

LIBERATE ENGLISH FROM ITS CRIPPLING HEGEMONY

Home-language foundation is vital

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MISPLACED controversy followed Education Minister Naledi Pandor's reference to language in her recent budget speech. It was not Pandor who introduced an optional status for English. The constitution settled the matter: there are 11 official languages and a new school language policy dated 1967. Yet English has not been abandoned as the most favoured language of educational choice. Motivation to learn English has never been stronger.

Nevertheless, English, like French, Portuguese and Spanish, cannot offer successful education to all in Africa. These languages work well for the few middle-class children who already know one of them before entering school. For the other 80%, they become barriers to learning where they are used for cognitively challenging demands at too early an age.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (Unesco) Education for All and Millennium Development Goals have triggered a number of new inquiries into education failure. One of these is a joint Unesco's Institute of Education (UIE) and Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) study on language education.

Their report shows that vast financial resources, including World Bank loans, pour into education systems designed for failure. Children cannot learn if they cannot understand the language through which the content is taught. It is as simple as that. This is why only five to 20% of primary school children in most African countries enter secondary school.

Amount of trying new tricks, teaching resources or curricula will achieve the impossible. It is no use buying expensive experts from North America, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal or Spain. They are unable to understand how Africa's multilingual context alters the models they bring to Africa.

A common goal of education is that children need to understand the entire curriculum if they are to derive any lasting benefit. A second goal in Africa is that children should achieve high-level proficiency in an international language. Almost every African child will choose one of: English, French, Portuguese, Spanish or Arabic.

There is no short-cut to achieving both goals. Using the international language as a medium too early does not result in success. It is neither educationally sound nor cost-effective to use mainly second/foreign language medium.

The use of the home or familiar language as the medium for at least



CONTROVERSY: The writer says Education Minister Naledi Pandor's recent references to language are positive, and that it would be unconstitutional to make English a compulsory medium.

eight (12 is better) years, plus the competent teaching of the second language as a subject, is one solution. Dual medium education is another option for well-resourced schools. Dual medium means home language for at least six years, followed by home language plus gradual use of the second language for up to, but not more than, 50% of the day.

The continent's failing education systems are based on the conviction that mathematics and science ought to be taught through English, French or Portuguese. Yet there is no example of a national system, anywhere, where maths and science have been taught successfully through a second or foreign language. South Africa's painful performance in recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) studies speaks volumes.

Dogged, persistent expenditure on failing systems contributes to debt, poor economic growth and social and health problems. Swiss economist Francois Grin has shown the European Union, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland and South Africa that cost-effective language models use the local language and a relevant international language.

Cost implications are often exaggerated and misunderstood. Additional costs are modest, involving an initial outlay of three to 4% on top of teacher education and school book costs. This is recoverable within five years through a lower repeater rate and lower drop-out/attrition rate. There is also a correlation between the number of years in school and future earning power. More years in school translates into higher earnings and return through income tax payment.

Pandor's references to language are positive: they offer dislocation from the current expensive, ineffective and inefficient system. It would be unconstitutional to make English a compulsory medium. We also know that it guarantees failure for most African pupils and exacerbates inequality.

The UIE-ADEA study shows that second language-only policies fail the majority of pupils in every international, regional and domestic context in which they have been attempted. It is important for government, therefore, to operationalise the language policy and eliminate systemic inequality.

The policy offers several options, including continuing with current inequitable practice unless proactive

planning kicks in. Afrikaans and English speakers will continue to enjoy mother tongue education and to be examined in either language in the Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC).

They will continue to take the other former official language as their second language (now called First Additional Language or FAL) and have an optional African language at third language level (now the Second Additional Language, SAL). African language speakers will continue to switch to English medium, as early as Grade 3, and fare dismally in maths and science.

This underserves all pupils. English and Afrikaans speakers will find themselves without the linguistic qualifications for future civil service employment, tender and equity opportunities. Few African pupils will penetrate the language barriers to reach higher education.

Progress will come when African pupils can write their FETC examinations in their home language and achieve high proficiency in English. Afrikaans-speakers have achieved high level proficiency in English and access to international activities through this language model for decades. Liberating English from its

current position as the inevitable medium of instruction for pupils who cannot understand it will increase prospects of education success and participation in all domains.

There is a bonanza to boot: it will cost less to increase the chances of success.

It would be more useful to redirect the controversy towards the implementation of a cost-effective, equitable and sound language policy.

Parents of African children should insist that the inexpensive and available electronic resources for translation and terminology development in African languages are harnessed to make maths and science accessible without further delay.

Parents of Afrikaans and English speaking children should insist that the conditions are established to make it possible for their children to take African languages at First Additional (formerly second) language level for the FETC by 2008.

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