

**News24** Guest Column 20190526

<https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/the-science-is-clear-about-mother-tongue-education-so-why-are-we-attacking-it-20190526>

## The science is clear about 'mother-tongue' education. So why are we attacking it?

*A new assault on the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction for children who speak Afrikaans at home, serves to diminish the opportunities for all children to learn through a language that they know best, writes Kathleen Heugh.*

The controversy about "mother tongue education" is not new. It's been around for at least 117 years in South Africa. If we want to cast "blame" around, we might point a finger at the British "anglicisation" policy and restriction of Dutch medium education at the end of the Anglo-Boer (South African) War in 1902.

Lingering resentment of linguistic discrimination resulted in policy to protect and privilege Afrikaans once the National Party came to power in 1948 and resurfaced in 1953 in the Bantu Education Act, according each ethnolinguistic community "the right to mother-tongue education".

Ironically, this was the same year that UNESCO's report on The Use of the Vernacular Languages in Education made recommendations based entirely on educational concerns for use of students' "mother languages" in school systems of Africa.

What sets the two documents apart is that National Party policy was entangled not only in the principles of "rights" and best educational practice. It was enmeshed within racist, segregationist, and inequitable socio-economic policy.

In the case of the UNESCO document, the home, local or mother language of the child was recognised as the essential foundation for education for all children. At the time it was thought that three years of the home language would be enough before a switch to one of the international languages (or former colonial languages) could occur with success. Since 1953, across twenty countries in Africa, we have found that most students need to have a minimum of six years of good teaching through the medium of the home or local language plus good teaching of English before students can learn through the medium of English.

The Six Year Primary Project, 1970-1976, led by Babs Fafunwa and colleagues in Nigeria demonstrated this, not only to Africa, but to the world. It was only 15 years later that the first longitudinal study led by David Ramirez found similar findings in the USA. These findings were further corroborated by Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, in large-scale studies, also in the US in 1997 and 2002.

UNESCO and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) commissioned a 25-country study of language education policy in 2005. By mid-2006

they were able to report to the ministers of education in Libreville that in Africa, we need a minimum of six years of mother-tongue medium education plus good teaching of either English, French or Portuguese, before students can switch to learning through one of these. We were able to understand from both South African data and more recent data from Ethiopia, that under less optimal or less well-resourced conditions, most students require eight years of mother-tongue education plus the teaching of English before they can learn through this language.

These later African research findings have been widely disseminated by UNESCO and currently inform language education policy in South-East Asia and South Asia. They are available in accessible form by UNESCO in: *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education: an evidence- and practice-based policy advocacy brief*.

The African research has similarly informed several international and transnational forums of research including the Council of Europe's Research Network of Excellence, Sustainable Development for a Diverse World. Most recently, for example, it has informed the Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World.

In an international context when South African and African research is being taken up beyond our borders, why are we going backwards in time, and why are we yet again attacking mother-tongue education in our country?

### **Heart-breaking failure of current system**

Disentangling sound educational principles from discriminatory and inequitable policy, twenty-five years after the official end of apartheid, should be possible. We have decades of research evidence from within South Africa, from across Africa, and elsewhere. This proves beyond any doubt that most school students cannot learn through a language that they do not know well and that they do not understand.

It is simply not possible to establish strong foundations of literacy and numeracy in a language that neither the students nor their teachers know well enough. The appalling, and let us be honest, heart-breaking failure of our current education system to teach students to read, write and understand even basic mathematics is shameful.

Even though we began our new vision for an equitable South Africa in 1994, with a Constitution that enshrines the right of all children to receive education in a language that is appropriate, we have failed. Even though we invested in a Language Plan Task Group Report (1996) and the establishment of a statutory body, the Pan South African Language Board, also in 1996, to oversee a new vision for multilingualism in the country, we have failed.

Even though we developed a new language in education policy in 1997, one that made provision for an additive approach to bilingual or multilingual education based on the mother tongue (or home language) plus English, we have failed. We have done very little to make sure that we do this properly. We have tried to deny most of our children what they need. For the most part we have pretended that they can get this through English, sooner rather than later. The result is that they have not.

## **Assault on Afrikaans not helpful**

A new assault on the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction for children who speak Afrikaans at home, is not helpful. All that it does is to diminish the opportunities for all children to learn through a language that they know best. It serves to discourage parents from insisting on both the mother tongue and an opportunity to learn English, and possibly also another South African language well. It takes us away from multilingualism that will prepare our students for employment and meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse world.

The only students who will continue to succeed under present circumstances will be a small minority of those with English as home language, and/or the children of socio-economic and political elite of the country. This is not democracy and it does not achieve equity.

---

Kathleen Heugh is associate professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of South Australia. She is an educational linguist whose research focussed on pre-empting and working with post-apartheid language policy in South Africa from 1988 to 2007. She has advised governments in more than 30 countries on the role of mother tongue, minority languages and multilingual education.