems for both respondents and interviewers with regard to the field logistics. All the inputs and comments from the pilot study were incorporated in the final questionnaire used for data collection. Information from the completed questionnaires was captured and cleaned. It was then weighted to the entire South African population so as to control for sampling biases that may have arisen during the data collection. The weighting of the data is also crucial in projecting the findings on the sample to that of the entire population. Descriptive statistical analyses used the weighted data while the inferential statistical analyses used the un-weighted data.

RESULTS

Responses to questions on the preferred language of instruction in the various levels of South African education system were measured across a range of categories, among them, environmental milieu, province, race, household monthly income, personal monthly income, age, highest educational level completed and gender. It became apparent in examining the data that in very few cases does gender make a significant difference to responses.

There are long-standing and continuing debates in multilingual countries like South Africa about the language of instruction in schools. The scholarly consensus is that first language instruction is desirable in the initial stages of schooling. Respondents were asked to say what they thought should be the language of instruction from Grades 1 to 3, 4 to 9, 10 to 12, and in higher education. Though English is the home language for quite a small minority of South Africans, it is notable that even for Grades 1 to 3, in all except the predominantly, though by no means exclusively, Afrikaans-speaking provinces of the Western and Northern Cape, a majority favours the use of English at this level. However, in the Western Cape just under a quarter favour English, and just over 38 percent in the Northern Cape. In Limpopo, no less than 70 percent favour English at this elementary level in school. It is worth emphasising that in the provinces where most speak African languages other than Afrikaans, still only a minority favours their use in school, even at the

lowest grades – as, for instance, just over 41 percent in the Xhosa-speaking Eastern Cape, and the 44 percent in KwaZulu Natal, where the population is supposed to be particularly assertive of Xhosa and Zulu culture and language respectively. Afrikaans however, which has been historically privileged, and has been enabled to develop as a medium of modern communication far more than other African languages, retains favour with many where it is predominant. Details of these results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Preferred main language of instruction by Province

	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GT	MP	LP	Total
Grade 1 to 3										
English	24.3%	53.1%	37.3%	52.3%	55.8%	57.7%	57.0%	65.3%	69.9%	54.0%
Home language	67.9%	41.2%	41.5%	46.5%	44.0%	39.2%	41.1%	30.7%	28.7%	42.8%
Afrikaans	7.7%	5.6%	21.2%	1.2%	.2%	2.8%	1.9%	3.8%	1.4%	3.2%
Grade 4 to 9										
English	29.1%	89.3%	53.3%	82.1%	92.9%	85.9%	83.7%	82.5%	88.8%	80.2%
Home language	62.3%	5.1%	28.7%	13.9%	6.9%	11.5%	14.5%	13.4%	9.9%	16.4%
Afrikaans	8.4%	5.6%	18.0%	4.0%	.2%	2.3%	1.8%	3.9%	1.4%	3.3%
Grade 10 to 12										
English	33.5%	92.6%	63.9%	85.3%	95.6%	91.1%	88.8%	87.4%	93.4%	84.5%
Home language	58.3%	2.3%	21.3%	12.8%	3.9%	6.1%	9.9%	8.6%	4.7%	12.5%
Afrikaans	8.1%	5.0%	14.8%	1.9%	.5%	2.5%	1.2%	3.8%	1.9%	3.0%
Higher Education										
English	55.6%	93.2%	65.7%	89.0%	95.5%	91.5%	90.6%	91.1%	95.3%	88.1%
Home language	36.8%	2.0%	19.5%	9.2%	4.1%	5.5%	8.2%	4.9%	3.7%	9.1%
Afrikaans	7.4%	4.8%	14.5%	1.8%	.4%	2.7%	1.1%	3.6%	1.0%	2.7%

Age seems to make a significant difference to responses at all education levels. The younger the respondents, the more they favour English as the language of instruction. More than 59 percent of 16 to 24 year-olds favour English as the language of instruction for children in Grades 1 to 3, but just over 48 percent of those of 50 years and older. Results on preferred language when compared by age category are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Preferred main language of instruction by Age category

