

ONE NATION, ELEVEN LANGUAGES: IMPROVING LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Seventeen years after the acceptance of a new Constitution there is still no progress in implementing a language-in-education policy (LIEP) in South Africa. Systemic research shows that the literacy and numeracy skills of South African learners are far below what is required to learn and develop effectively – mainly because the government still believes that the acquisition of basic knowledge is synonymous with learning English as language of instruction. The problem starts in the Foundation Phase, where learners fail to acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills because very few of them are being taught through their mother tongue, which has a huge impact on learners' ability to master the curriculum. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the government accepted a multilingual language policy with 11 official languages: Afrikaans, English, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, IsiNdebele, Siswati, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Although the Constitution makes provision for the protection of all languages, and declares that where it is reasonably practicable, everyone has the right to receive education in the official language of their choice, language practices in South Africa have not changed since the pre-1994 dispensation. Despite the constitutional principles, South Africa's indigenous languages are still marginalised.

Keywords: mother-tongue education, bilingual education, language-in-education policy, literacy and numeracy, indigenous languages

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is for all of us the lifeline connecting us to the pulse of our culture. It is the tool of the legislature, executive and judiciary, as well as other public and private institutions. In a nation as diverse as South Africa, language is an important issue. It is an instrument of both domination and liberation. Our collective identity as a nation has transcended one whose cultures were first divided by words to one that is now united by the words of our Constitution. Against the backdrop of South Africa's history, its diverse cultures and multilingualism, it is not only important that there are proper safeguards to protect this vast array of interests; it is also mandated by our Constitution.

When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the government accepted a multilingual language policy with eleven official languages: Afrikaans, English, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, IsiNdebele, Siswati, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. In general, the Constitution makes provision for the protection of all languages, and declares that where it is reasonably practicable, everyone has the right to receive education in the official language of their choice.

With the above outline in mind, it is clear therefore that in terms of the Constitution the state has a responsibility to implement a language-in-education policy (LiEP) and is also compelled to increase the status of South Africa's indigenous languages and promote their use. However, seventeen years after the adoption of a new Constitution, there is still no progress in implementing a LiEP in South Africa. Systemic research shows that the literacy and numeracy skills of South African learners are far below what is required to learn and develop effectively – mainly because the government still believes that the acquisition of basic knowledge is synonymous with learning English as language of instruction.

According to various educationists (Jansen, 2008:11; Ramphele, 2008:174; 2009:11; Bloch, 2009:12), the problem starts in the Foundation Phase, where learners do not succeed in mastering the basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Moedertaalsprekers in Suid-Afrika

