

Bilingual Education: Meeting the Challenges of Diversity in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the role of language in addressing issues of instruction and diversity towards the achievement of the aims of basic education in Botswana. It also examines the role of the mother tongue in instruction in promoting and sustaining national educational and social goals. It further reviews the Botswana language in education policy and its implementation. The failures, inconsistencies between policy and practice, and other obstacles are discussed. The need for compromise in the implementation of mother tongue instruction in bilingual education model and its implications for literacy are discussed. Finally, suggestions for implementation of mother tongue instruction and model are outlined to ensure that government responds to the needs of her citizens, in the continuous efforts at mobilizing the people for national unity and sustainable development.

Keywords: Language, Policy, Mother Tongue, Instruction, Bilingual Education, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Botswana attaches much importance to education as well as the medium through which the education is attained. Also, several international organizations such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children and Education Fund (UNICEF), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so on, have proclaimed interest in education. Since 2000, governments all over the world with the assistance of agencies of the United Nations have launched several initiatives/declarations to focus on education. Such declarations include the Education for All (EFA) – 2000–2015, the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) – 2000–2015, the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) – 2003–2012 and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) – 2005–2014.

For example, the EFA emphasizes the commitment to revitalize education through the provision of Universal Primary Education (UPE). Also, the UNLD was launched to mobilize the resources and political will to promote literacy and meet the learning needs of illiterate people living around the world. The DESD particularly called on governments to mobilize efforts for widespread global implementation of education for sustainable development. Both the educational

goals of the UNLD and DESD are important to the discussion in this paper. This is because both emphasize literacy as a factor of human rights and sustainable development. In addition, Botswana as a developing Southern African country subscribes to the ideals of the United Nations organizations as it believes that, 'the nation's major resource is its people and that investment in their education and training is a necessary condition of national development' (Republic of Botswana, 1993: 19). Therefore, in addressing the highlighted issues, this paper has the following two objectives.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THIS PAPER

This paper seeks to:

- To review the issues of bilingualism in addressing issues of diversity towards the achievement of basic education and promotion of sustainable development in Botswana and
- Suggest a model for improvement towards the realization of Botswana's education, social and sustainable development goals.

2. BASIC EDUCATION IN BOTSWANA

Botswana views the education of its citizens and access to basic education as a fundamental human right. It also believes that the role of education should be to; develop and maintain a society that among other things promotes moral and social values; respect the cultures and languages of different ethnic groups within the country; promote unity; reject discrimination and uphold social justice (Republic of Botswana, 1993: 19). In order to achieve all these lofty goals, various educational and social policies were formulated to address the changing needs of the society since independence in 1966. These included the 1977 National Policy on Education (NPE) (Republic of Botswana, 1977), the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 and the goals of Vision 2016 (1997).

In the various versions of the educational policies, the State undertook to create educational opportunities for all its citizens and to implement this in the context of bilingualism. In the Botswana context, bilingualism implies the provision of education to the citizenry through the medium of English, the official language, and Setswana, the national language. Considering that language and education go hand in hand, the language in which the education is achieved is a very important factor in the process of literacy. It is a common view that language and education have strong correlation in terms of the issues of fundamental human rights, liberty, self esteem, societal values, and cultural identity of the individual. These are reflected in the Botswana philosophy of basic education which states:

To promote the all-round development of the individual; foster intellectual growth and creativity; enable every citizen to achieve his/her full potential; develop moral, ethical and social values, cultural identity, self-esteem and good citizenship; prepare citizens to participate actively to further develop our democracy and prepare citizens for life in the 21st Century (Republic of Botswana, 1995: 2).

The above philosophy of basic education was guided by the RNPE (Republic of Botswana, 1994) which calls for the introduction of the Three Year Junior Certificate programme after the completion of the seven-year primary education by 1996. The basic education programme has duration of ten years. This includes the seven years of education from Standards 1 through 7, and 3 years of junior secondary education thereafter (Republic of Botswana, 1995: 2). This is an attempt to encourage literacy and access to education by all in order to foster the national and UN education goals. It is also based on the principles of national development, sustained development, rapid economic growth, economic independence, social justice and a desire for continued learning (Republic of Botswana, 1995).

The UN General Assembly at the launch of the Literacy Decade from 2003 to 2012 notes that if the prevailing trends in education continues, 'Literacy as Freedom' will be an unreachable dream for millions of people, especially in the developing countries of which Botswana is one. It goes further to call for necessary changes in the school system so that everyone has access to literacy in ways that are relevant and meaningful. Furthermore, the DESD urges governments to implement education for all for sustainable development which can only be achieved through the meaningful education of all citizens.