	16-24 years	25-34 yrs	35-49 yrs	50 + yrs	Total
Grade 1 to 3					
English	59.4%	54.5%	52.3%	48.3%	54.0%
Home language	38.7%	41.7%	44.8%	47.2%	42.8%
Afrikaans	1.9%	3.8%	2.9%	4.3%	3.1%
Grade 4 to 9					
English	84.8%	83.5%	76.5%	75.1%	80.3%
Home language	13.2%	12.4%	20.6%	20.2%	16.4%
Afrikaans	2.1%	4.1%	2.9%	4.4%	3.3%
Grade 10 to 12					
English	87.8%	88.6%	80.7%	80.2%	84.5%
Home language	10.4%	8.6%	16.0%	15.0%	12.4%
Afrikaans	1.8%	2.8%	3.2%	4.6%	3.0%
Higher Education					
English	91.4%	91.3%	84.4%	84.7%	88.1%
Home language	7.1%	6.3%	12.4%	10.6%	9.0%
Afrikaans	1.5%	2.4%	3.1%	4.4%	2.7%

Responses arranged by racial category are interesting as is shown in Table 4: Indians (in South Africa, an almost exclusively first-language English-speaking community) are over 94 percent in favour of English at this level. Africans, however, few of whom speak English as their home language, are 58 percent in favour of teaching in English at this junior school level. This is true of less than a quarter of coloureds, who favour the home language, which would in most cases be Afrikaans, and of just over 40 percent of whites. Once again, it is clear that African languages are considerably less favoured than English and Afrikaans, and that the hegemony of these two historically dominant languages remains. English, though, seems to be the real linguistic winner.

Table 4: Preferred main language of instruction by Race

	African Black	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White	Other	Total
Grade 1 to 3						
English	57.9%	24.2%	94.1%	40.5%	98.5%	54.0%
Home language	40.2%	63.7%	5.6%	53.7%	1.5%	42.8%
Afrikaans	1.8%	11.9%	.4%	5.8%	0	3.2%
Grade 4 to 9						
English	89.6%	37.5%	95.3%	47.0%	98.5%	80.2%
Home language	8.3%	50.1%	4.0%	47.1%	1.5%	16.4%
Afrikaans	2.0%	12.2%	.7%	5.9%	0	3.3%
Grade 10 to 12						
English	93.8%	42.6%	95.6%	52.5%	98.5%	84.5%
Home language	4.4%	46.2%	3.7%	41.7%	1.5%	12.5%
Afrikaans	1.7%	10.9%	.7%	5.9%	0	3.0%
Higher Education						
English	95.0%	55.6%	97.0%	64.9%	98.5%	88.1%
Home language	3.3%	34.8%	2.6	28.7	1.5%	9.1%
Afrikaans	1.5%	9.2%	.4	6.4		2.7%

Income makes comparatively little difference to attitudes here, with a half or more favouring English, and 60 percent in the highest income category, and the same pattern applies to respondents divided by educational qualification, where again about half favour English, but more than 60 percent in the case of those with matriculation and tertiary qualifications. Environmental milieu in South Africa depicts the socio economic status of the residents with the poorest residing in urban informal and in tribal areas. English, again, seems to be the preferred language of instruction among the residents of Tribal areas in all the levels while Afrikaans is favoured among the rural formal residents. These results are summarized in Tables 5, 6 and 7 in the Appendix.

As might be expected, the proportion of respondents committing themselves to English rises in all cases as respondents are asked about Grades 4 to 9, 10 to 12, and higher education. However, the partial exception remains the Western Cape, and to a lesser extent the Northern Cape. Only at tertiary level does a bare majority – below 56 percent – of Western Cape respondents choose English as the language of instruction. Clearly, this atypical response represents the strength of Afrikaans in this province. In other provinces,

apart from the Northern Cape, already by Grades 4 to 9 commitment to English is 82 percent or above in terms of teaching and learning.