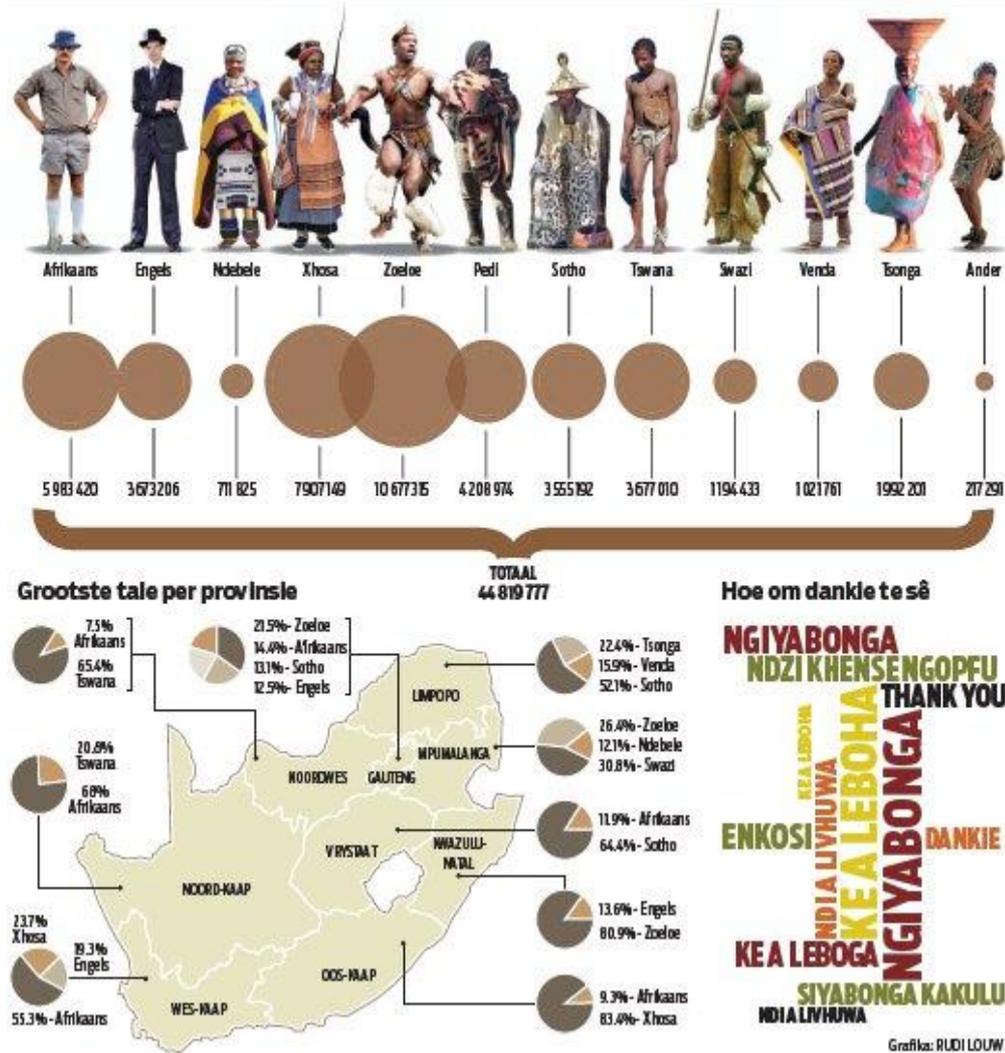


Figure 1. Mother Tongue speakers in South Africa. Source: Le Cordeur, MLA. *Praat hard oor taalregte (Talk loudly about language rights)*. Die Burger. 28 February 2011.

According to the results of the systemic evaluation and baseline assessment of February 2011, only nine per cent of all learners in Grade 3 and Grade 6 scored the required 50 per cent for literacy and numeracy (DBE, 2011a; 2011b).

One of the main causes of learners’ poor performance in literacy and numeracy is the fact that many learners are not being taught in their mother tongue (see e.g.

Yeld, 2009). A report by the Department of Basic Education (2010b:29) indicates that 20 per cent (or 600 000) of all learners in the Foundation Phase and most of the learners from Grade 4 onward are not taught in their mother tongue. It is important that learners receive tuition in their mother tongue during these formative years, since literacy and numeracy skills are developed in the Foundation Phase. Local and international research supports this opinion (Alexander, 2010a; Cummins, 2005; Heugh, 2006; Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Webb, 2006).

Although mother-tongue education affords the learner the best opportunity for academic development, the view that mother-tongue education is not the only determining factor for good learner performance (as stated by Webb, 2006:37) is also noted. Other factors that also play a determining role are leadership, the work ethic of teachers, available resources and (in) adequate facilities. Another important factor, according to Webb (2006:39), relates to the development of the academic language proficiency of learners. Learners from disadvantaged communities do not come to school equipped with this kind of language skill, not even in their mother tongue. It is evident that mother-tongue education as such will not help if these contextual aspects are not addressed.

In this article I will argue for a language-in-education policy (LiEP) in South African schools that is based on mother-tongue education as well as bilingual education, with specific reference to indigenous languages. A LiEP aimed at promoting the learner's mother-tongue proficiency, while also ensuring they acquire a world-class second language, is recommended. It is believed that not only will this improve nation building, but will encourage respect for other languages. The following axioms serve as the point of departure:

- 1) *That mother-tongue education as entrenched in Section 29 (2) of the South African Constitution makes provision for all the indigenous languages because they offer learners more opportunities to perform better academically;*
- 2) *That the language-in-education policy provides for mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) because it exposes learners to a world language.*

The research methodology entails a literature survey (Denscombe, 1998:29; Mouton, 2001:56) to collect data on the role that mother-tongue education plays in learners' levels of literacy and numeracy. The literature study is supported by an empirical study, which consists of an open-ended questionnaire completed by experts in the areas of language policy and language teaching. The advantage of this is that the data collected in this way reflect the complexity of the research question as well as the variety of the opinions on the subject, and respondents have the freedom to express themselves in their own words (Denscombe, 1998:112).

The aim of the questionnaire was to collect data on the latest trends in, and attitudes toward, mother-tongue education. The present study therefore utilises the insights of other experts as an integral part of the investigation.

The article begins with a definition of key terms. Then follows a discussion on the value of mother-tongue education for learner performance against the background of the low levels of literacy and numeracy in South Africa. As no significant

progress has been made since 1994 to improve the status of the indigenous languages, and these languages are in reality being scaled down, the value of indigenous languages for effective literacy and numeracy is discussed briefly. This is followed by an overview of the current language-in-education policy and its shortcomings, which contributed towards the drafting of a revised school curriculum, called *Curriculum and Assessments Policy Statements* (CAPS), and to changes in the area of language in education. The article concludes with a discussion of the information obtained from the feedback on the questionnaire completed by the experts referred to above.

1.1 Definition of terms

For the purpose of this article, *literacy* in the educational use of the term will refer to the ability to read and write (WCED 2006: 6) and *numeracy* refers to basic numerical skills, such as the ability to count, add, subtract, multiply and divide (WCED, 2006:18).

This article uses the following definition of *mother-tongue education*: “[E]ducation which uses as its medium of instruction a person’s mother tongue, that is, the language which a person has acquired in early years and which normally has become his natural instrument of thought and communication” (UNESCO, 1974:698).

2. EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

According to Gogolin (in Alexander, 2010a:1), the monolingual habitus is the general accepted view that the use of the “nation’s” one official language (e.g. German in Germany) is sufficient for the purposes of school education, even for those who speak a different language. Consequently the monolingual habitus ignores the multilingual nature of the population and the languages of minority groups are marginalised – with negative consequences for the speakers. Alexander (2010a:1) uses Gogolin’s term and applies it to the post-apartheid dispensation in which English became hegemonic to the detriment of indigenous languages, as a result of the political class’s monolingual habitus. Alexander’s argument is that it is true in principle that a child can learn through the medium of any language, provided that he/she is fully proficient in the language. This is especially true for older children who already are bilingual. For most young children, however, only the mother tongue is suitable for this role. It is clear in the case of the indigenous language speakers in South Africa – based on research findings (e.g. Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010) – that English cannot play this role in South Africa, at least not before Grade 7.

