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Editorial: Beyond language policy intention to implementation – Evidence of multilingualism in South African primary school classrooms

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Since becoming a democracy in 1994, the task of transforming South Africa as an inequitable system to that of a democratic society with equal opportunities for all its citizens became a systemic priority. Transformation needed to take place in a number of areas such as equal access to education, protection against discrimination and protection of language rights (Ahmed & Sayed, 2009). According to Motala (2006), central to this transformation task was the establishment of an education system based on principles of quality and equity in pursuit of democratic ideals. The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) has been instrumental in developing the South African education system to one of equity and equality. However, against a multilingual complex context, the LiEP that has been left unchanged since 1997, paves the way for this special issue to provide insights on driving the language policy debate forward with empirical evidence. The LiEP (Department of Education [DoE], 1997) attempts to promote language equity and quality education in all 11 official languages. In the preamble of this policy document (“The South African National Educational System Language Policy”, 1997), it is recognised that the cultural diversity of South Africa is a national strength. With this strength in mind, the Language in Education Policy aims at promoting multilingualism and the development of all 11 official languages specified in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). To ensure the development of all official languages in South Africa, the Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997), attempts to promote language equity and quality education in all 11 official languages. Its underlying principle is to maintain home language(s), while providing access to the effective acquisition of additional languages. The DoE, therefore, follows an additive approach to promoting bilingualism from a mother tongue base – learners who have a strong mother-tongue foundation participate more actively and with more confidence in their learning and outperform peers who only operate from a second language (Edwards & Ngwaru, 2011).

Serious concerns with regard to unacceptably low levels of learner achievement permeate research initiatives and educational debates. Persistently poor results across a number of cycles of international assessment programmes, such as the Southern and East African Consortium for the Monitoring of Education Quality (SACMEQ, currently known as SEACMEQ), the Trends in Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) provide evidence for a system that is under pressure to produce adequately literate and numerate learners. South Africa’s participation in PIRLS in the 2006, 2011 and 2016 cycles consistently provided national results that unfavourably compared to other participating countries internationally. So, for example, did PIRLS 2006 illustrate the extent of poor Grade 4 achievement when South African Grade 5 results were internationally reported (see Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Scherman & Archer, 2008). For purposes of PIRLS 2011, an easier assessment (i.e. prePIRLS 2011) was introduced to provide learners with some opportunity to show evidence of improved reading skill (see Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse & Zimmerman, 2012). Yet, even with an easier assessment that continued into the PIRLS 2016 study design (PIRLS Literacy 2016), South African Grade 4 learner performance remained among the lowest rankings of participating countries (see Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & McLeod Palane, 2017).

Of particular concern across the PIRLS cycles was clear evidence that Grade 4 learners who were tested in African languages were at a distinct disadvantage of under-performance. Work has been conducted by a number of researchers to uncover the role of language, and specifically African languages, in school performance (see for example Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Reed, Watson, Joseph & Ramani, 1998; Howie, Venter & Van Staden, 2008; Nyika, 2009; Rule & Land, 2017; Shepherd, 2018; Spaul & Pretorius, 2019; Spaul, Pretorius & Mohohlwane, 2020; Van Staden, Bosker & Bergbauer, 2016). With this special issue we aim to initiate further evidence to inform the LiEP and extend the debate of languages in education in South Africa beyond policy intention to implementation to incorporate evidence of multilingualism and how it takes place in classrooms.

What Readers can Expect in this Issue

This special issue presents readers with six articles of differing topics that deal with issues of language in education. These include:

- Dealing with language as a contextual factor of an education system and the importance of reading development (Vos & Fouché, 2021);
- Reasons for code-switching when English teachers teach English as a second language or as a first additional language (Shinga & Pillay, 2021);
- Promoting multilingualism in the Foundation Phase as described by teacher experiences of isiXhosa and Afrikaans Home Language speakers (De Klerk, Palmer & Papashane, 2021);

- Exploring those experiences and attitudes of Setswana speaking teachers when using an online assessment platform that caters for indigenous African languages (Moodley & Dlamini, 2021);
- Pre-service isiZulu pre-teacher perceptions about English classroom proficiency (Kellerman, Evans & Graham, 2021);
- Teachers' beliefs and practices when teaching Life Sciences using their second language (Motloung, Mavuru & McNaught, 2021).

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