The same pattern occurs when the other variables of race, educational qualifications and income levels are examined. Commitment to English rises as the question is asked in relation to the higher levels of education. The question of language in relation to income is worth examining a little further in this context. While commitment to English rises fast amongst the poorer income-groups as the question is applied to the more advanced levels of education, it does so much more slowly amongst the better-off. For example, while more than 80 percent of those with no income or below R1500 per month believe that English should be utilised in Grades 4 to 9, approximately 70 percent of those with incomes over R1501 feel the same way, and the same differential of approximately 10 percent is maintained for Grades 10 to 12, even widening to 12 percent or 13 percent in relation to higher education.

In order to identify the demographic factors that could predict the likelihood of a given category of participants in selecting English as the preferred language of instruction, a series of Binary logistic regression models were developed.

Binary logistic regression of the dependent variable main language of instruction in Grade 1-3, English, identifies only three significant predictors, namely, race, personal monthly income, and education level (see Model 1 in Appendix). The results indicate that Indians/Asians, followed by Africans, are more likely than whites to select English as the main language for instruction in the Foundation phase. Those with no income are more likely than well off individuals to select English as the main language of instruction. But this trend decreases with increase in income. Those with lower levels of education are less likely than those with tertiary level to select English. The pattern is similar with regard to the other levels of the education system.

It is interesting to see how different the results are when the dependent variable of main language of instruction is recoded as (1=mother tongue 0=others). Those who are most likely to select mother tongue as the language of instruction are either white, or people with high personal income or those with low education. This same pattern is evident when the other levels of education are considered (see Model 2 in Appendix for details). This reflects complex, cross cutting patterns of class, ethnicity, education and language.

CONCLUSION

The emerging patterns regarding the demographic variables with respect to preferred language of instruction indicate clearly that there is a complex relationship between wealth and poverty, race, and language. English is the language of perceived potential upward educational mobility amongst almost all Black Africans; Afrikaans maintains some strength at all levels of the educational system amongst the better-off, a group that comprises, amongst others, many whites and some coloureds, and African languages, even at the lowest levels in the system, are considered as having a subsidiary role that diminishes yet further as the African child climbs through the system. This is an ironic commentary on declarations that the role of African languages should increase. It is an area that will repay close examination over succeeding years in longitudinal studies.

Attitudes are by their nature changeable, mirroring a multitude of social factors. Education in particular has been subjected to many changes and stresses in South Africa, which do not seem to be about to cease. It will be fascinating and instructive to track alterations and continuities in social attitudes in this sphere as future surveys accumulate.

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APPENDIX

Table 5: Preferred main language of instruction by Personal total monthly income

	No income	R1 - R500	R501 - 1500	R1501 - 5000	R5001+	Total
Grade 1 to 3						
English	56.4%	53.2%	55.1%	48.4%	60.0%	53.7%
Home language	40.5%	44.0%	41.9%	49.1%	38.9%	43.0%
Afrikaans	3.1%	2.7%	2.8%	2.5%	1.1%	3.2%
Grade 4 to 9						
English	85.0%	88.4%	81.9%	69.8%	70.5%	80.0%
Home language	11.7%	8.9%	14.9%	27.9%	28.3%	16.6%
Afrikaans	3.2%	2.6%	3.0%	2.3%	1.2%	3.4%
Grade 10 to 12						
English	88.9%	92.9%	86.3%	73.8%	73.8%	84.2%
Home language	8.4%	3.8%	11.0%	24.2%	24.5%	12.7%
Afrikaans	2.7%	3.2%	2.5%	2.0%	1.7%	3.0%
Higher education						
English	91.0%	93.9%	90.3%	77.7%	78.0%	87.9%
Home language	6.7%	3.6%	7.1%	19.9%	18.5%	9.2%
Afrikaans	2.3%	2.5%	2.3%	2.5%	3.5%	2.8%

Table 6: Preferred main language of instruction by Highest level of education completed