It is a relatively general view that a large percentage of South Africans’ knowledge, skills, values and attitudes are insufficiently developed for the demands

of the modern labour market and that this situation has serious consequences, such as inefficient management and poor service delivery in public service institutions, as well as unsatisfactory levels of productivity and competitiveness in the private sector. There are probably various reasons for such inadequate knowledge and skills, but one reason is undoubtedly the use of English as Language of Teaching and Learning (LoTL) among particularly black learners, while their proficiency in English is not adequate for the purpose of formal training. Inadequate proficiency in English is found especially in the most vulnerable communities, namely the lower classes and township and rural communities. The choice of teaching language is of fundamental importance, because essentially the quality of life of South Africans is at stake, as well as their access to basic rights and privileges, the struggle against the uneven distribution of scarce resources, poverty and inequality (Webb, 2006:37).

Research has repeatedly proven the negative consequences of a lack of mother-tongue education across the world, especially in poor and dominated communities, and among speakers of low-prestige varieties of the language (Macdonald & Burroughs (1991) with reference to South Africa; Obanya (2004) with reference to Nigeria; Hornberger (1987) with reference to Peru; Thomas & Collier (2002) (as cited in Plüddeman, 2006:81) with reference to the USA; and Alexander (2010b) with reference to Iceland).

Mother-tongue education is a controversial subject in South Africa. In spite of the above-mentioned arguments in its favour, not all South Africans are convinced that mother-tongue education is best for their children. There are those who are against the "ideology of mother-tongue education", such as Guptha (1997:496), who argue that it is not feasible because of financial factors. According to Gxilishe (2009:3), it is a divisive factor that can once again lead to separate ethnic education systems: "There is currently a widespread mistrust of mother-tongue tuition. This arose from apartheid's attempt to foster and impose ethnicity as a divide and rule strategy."

Kamwangamalu (2000:124) explains that this controversy has led most black people to steer away from their own languages and dismiss these languages as irrelevant in the education process, also because, unlike English and Afrikaans, they do not hold an economic advantage. The legacy of apartheid education and the stigma associated with mother-tongue education makes it difficult to market the indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning.

Research on language-in-education over the past four decades (e.g. Alexander, 2010b; Heugh, 2009), however, proves that all attempts to establish English or other European languages as teaching language for speakers of indigenous languages on the African continent have failed. The question is why many black parents remain negative about mother-tongue education and what can be done to convince them to choose in favour of it.

2.1 Motivation for using indigenous languages for basic education

Despite the value of mother-tongue education and the role it plays in promoting academic performance, Africans steer away from it (Alexander, 2010b:12) and the use of indigenous languages is being scaled down (Ngwenya, 2010:74). It is therefore important to discuss specific reasons that can serve as motivation for indigenous-language-speaking parents to choose mother-tongue education.

Firstly, the learner can identify cognitively with the mother tongue (Batibo, 2011:16). Learners are exposed to new information and concepts, and they try to fit these into their existing conceptual and intellectual frameworks (Carrell, (1998:245) uses the terminology of schema theory), after which they are internalised. If the new information is presented in an unfamiliar language, the learner has insufficient supportive mechanisms to bring about comprehension. Such learners grow up with a complete inability to articulate their thoughts; they are timid and lack a sense of self-worth (Batibo, 2011:17). Secondly, indigenous languages intensify the learners' bond with the community in which they grow up, precisely because most members of the community are not fluent in the colonial language, English. A third reason relates to the fact that at the moment efforts are being made to include information on indigenous cultures in the curriculum, and concepts in this regard can be understood best if they are explained to the learners in their own language (Batibo, 2011:18).

3. LANGUAGE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION

During the last decade concerns were raised about the proposed 2011 South African Languages Bill, which was to become the new South African Languages Act. The Bill has had a rocky past. Section 6(4) of the Constitution states that national and provincial governments must organise and monitor their official language use by means of legislative as well as other measures.

In the last few years, a National Language Bill for South Africa has resurfaced as a topical issue, resulting from a summons that was served by a South African attorney, Cerneels Lourens, in August 2009, in an endeavour to enforce the promulgation of the South African Languages Bill (Lourens vs The President of the Republic of South Africa and others, 2009). In his ruling of 16 March 2010 the Judge ordered the national government to regulate and monitor the use of the official languages by means of legislative and other measures within two years (Lourens vs The President of the Republic of South Africa and others, 2010). The government responded by tabling a draft Languages Bill at the end of 2011 giving the people of South Africa an opportunity to comment on the draft before submitting it to Parliament on 16 March 2012.

The proposed Languages Bill was, however, found to be insufficient. Former president FW de Klerk articulated his concern as follows: "As a people who collectively speak 11 official languages and our rights to enjoy them are constitutionally

entrenched, we should collectively voice our concern that the 2011 Languages Bill does not give effect to these rights but rather severely limits them” (De Klerk 2012). The result of all of this was that Cerneels Lourens and the State settled on 15 March 2012, which allowed the Minister of Arts and Culture until 15 September 2012 to finalise the Languages Bill as stipulated in section 6(4) of the Constitution.