Again, Vision 2016 (Republic of Botswana, 1997), the long term vision for Botswana, identifies the goals for the nation by the year 2016. It visualizes Botswana's development with reference to the country's language policy that, Botswana's wealth of different languages and cultural traditions will be recognized, supported and strengthened within the education system. It further emphasizes that no Motswana (citizen of Botswana) will be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of a mother tongue that differs from the country's two official languages (English and Setswana). All these policies set the stage for the context in which this paper is discussed and introduces the first objective of this paper to review the issues of bilingualism in addressing issues of diversity towards the achievement of basic education and promotion of sustainable development in the country.

3. LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN BOTSWANA

Botswana, a British protectorate became independent in 1966 and adopted English as the official language, and Setswana as the national language.

Setswana is the mother tongue of approximately 80% of Botswana's population, and is spoken as a second language by another 10% (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997). This situation left very little room for the consideration of the languages of other groups such as Kalanga, Wayeyi, Shiyeyi and so on. This development according to Kamwendo and Mooko (2006) came as no surprise since the intention of the government at the time of independence, was to promote the homogeneity of the country and focus on nation building. In this model, the country sought to develop a monolithic nation with one language, one culture under one flag. However, it has since been realized that the concept or ideal of development takes into account a commitment to cultural pluralism and cultural diversity.

Although constitutionally Botswana is a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, in practice, it is the opposite. Le Roux (2000) notes that minority cultural expressions are relegated to the private sphere which explains why the languages of other groups are not used in the public domains such as schools. Also, Tabulawa (2008) argues that unless the state abandons monoculturalism, it is difficult to see how any other measures would mitigate the exclusionary effects of the state ideology in education. This can be interpreted to suggest that if a segment of the society feels excluded, with the attendant social inequality and unequal access to education, it will hamper sustainable development.

The above view is especially tenable as it is proven that the use of the child's first language as medium of instruction at the initial stages of education is beneficial (UN, 1953). However, in this, there is a challenge to multi-lingual and multicultural societies all over the world, and in Botswana in particular in addressing this type of situation. The question of which languages to utilize in education for a relevant and meaningful provision of literacy to its citizens, and uphold each member's human rights and dignity in the process, becomes a dilemma. This is because of the importance of every language to its people and the need for the provision of basic education as a fundamental human right. Hume (2008) succinctly puts it:

Every language contains a universe. Every language provides a unique point of view that is as important to the cosmos of ideas, metaphors, miracles and metaphysics that comprise the totality of human experience,... Thus, the extinction of a language is never merely a blip of local inconvenience in the great rationalizing efficiencies demanded by global economies of scale. Such a loss is always an incremental diminishment of what it means to be human (Vancouver Sun, 2008).

In order to overcome the language hurdle, a lot of policy formulation with regard to language use in education is put into place by the Botswana government. The extent to which the ideals of the Botswana language education policy has succeeded in overcoming the problems of diversity and language in education will now be closely examined.

4. CLAMOUR FOR LANGUAGE RIGHTS

Recently, the clamour for language and cultural rights has resulted in the formation of non-governmental organizations such as the Kamanakao Association and the Society for the Promotion of Ikalanga (SPIL) which advocate for the development and preservation of Shiyeyi and Ikalanga languages respectively. These societies have undertaken a wide variety of activities for the promotion of Shiyeyi and Kalanga languages as medium of instruction at the earlier stages of pre-school and primary education, and in adult literacy programmes (Kamwendo and Mooko, 2006). Another development in the clamour for cultural and language issues was the formation of a coalition that brings together the different cultural organizations named RETENG – literally translated to mean, ‘we are present’. This body is said to be working for the promotion and preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Botswana. The activities of RETENG are also aimed at the development of writing system of some indigenous languages. At this point, the extent of the achievement of those aims is not the purpose of this paper.

However, the need to address language and other cultural recognition issues informed the revision and renaming of the activities of the National Setswana Language Council (NSLC) endorsed by the NPE 1977, to promote the use and understanding of the national language (Setswana) to the Botswana Languages Council (BLC) (Republic of Botswana, 1994). This body is to have a term of reference to formulate a language policy for the country. It is pertinent to point out that this council is yet to be formed.