	No schooling	Primary	Gr 8-11	Matric	Tertiary	Total
Grade 1 to 3						
English	47.2%	47.8%	52.6%	61.0%	62.8%	54.2%
Home language	48.4%	47.5%	43.9%	36.9%	36.7%	42.5%
Afrikaans	4.1%	4.5%	3.5%	2.0%	.5%	3.2%
Grade 4 to 9						
English	84.3%	78.8%	82.6%	77.1%	78.6%	80.2%
Home language	10.8%	16.2%	13.9%	21.0%	20.5%	16.4%
Afrikaans	4.5%	4.9%	3.5%	1.9%	.9%	3.3%
Grade 10 to 12						
English	88.8%	85.4%	86.3%	80.4%	82.9%	84.5%
Home language	6.1%	10.0%	10.5%	18.3%	16.1%	12.4%
Afrikaans	4.8%	4.5%	3.1%	1.3%	1.0%	3.0%
Higher Education						
English	91.5%	88.7%	88.8%	85.5%	89.0%	88.1%
Home language	3.6%	7.1%	8.5%	13.3%	9.3%	9.0%
Afrikaans	4.3%	4.0%	2.7%	1.2%	1.7%	2.8%

Table 7: Preferred main language of instruction by Environmental milieu

	Urban formal	Urban informal	Tribal	Rural formal	Total
Grade 1 to 3					
English	52.8%	49.9%	59.1%	44.8%	54.0%
Home language	43.1%	48.7%	39.5%	49.6%	42.8%
Afrikaans	4.1%	1.3%	1.3%	5.5%	3.2%
Grade 4 to 9					
English	74.4%	86.5%	91.6%	72.2%	80.2%
Home language	21.3%	12.6%	6.9%	21.0%	16.4%
Afrikaans	4.3%	.8%	1.4%	6.7%	3.3%
Grade 10 to 12					
English	78.8%	89.0%	95.4%	80.4%	84.5%
Home language	17.5%	9.1%	2.9%	14.9%	12.5%
Afrikaans	3.7%	1.8%	1.6%	4.6%	3.0%
Higher education					

English	83.9%	91.3%	96.6%	81.9%	88.1%
Home language	12.5%	7.2%	2.0%	12.7%	9.1%
Afrikaans	3.5%	1.4%	1.3%	5.0%	2.7%

Model 1: Logistic regression of Language of instruction (1=English, 0=others) at Grade 1-3 with race, personal monthly income and education level.

Individual characteristics	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Race (White)			356.4	.000	
Africans	1.03	.14	54.4	.000	2.807
Coloured	-.41	.16	6.7	.010	.661
Indians	3.28	.25	168.3	.000	26.615
Personal income (R5000+)			10.7	.031	
No income	.16	.20	0.7	.417	1.179
R1-500	.39	.20	3.744	.053	1.480
R501-1500	.20	.19	1.046	.306	1.217
R1501-5000	-.078	.190	.168	.682	.925
Qualification(Tertiary)			45.146	.000	
No Schooling	-.930	.196	22.429	.000	.395
Primary	-.674	.169	15.931	.000	.510
Grade 8-11	-.344	.158	4.730	.030	.709
Matric	-.043	.157	.075	.784	.958
Constant	-.442	.211	4.397	.036	.643

Model 2: Logistic regression of Language of instruction (1=Mother tongue, 0=others) at Grade 1-3 with race, personal monthly income and education level.

Individual characteristics	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Odds ratio (Exp(B))
Race (White)					
Africans	-.693	.136	25.971	.000	.500
Coloured	-.068	.150	.203	.652	.935
Indians/Asians	-2.955	.251	138.956	.000	.052
Personal income (R5000+)					
No income	-.290	.197	2.160	.142	.748
R1-500	-.595	.198	9.078	.003	.551
R501-1500	-.318	.186	2.908	.088	.728
R1501-5000	-.006	.184	.001	.973	.994
Qualification(Tertiary)					
No Schooling	.567	.192	8.724	.003	1.762
Primary	.469	.166	8.032	.005	1.599
Grade 8-11	.233	.155	2.271	.132	1.263
Matric	.032	.154	.043	.835	1.032
Constant	.327	.206	2.518	.113	1.386