Another perspective is created by the question of finance. Financially it is not possible for a province such as the Western Cape to accommodate eleven languages. Thus English as so-called common denominator implicitly becomes the “anchor language”, which means that English in fact enjoys a higher status than the other official languages, which amounts to the creation of a language hierarchy. A language policy that gives equal status to three languages, namely the language spoken by the majority of people in the province (Afrikaans), the largest indigenous language (isiXhosa) and a language that give citizens exposure to an international language such as English, as is currently the case in the Western Cape, would therefore be more viable. In this way, provincial governments, such as KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State and the North West, will all promote an indigenous language – in these three cases, isiZulu, Sesotho and Setswana respectively.

A historical analysis brings in a further dimension. If one compares the language provisions of the 1983 Constitution with those of the 1996 Constitution (RSA, 1996), it is clear that the Constitution supports multilingualism (Carstens, 2007:18). The state should play a pivotal role in the implementation of the language provisions and is obligated to improve the status of the indigenous languages and promote their use. Mutual respect for the languages of others is important and languages should be treated *equally* (Alexander, 2006). De Varennes (2010:4) points to the fact that in practice only one language, English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, enjoy true official status. Kamwangamalu (2000:128) is also of the opinion that the situation of indigenous languages has not improved at all since 1994. There is a continuing tendency to scale down the importance of indigenous languages (as discussed by Ramphele, 2009, Kamwangamalu, 2000 and Ngwenya, 2010).

4. CURRENT LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY (LIEP) AND PRACTICE

The current language policy for schools (DBE 1997) is based on specific principles of the Constitution (RSA, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act of 1996 (RSA, 1996b). The Department of Basic Education adopted a draft language-in-education policy (LiEP) in 1997, details of which were set out in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DBE, 2002). The RNCS emphasises the importance of additive multilingualism as well as the necessity of teaching indigenous languages at school. It stipulates that:

- all learners should learn their mother tongue and at least one additional language as subject from Grade 1;

- all learners should have studied an indigenous language for at least three years by the end of the General Education and Teaching (GET) phase (DBE 2010:6).

Although, according to the Constitution, there should therefore be no problem, it is not the case in practice, because there has not been any noteworthy progress in establishing all languages in South Africa as languages of teaching.

The recent investigation into the position of the LiEP (DBE, 2010b) found that the policy is vague on the subject of indigenous languages, which should be defined much more clearly in the policy document (DBE, 2010b:29). Regarding the practical implementation of the LiEP, it is important to note that Section 29 (2) of the Constitution, on which the LiEP is founded, refers to “the language of their choice” and not to “mother-tongue education”. Since learners are not capable of deciding for themselves on the language of teaching, the choice lies with their parents or guardian serving on school governing bodies, for all practical and legal purposes. And herein lies the problem, because the majority of black parents prefer their children to switch to English as teaching language as soon as possible (cf. Makoe & McKinney 2009:80) – with dire consequences for their children’s education and the future of indigenous languages (as indicated by Ramphele, 2009:2).

While the mother tongue of 307 511 foundation phase learners is Afrikaans, 316 316 were taught through the medium of Afrikaans; therefore nearly 9 000 learners were taught in Afrikaans even though Afrikaans is not their mother tongue. At the same time, nearly 800 000 Foundation Phase learners were taught through the medium of English, while only about 200 000 of them were mother-tongue speakers. This means that nearly 600 000 learners in the Foundation Phase are taught in English, even though English is not their mother tongue (DBE 2010b:18).

The situation is even worse after the Foundation Phase: learners in previously disadvantaged (black) schools receive mother-tongue education from Grade 1 to Grade 3. From Grade 4 English is the language of teaching. While 80 per cent of all learners in the Foundation Phase were taught in their mother tongue (DBE 2010b:18), the figure for the intermediary phase (Grades 4 to 6) is only 27 per cent (DBE 2010b:19). This figure is an indication that most indigenous-language speakers are taught in English from Grade 4 onwards, because the LiEP stipulates that English will be the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 (DBE, 2010b:20).

Learners are therefore confronted with a situation in which they have to switch from mother-tongue education to English as LoLT in Grade 4, without their having received adequate linguistic preparation for English. According to experts, this – in addition to the learners’ lack of exposure to English outside the classroom – has led to high failure and drop-out rates (Heugh 2006:75; Webb 2006:47). This to a large extent explains these schools’ poor results in literacy and numeracy. Gxilishe’s (2009:4) frustration about the current LiEP is understandable: “Decades after the political independence the situation of African languages keeps on widening the inequalities, in the fields of science, education and technology.”

Hence various experts (Heugh, 2006:76; Alexander, 2006:3; Ramphela, 2008:179) are of the opinion that the poor performance of learners in literacy and numeracy can be attributed to a large extent (but not exclusively) to the lack of a mother-tongue-based LiEP. This and many other objections to the RNCS of 2002 led to the appointment of a ministerial task team in 2009 that was required to revise the RNCS, and the task team did the groundwork for numerous adjustments to the national school curriculum announced by Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education on 6 July 2010 (DBE 2010a).

The new LiEP, as set out in the announcement of the revision of the National Curriculum Statement (DBE 2010a), entails that mother-tongue education be extended as LoLT – something researchers such as Heugh (2006:76) and Alexander (1997:98) have been advocating for years. Another important adjustment is that a first additional language as subject is added in the Foundation Phase. As from 2012 the chosen LoLT will be taught as a subject from Grade 1. This means that if English is chosen as teaching language, learners will have it as a subject from Grade 1.