5. BOTSWANA’S LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY

At present there are 26 languages being spoken in Botswana (Nkate, 2005). Out of these, only the majority language, Setswana is used as a medium of instruction at the initial levels (Standards 1–2) of primary education. English has been accorded the status of an official language and medium of instruction at all levels of education. These are the only two languages permitted in the school system (Mooko, 2008). After two years of initial instruction in Setswana, a switch is made to English as the medium of instruction. Thereafter, English becomes the medium of instruction and Setswana is taught as a subject. This implies that Setswana is taught as a subject and at the same time used as the medium of instruction at the lower classes in public or government primary schools.

The above sets the stage for the context in which the Botswana language in education system is implemented. It also suggests the bilingual implications of education for all majority and minority groups. The question that arises from this is whether the prevailing system satisfies the needs of all. This is because a part of the Revised National Policy in Education (RNPE) (Republic of

Botswana, 1994) aims for primary education is to improve learning achievement for all groups of the population and remove any barriers to achievement affecting particular groups of the population. How then does this situation account for those sections of the population whose mother tongue differs from Setswana?

6. BOTSWANA'S BILINGUAL EDUCATION MODEL

Botswana's present language policy is based on the transitional bilingual model. This means the use of the child's first language (L1) as the medium of instruction at the initial stages of education followed by a switch to a second language (L2). Transitional bilingual education offers students some instruction in their native language while simultaneously providing concentrated English language instruction. The L1 in this model is used only as an interim means to master the L2, and as soon as students are considered proficient enough to comprehend and work academically in the L2, then the L2 becomes the medium of instruction in all subjects except Setswana (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997).

Nyati-Ramahobo (1997) defines bilingual education as the use of two or more languages as medium of instruction to teach subjects other than language. In some cases, one of the two languages is the child's first language. Also, Matiki (2006: 240) notes that, 'transitional bilingual education is an attempt to facilitate learning through the use of two languages. It has already been established that Botswana uses a transitional bilingual model in which the child's L1 is used at the initial stages after which a switch is made to the L2, and thereafter the L2 is used to teach all other subjects and the L1 is taught as a subject.

Further on bilingual education, Hornberger (1990), Ovando and Collier (1985) note that transitional models are characterized by underlying goals of language shift, cultural assimilation, and social incorporation. Nyati-Ramahobo (1997: 162) exploits this assertion to conclude that, 'the bilingual education model in operation in Botswana is the transitional model for children from Setswana speaking groups, since they start with their L1, Setswana, as medium of instruction and later switch to English (L1 to L2). For children from minority groups, it is a transitional submersion programme in the sense that their L1 is not used at all and they are submerged into Setswana which is their L2 for the first four years, and later switch to English which is their L3. For the purpose of this paper, Nyati-Ramahobo's description would suffice especially with reference to the children of the other groups, whose L1 is not Setswana. If the aims of the RNPE (1994) is to support equal access to education and remove any barriers to learning, then definitely, the present transitional submersion model for minority groups need to be reviewed and a more inclusive model developed.

In addressing the all important language in education issue, the Minister of Education and Skills Development, Jacob Nkate (2005) reiterates the difficulties

in the development of each of the languages in Botswana in terms of orthography, curricula, teaching materials and the training of teachers. Apart from the limitations of material and manpower resources noted by the Minister, Nyati-Ramahobo (1997) argues that for a language to be valuable, it must be income generating and that there must be more to the basis for teaching language than cultural identity. It must be accompanied by economic value. This trend of argument is based primarily on the issues of funding and value attached to language development issues.

7. LANGUAGE VALUE ISSUES

An important issue in indigenous languages development borders language value. Developing indigenous languages is always viewed by many African governments as a waste of resources without any immediate economic gains. Where fundamental human rights and collective well being are prioritized, language can be a resource for economic and sustainable development, promoting equal access to basic education and providing an inclusive and enabling political and social environment. The Botswana government's position on the language of education issue tends to disadvantage a Motswana whose mother tongue differs from the country's national language (Setswana). This may also have a negative implication on the nation's philosophy of basic education that seeks to provide quality basic education to all citizens as a fundamental human right. It may also not promote the all-round development of the individual in terms of fostering intellectual growth and creativity; cultural identity, self-esteem and so on, if the citizens cannot receive education in their mother tongue.