The announced LiEP furthermore stipulates that all language subjects will receive the same time allocation and resources. Learners have to choose their LoLT when they apply for admission to a specific school. If the school offers the chosen LoLT, and if there is place available, the learner has to be admitted (cf. DBE, 2010b:6-7).

The interpretation of Section 6 of the South African Schools Act (SASA) has been the subject of various lawsuits. The powers that SASA grants to school governing bodies to determine a school's language policy, provided that it is subject to the South African Constitution, is of great importance. In reality, the school's language policy to a large extent depends on the choices learners (or their parents) make when they choose a LoLT.

It is clear that the language provisions in the Constitution are aimed at nation building, while one of the strategic objectives of the proposed LiEP is national integration. The LiEP also encourages all South Africans to learn other South African languages by promoting national unity, multilingualism and multiculturalism.

In summary, the new LiEP is aimed at promoting proficiency in the learners' mother tongue in school and ensuring that learners acquire a second language. Not only will this improve nation building, but it will also encourage respect for other languages and facilitate the transition to teaching through the medium of a language other than the mother tongue.

The decision to add an additional language (which will in practice mostly be English) for indigenous language speakers from Grade 1 is understandable as this is a way of facilitating the transition to non-mother-tongue education in Grade 4. However, extending the period of mother-tongue education would be a more justifiable solution to the problem of low levels of literacy and numeracy.

5. 'MOTHER TONGUE' IN LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION – THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

For at least five decades, since the 1953 UNESCO Report on *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, African countries have been struggling to find an effective strategy that allows them to move from an education system inherited from the colonial period to a more transformative and culturally relevant education that takes into consideration African values and languages, people's socio-cultural and linguistic background as well as their educational needs. Such a relevant and effective education strategy would be characterized, first of all, by the use of an appropriate medium of instruction (Mol), the use of adequate teaching techniques, the use of culturally adequate curriculum content and sufficient financial and material resources. Currently there are two competing views with respect to the central issue of language in education. Each view is based on a different vision for African societies (Wolff et al., 2006).

The view that reflects the current practice in most African countries advocates for the continued use of the official/foreign language as the primary and ultimate Medium of Instruction (Mol) during the whole educational system. The objective of the so-called *Subtractive Education Model* is to move learners out of mother tongue (MT) and into the official/foreign language as a medium of instruction as early as possible. Many "Francophone" countries in Africa use these models inherited from the colonial era. In these countries, the mother tongue is taken out of the formal school system as a medium of instruction and also as a subject of instruction. This policy and education system succeeded under the colonial system in developing the leadership needed and in training the manpower required for the Africa envisioned by the colonial powers. This colonial vision of Africa, however, has since been rejected by most African countries.

The second view advocates for the use of MT or a familiar national language (NL) and the official / foreign language as a Mol throughout the education system. This approach reflects better the socio-economic and cultural realities of multilingual Africa. However, it does not advocate the rejection of the official/foreign language. On the contrary, research evidence shows that the use of MT or NL as a medium of instruction throughout schooling improves the teaching and learning of the official/foreign language as a subject of learning and will ultimately make it a better medium of specialized learning wherever appropriate. Such a change in approach aims at bringing profound social change in terms of development and societal progress.

In 2005 the ADEA (Association for development of Education in Africa) commissioned a stocktaking research on the state-of-the-art on mother tongue and bilingual education in formal and non-formal education in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of this research there is convincing evidence to argue for the second approach, the use of mother tongue or the use of an African language familiar to the children upon school entry as the natural medium of instruction in all African schools and institutions of higher education.

The research team is well aware that an educational system which emphasizes the use of African languages will only be viable if the socio-economic environment values these languages so that people with a diploma in an African language will find challenging positions where they can continue to grow professionally. It is recommended that any kind of language policy be based on the vision of the society it is designed and implemented for as well as the political economy and the sociolinguistic reality of the country (Wolff et al., 2006).

5.1 Mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) in South Africa

A comparison between the statutory language provisions prior to the democratic dispensation of 1994 and those of the post-apartheid Constitution highlights two important developments, other than the fact that there are now eleven instead of two official languages. Since South Africa became a democracy, there has been a move away from strict, prescriptive language provision, and the principle of statutory bilingualism has been abandoned.

Instead, in Section 6 (3) of the current South African Constitution the minimum requirement is made that the government conduct business in “at least two” official languages. Which two languages is not prescribed; in fact, the choice is left in the hands of officials, following a set of relatively complex and subjective factors: demography (language distribution), economy (cost and practicality) and sensitivity to language attitudes (citizens’ preferences). According to Du Plessis (2009:5), the strictly delineated form of statutory bilingualism that existed prior to 1994 was replaced by what appears to be a vaguely delineated form of “official bilingualism” after 1996. According to Cowling (2003:84), this means that “bilingualism is the bottom line in any language dispensation in South Africa as a whole or any part of it”. However, Deumert (2006:78) avoids typifying the new constitutional two-language requirement as a form of official bilingualism and is of the opinion that the ideal of additive bilingualism is assumed, a concept she links to an objective of the 1996 LiEP (DoE 1997).

Mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) entails that a child is taught and learns in the mother tongue from the start of his/her school education and continues to do so for as long as possible, while an additional language is gradually added as subject. A child is not supposed to be taught in his/her second language before he/she is completely proficient in the second language (Alexander 2010b:13). The second language therefore can be phased in gradually as language subject.