8. INCONSISTENCY OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

Recommendation 18 of the NCE, 1993 report which was adopted in the RNPE of 1994 states as follows:

- **Setswana** should be taught as a compulsory subject for citizens of Botswana throughout the primary system.
- **Where parents request that other local languages** be taught to their children, the school should make arrangements to teach them as a co-curricular activity.

Certainly, in a situation where the incentive or government backing for the development of other languages is half-hearted and left to poor communities to arrange for their children's' language of instruction, not much can be achieved. In a radio broadcast which was reported in the Daily News of Friday, 22 February, 2008 on the commemoration of International Mother Language Day,

the Honourable Minister of Education said, 'Languages matter because we use them not only to communicate among ourselves but also to preserve our cultures and identities in all their diversities and richness.' He concludes, 'I encourage all citizens of the world and Botswana in particular to respect and preserve their language because the death of any language signals the death of a culture and identity of its people.' This implies that the action of the government on the issue of language of instruction does not match practice and is full of pronouncements without implementation. To underscore the issue of non implementation of policies by African governments, Alexander (2008) notes that South Africa has arguably the most progressive language policy on paper and concludes that in spite of this, they would have to accept that the language policy is a total failure as they are moving to a situation where the de facto official language is the Queen's English to the exclusion of other indigenous languages.

9. RETHINKING LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

As earlier indicated, the obstacles to mother tongue development are not restricted to Botswana alone. It is a common complaint by many governments in Africa and other developing countries with multi lingual issues. The important issue at this point is what is to be done to address this human rights, as well as educational issue in an attempt to promote national and international ideals, and meet the learning needs of all the people of Botswana and elsewhere.

It is generally agreed that indigenous languages or mother tongue can be used as a medium of instruction, although there are problems of implementation which must be addressed. These problems include the provision of resources by world organizations such as the UN, UNICEF, World Bank and other bodies for governments of multicultural societies to develop indigenous languages for instruction. This is because many governments such as the Botswana government have policies that support the development of indigenous languages but lack the resources to implement it as can be seen from this discussion. For instance, in order to enhance the development of minority languages, the RNPE (1994) Recommendation 32 with respect to Junior Secondary Certificate curriculum allows for students to choose the option of a third language in general studies. This is being exploited presently in some junior secondary schools to teach French. Ironically, this exercise is being funded and sustained by the provision of manpower and material resources by the French Embassy and Alliance Francaise in Botswana through the Cooperation Outline Agreement for the teaching of French Language in the country (Mmegi, 2008). It is the belief that this option can be used to include the development and learning of other minority languages.

Too often, many African governments exhibit lack of commitment towards issues of indigenous languages development and this is why the debate will continue for a long time to come. Always there are ready made excuses – lack of funds, lack of manpower, lack of material resources, promotion of agitations by every single language community, and even lack of workable models in some cases. These reasons, while legitimate in some cases, may lack substance in reality. This is because the investment in language and thereby culture is an investment for both now and the future. After all, Hume (2008) says, ‘to lose one’s language is not necessarily to perish – to have one’s own creation narratives, folk history and traditional world view filtered through the prism of another language must be one of the saddest prospects anyone can face.’ This is a legitimate way to describe the feelings of people whose languages are overlooked, excluded or relegated.

It can be said that the issue of indigenous languages development and promotion goes beyond sentimentalism; it is reflective of the modern day realization of the value of language and the need for its preservation which cannot be quantified in material or monetary terms. In more vivid terms, Hume (2008) claims that Canada committed a great crime of diminishment to individuals and itself when it embarked upon a deliberate attempt at eradicating aboriginal languages. Africa and Botswana can learn a great deal from this tragedy and lamentation.

Botswana has already identified six teachable minority languages that can be used as a starting point to launch the mother tongue instruction in a bilingual setting, since it is generally agreed that there is a need to pursue the course as enunciated by Vision 2016 (1997) that, no Motswana will be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of a mother tongue that differs from the country’s two official languages (English and Setswana). It is important that agreement or consensus is achieved as to which languages are the most viable nationally that would help the greatest number of people to achieve their personal and educational goals at this point. Common reasoning suggest that it is easy for monolingual societies to contend with mother tongue instruction, but in societies with numerous languages such as Botswana (26), Nigeria (over 400), and Malawi (15), it is herculean, and if care is not taken, African countries including Botswana would squabble over languages for eternity without doing much about them. Multilingualism, instead of promoting unity in diversity as an asset, would then become a hindrance to development and the achievement of national as well as global sustainable development goals.