Research by Heugh (2010:25) for the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa indicates that learners who are taught and assessed in their mother tongue perform better academically. According to her, self-worth, self-confidence, spontaneity, creativity, interaction and participation in the learning process are irreplaceable assets of an education system based on mother-tongue education. A LiEP that does not include mother-tongue education is the second most important

reason, after poor instruction, for the low matriculation pass rate in South Africa. Therefore is it preferable to educate children to their mother tongue for as long as possible.

Learners who switch to a second language in Grade 4 score only 30 to 40 per cent in the second language by Grade 12, even though they have been exposed to the language for longer. In contrast, learners who have had about six years of mother-tongue education usually score 50 per cent or more in the second language. If the learner received mother-tongue education until Grade 12, the score is 60 per cent or higher (Dippenaar, 2010:3).

Ramphele (2009:2) summarises the position as follows:

Children who are taught in the first few years in their mother tongue, while other languages are introduced as subjects, tend to become more proficient in all languages. It provides the anchor for better and deeper learning by linking it to everyday life and one's own identity.

The South African reality is that the increasing hegemony of English in the post-apartheid era puts immense pressure on parents to choose English as teaching language for their children (Makoe & McKinney, 2009). These aspirations are understandable, but do not have to be met at the cost of mother-tongue education. Alexander (2010a) and Du Plessis (2009) are of the opinion that a mother-tongue-based bilingual education system is the solution. Particularly black parents will have peace of mind knowing that such a system has educational and economic benefits (Alexander, 2010b:12). Parents are uninformed about mother-tongue education and often have the wrong impression that English is their children's only option. This misconception can be cleared up only if parents can be convinced that the best way to become proficient in English is a strong foundation in the mother tongue (Alexander, 2010a:3).

According to Alexander (2010a:3), the shortage of teachers who are well trained in their mother tongues is the biggest challenge that the ideal of MTBBE faces. It is clear that there will be no progress in establishing the indigenous languages as teaching languages if we do not have enough professionals who can do excellent work in their mother tongue and who, generally speaking, are doomed to mediocrity in English. As more capable teachers become available, more and more parents will switch to this model (Alexander 2010b:14).

6. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In support of the literature study, seven experienced and respected South African experts in the field of language policy and teaching who have published widely on the subject were invited to respond to an open-ended questionnaire. The objective of the empirical research was to elucidate the aspects discussed so far in this article. The author also wanted – in the light of the participating experts' extensive experience in language teaching – to investigate what they recommend in order to address the deep-seated problem: the connection between Language of Learning

and Teaching (LoLT) and the low levels of literacy and numeracy in our national education system.

Since MTBBE is already being investigated as an option by one provincial department of education (cf. WCED 2007), the author also wanted to determine if the participating researchers think that it is a viable option that can be applied nationally. The rationale behind the empirical investigation was therefore to determine if there is a connection between the problematic issue of mother-tongue instruction as presented in the literature study and the perceptions of experts in the field regarding the way forward.

The experts who took part in the survey were Neville Alexander (University of Stellenbosch), WAM Carstens (North-West University), Theodorus du Plessis (University of the Free State), Sandile Gxilishe (University Cape Town), Kathleen Heugh (HSRC), Jacques van der Elst (South African Academy for Arts and Science) and Victor Webb (University of Pretoria).¹

6.1 *Feedback on the questionnaire*

The feedback on the ten questions can be summarised as follows:

- 1) *The reason for South Africa's poor performance in literacy and numeracy begins in the foundation phase, where learners do not succeed in mastering the basic literacy and numeracy skills. Do you agree?*

All the participants answered affirmatively. Heugh points out that her research in the Western Cape and Limpopo led to the same conclusion. The participants agree that the consequences are dire: learners are denied access to economic, educational, political and social opportunities in their adult lives (Alexander), and therefore South Africa will remain an underdeveloped country (Webb). All the participants are of the opinion that mother-tongue education for all South Africans is negotiable.

- 2) *The lack of mother-tongue education is a possible cause of the deterioration in literacy and numeracy despite departmental attempts to improve the situation. What is your opinion regarding this?*

The participants agree that the mother tongue is the basis of education in most countries around the globe. The inability to implement effective mother-tongue education (Van der Elst) is the primary reason for the low levels of literacy and numeracy in the country (Carstens, Heugh). The closing of teaching colleges is one of the main reasons for the deterioration in literacy and numeracy, according to Gxilishe. He argues that universities cannot guarantee the same quality and number of teachers. According to him, fewer teachers are produced and, furthermore, they are not trained in mother-tongue education. It is accepted that learners cannot learn to read and write in a language they do not know. The situation has to be

¹ *We thank the experts for their valuable contributions and also for their permission to have their answers and opinions stated explicitly in this article.*

reversed: learners should become literate and numerate in a language they know well (Webb).

- 3) *Do you agree that the government's unwillingness to implement an effective LiEP based on mother-tongue education is responsible for the poor performance in literacy and numeracy?*

Heugh mentions that at international level there is considerable disappointment that the South African government does not have the courage of its convictions to implement one of the most democratic language-in-education policies in the world. The Ethiopian government succeeded in doing so with 22 languages in a relatively short period (1994–2000). If it can be done in one of the poorest countries in the world, it has to be possible in what is economically the strongest country on the African continent. What is lacking, according to Gxilishe, is the government's political will to amend the LiEP in such a way that it makes provision for mother-tongue education up to the highest school level. Carstens is of the opinion that the government is failing our children. He says that the South African Constitution provides for education through the medium of official languages, but still a large part of teaching takes place in English, probably because, according to Alexander, the government has only a vague idea of what constitutes a multilingual and multicultural society at the beginning of the 21st century. The government's race-driven understanding of a democratic dispensation is the real reason for the frustration of most people (Alexander). In the meantime, the damage done by a "short-sighted, purely politically driven" LiEP is incalculable (Van der Elst).

Not all participants agree with the statement presented in the question. Du Plessis is of the opinion that such a statement is difficult to prove. Webb argues that the LiEP should make provision for the fact that learners' literacy and numeracy development should take place in a language in which they are well grounded – whether it is the mother tongue, the home language or a community language, as long as he/she has a good grasp of that language.

- 4) *Many feel that the legacy of the Bantu Education Act is responsible for the current negative attitude toward indigenous languages as teaching languages. Do you agree?*

The participants do not agree fully with the statement. Naturally the apartheid government's enforcement of mother-tongue education with its racist inferior curriculum stigmatised the concept of mother-tongue education. According to Gxilishe, this has led black people to "hate" mother-tongue education. This fostered a negative attitude towards it among parents and teachers, which led to the unfortunate and ignorant rejection of mother-tongue education as such (Alexander, Webb). The essential factor was the colonialism and imperialism of the European powers, which created an obsession with instruction in English, French or Portuguese throughout Africa. The languages of Africa are regarded simply as inferior, as languages in which teaching is impossible (Webb). According to Du Plessis, Bantu Education was but one factor that impacted negatively on mother-tongue education – definitely not the only one. He bases his argument on the fact that 'Bantu

Education' did not exist in other African countries, but the negativity is the same. Heugh mentions that Bantu education came to an end 35 years ago; therefore this negativity towards mother-tongue education can no longer be ascribed to apartheid and Bantu Education. She furthermore states that today Verwoerd's controversial system is used solely as a smokescreen for unequal teaching practices and that it is time that these practices, including the lack of mother-tongue education, are exposed for their injustices against innocent learners. The participants agree that the emphasis should be on improving the skills of incompetent teachers (Carstens, Van der Elst).

- 5) *It seems that there is an increasing tendency to scale down the importance of indigenous languages in South Africa. Do you agree with this statement? Can you propose a solution?*

Except for Du Plessis, who asks whether indigenous languages are suitable to fulfil higher functions, the experts agree that it seems to be the pattern. Heugh sees it as ironic that, in a country in which the Constitution espouses diversity and particularly linguistic diversity, those constitutional principles are ignored completely in practice. The intentional dismissal of the importance of mother-tongue education amounts to intolerance and even the undermining of the Constitution, which entrenches the right to mother-tongue education (Van der Elst). Webb refers to positive signs in Limpopo, but emphasises that the ultimate solution would be for the indigenous languages to gain economic and social value. This would be a long-term process, because the more the indigenous languages are ignored, the less economic capital they attract. Furthermore, every South African child should have a command of at least three South African languages, of which one should be an (other) indigenous language, according to Alexander.

- 6) *Is it still practical and necessary at all to insist on mother-tongue education in South Africa?*

All the participants agree that it is indeed practical and necessary. The latest data from Heugh's research in Ethiopia, as well as the results of the systemic evaluation and follow-up assessments in 2000, 2004 and 2008, indicate that learners with eight years of mother-tongue education plus English as subject plus a third indigenous language as subject performed the best. Heugh states that no country in the world (including Africa) ever successfully educated the majority of the population in a second or a foreign language. She also refers to the fact that in the former Soviet Union students from a language background other than Russian always performed the poorest. Du Plessis and Webb are of the opinion that the issue of mother-tongue education is not that simple, since the attitude of the community towards their language has to change, which takes time. Van der Elst agrees that it is an injustice to educate a child in a language that he/she does not understand, and the poor results of the current education policy for youths growing up in one of the indigenous languages are evident in the deteriorating matriculation pass rate.

- 7) *In response to the question "What can we do to promote the use of indigenous languages?", it is often said that linguistic products (such as the media, televi-*

sion, newspapers, radio, etc.) are examples of a language's economic capital. The market adjusts the price according to the demand for a product. Therefore, the more users a language has, the better it is placed to influence the market. Do you agree with this view?

Alexander, Carstens and Heugh agree with this argument, but Du Plessis and Webb are of the opinion that the situation is too complex to be simplified in this way. The number of speakers of a language is not the central factor. As an example, Webb refers to isiZulu, which has more than ten million speakers but is still a minority language. The central requirement is *value* and this value is developed along different avenues, with different institutions playing a role, including government and the community. Indigenous African languages, can be languages of business, of the workplace and of power. If the "market value" of people's languages grows (for example, when it is a prerequisite that you have command of two or even three of the indigenous languages in order to work in the public service, retail banks, supermarkets, etc.), people will begin to realise that it is just as important to study their own languages as it is to study English (Alexander). According to Gxilishe, black people are increasingly insisting that those who want to do business with them address them in their own language.