10. WAY FORWARD

While Botswana in particular, and Africa in general look inward to solving the problems of the development of minority languages for instruction, and at the same time struggle to fulfill the DESD goals, a model for implementation can be

considered. A model of decentralization as expounded by Nyati-Ramahobo (1997: 163–164) reproduced below can be considered and modified where need:

- A. In situations in which the use of Setswana is limited in the home and community (in which Setswana is not the language in the air), then home language should be used as a medium of instruction for the first four years, with Setswana and English as subjects beginning in grade 2 or 3 depending on their literacy levels in the mother tongue.
- B. In areas in which Setswana is the dominant language amongst a number of minority groups, Setswana should be the medium of instruction throughout the primary education system. English and at least one minority language should be taught as subjects in grade 2 or 3. More importantly, the culture of these groups should form part and parcel of the curriculum to enhance their self-esteem.
- C. In areas in which a minority language is dominant amongst other minority languages (and Setswana could be a minority language in that area), the dominant language should be used as medium of instruction in grades 1–4. English and Setswana should be taught as subjects.
- D. In monolingual Setswana speaking areas, Setswana should be the medium of instruction throughout the primary school system, with one minority language and English as subjects in grade 2 or 3.

It is important to point out that there have been modifications since the development of the above model. For instance the present language policy requires the use of the L1 as medium of instruction in the first two years of initial education (Republic of Botswana, 1994) as opposed to four in the model. Also, the issues of developing myriads of languages and its implications on resources have been discussed earlier and arguments made for some forms of compromise, decentralization and identification of language area blocks. While it is important to avoid turning the country into ‘a tower of Babel’ scenario, there is a need to put into place a comprehensive language in education policy. For ease of implementation and avoidance of ambiguity, the model has been simplified below in line with the RNPE 1994:

Group	Medium	Subject	Component
Exclusive Minority Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L1 in grades 1–2 • Setswana and English from Grade 3 onwards 	English and Setswana taught as subjects in Grade 3 onwards	All cultures with focus on the child’s own culture
Heterogeneous communities with Setswana as the dominant language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setswana from Grades 1–2 • English from Grade 3 	English and minority language taught as subjects in grade 3 onwards	All cultures
Heterogeneous communities with a minority language as the dominant language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominant language in Grades 1–2 • English and Setswana from grade 3 	English and Setswana taught as subjects in grade 3 onwards	All cultures

Source: Adapted from Nyati-Ramahobo (1997: 264).

The above model explains a way of thinking around the development of language of instruction issue. The model acknowledges Setswana as a national language as well as recognizes the importance of the language of other groups to co-exist with the national language and for equity in access to education. Fortunately, the Botswana government is no stranger to the model since it was developed from a study performed in Botswana. It is reproduced here for the purpose of modification or replication by other multilingual societies with a commitment to addressing the language question in their communities.

11. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Kapoli (2001) notes that since 1953 when the UNESCO declared that the mother tongue would be the best medium for educating children, some countries, particularly after gaining their independence educated their children at primary school in the dominant mother tongue. Such countries include Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe and others. In other cases, political hegemony and power dictated the identification or choice of the indigenous language to be used in instruction such as the use of Setswana as the national language in Botswana, English and Chichewa in Malawi and Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo as national languages at Nigeria's independence in 1960. With the passing of time, issues of fundamental human rights and social justice surfaced to indicate the inclusion of the multifarious languages in instruction to address the instructional needs of all groups of people and communities. However, this is proving to be a difficult assignment for most governments as a result of the challenges involved in doing so.

This paper has argued for political and social commitment to start the process of implementing bilingual education in Botswana by drawing attention to the challenges involved and calls for the involvement of the international organizations in the process. It stresses the need for change of attitude in order to address the educational needs of the citizenry. Most importantly, it has highlighted the need to foster social justice and human dignity in an attempt to promote the nation's educational goals, as well as the ideals of the United Nation's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) launched from 2003 to 2014. Finally, the paper suggested a model for the implementation of bilingual instruction in Botswana.

In conclusion, for a multi-lingual society such as Botswana and other African countries, the use of the various languages of the different groups should be considered and prioritized at the initial stages of education. This will in turn, aid the realization of the national, educational and sustainable development goals of an enlightened society. The suggested model borrowed from Nyati-Ramohobo (1997) provides a start and not an end towards the implementation of instruction in minority languages in the education system of Botswana and elsewhere with similar language issues.

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