8) *Language development requires that civic society mobilise around language rights and their practical benefits. What is your opinion regarding this?*

Most of the participants agree that greater mobilisation around language rights will advance the cause of mother-tongue education. Carstens puts it that as long as the speakers of indigenous languages do not protest against the dismissal of their language rights, their language will not receive the recognition it deserves. The question is, according to Webb, how it will come about that civic society mobilises – what variables and conditions determine such a process? Du Plessis warns that language rights movements often cause division. According to him, the focus should be on conventionalising language policy making, in other words what people do from the bottom up in order to address language problems – with which Alexander and Webb agree. The most important challenge is the lack or insufficient vision of government and leaders (Alexander). Apart from basic human rights, ethical principles such as good governance and a responsibility toward society, it is unprofessional, according to Heugh, to maintain an education system which is designed to make success available to the privileged only, while the majority of the population is doomed to fail. Such a system is not sustainable economically; it impedes economic and other development and ensures that the country cannot be competitive in the globalising economy.

9) *Is litigation such as recently instituted by Cerneels Lourens (2009) the solution? What is your outlook regarding this?*

The participants had widely different opinions on this issue. Heugh is of the opinion that a watershed court case such as referred to in the question may be the only way, while the government continues to ignore the data from worldwide research. Heugh is supported by Carstens: "If it has an *effect*, then it should happen. The im-

portant thing is that the speakers of the indigenous languages become activists for their languages.” Du Plessis and Gxilishe do not agree. The former argues that in some countries and communities litigation is regarded as an intense form of activism and although it is rights driven, it leads to division. Gxilishe is uncertain whether litigation has accomplished anything here and stresses that policy makers have to build on solutions that already exist at grassroots level. Ultimately the language attitudes of the community are of key importance (Webb).

10) *Do you have any other input concerning mother-tongue education and/or language-in-education legislation?*

According to Van der Elst, it is false to claim that children who are trained in English will do better in their careers than others who, for instance, received mother-tongue education in Afrikaans. Mother-tongue education is a key aspect determining the quality of education. Carstens concurs: unless government realises this, the current situation of paralysis among the speakers of the indigenous languages will continue and the country will be doomed to the current level of mediocrity. Heugh is of the opinion that it all depends on whether the government wants to act or not.

The participants agreed that the debate should shift to MTBBE. If Afrikaans-speaking people know that their right to mother-tongue education is guaranteed by this LiEP, the emotional element will be removed from the language debate. Gxilishe and Alexander feel that a national awareness campaign is needed in order to change black parents’ attitude toward mother-tongue education. Everyone has to realise that they are equipped with a valuable gift – their mother tongue – and that the proper use of this gift is in fact one of the keys to their own and our communal social progress. MTBBE will ensure that indigenous languages will be promoted in the school situation, while it will give black learners the opportunity to master English as second language. This will strengthen their chances at furthering their studies and gaining employment.

MTBBE in which both the mother tongue and English are taught well will have a positive impact on the country’s literacy and numeracy (Alexander, Du Plessis, Heugh, Carstens). Furthermore Alexander is of the opinion that, by means of MTBBE, we can realise a truly democratic society in which all people can be part of the decision-making process, because no one is excluded on the basis of language or any other obstacles.

7. CONCLUSION

In this article it became evident that the LiEP supports the unspecified two-language requirement of Section 6 (3). Du Plessis (2009:5) states that without a specified requirement of bilingualism, it seems almost impossible to realise the enforcement of Section 6 (3). Therefore, with regards to Education in official languages, it seems reasonable to recommend that the South African Languages Bill should provide for.

The South African Languages Bill should provide for school education in three official languages in primary and secondary schools in the provinces. The languages will be English, the province's majority language and a language chosen by the school's governing body. Mother-tongue education in the first six years of education should be provided for, wherever possible. A teaching certificate/diploma in bilingualism or multilingualism should be a requirement for future teachers.

Based on the data gathered in the literature study, and supported by the empirical investigation, mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) is suggested as a solution. Such a system will: promote mother-tongue education, particularly through the medium of indigenous languages; provide access to an international language such as English and contribute to improved literacy and numeracy.

The issue of mother-tongue education as a matter of public concern requires the unflinching attention of the country's leaders. Although the Constitution grants all learners the right to attend school in the language of their choice, this right is undermined in practice by the state's inability to make provision for it (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010: 27; Ngwenya, 2010:2; Ramphela, 2009:11). The business sector, church leaders and civil rights leaders all have a responsibility to keep the country's rich cultural heritage alive (Ramphela, 2009:11). Furthermore, South Africa is in need of a clear undertaking by government to promote the indigenous languages. People have to be empowered to be the masters of their own destiny. In order to achieve this, they need a language and culture with which they can identify (Batibo, 2011:18).

While the benefits of MTBBE are clear, an education system based on a second or even a third language as medium of teaching is only capable of producing second-class and third-class citizens. No country has ever become an economic power through the medium of a second or third language. It is also a myth that only monolingual countries are successful economically. The most important characteristic of an economically successful country is not monolingualism, but high levels of literacy and numeracy (Alexander, 2010b:14). If each child in the following decades can master at least three South African languages, of which one is an (other) indigenous language, our multicultural democracy will be guaranteed by means of the curriculum.

Therefore an education system based on MTBBE (in which the mother tongue *and* English – or Afrikaans where applicable – are taught intensively) might be the answer to South Africa's low levels of literacy and numeracy.

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