

Challenges in implementing a mother tongue-based language-in-education policy: Policy and practice in Kenya.

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the challenges faced in implementing Kenya's language-in-education policy, which advocates mother tongue-based learning. This policy has the potential to make primary education contextually located and locally accessible, particularly to ethnic minorities and marginalised groups, improving the reach and quality of education. It is however not widely practiced. Using a literature review, ethnographic studies, research findings and interviews with linguists and sociologists, this paper argues for greater resource allocation, political will and clearer policy objectives to achieve the aims of an effective mother tongue-based education system in Kenya.

Introduction

‘There is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in the construction of the purpose involved in his studying.’

(Dewey 1938, p. 67)

Education has been found to have a positive impact on human development and attempts to make it available to all has been a priority for development agencies and governments since the UN declared it a human right in 1948. At the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the international community committed to ensuring the universal right to education for “every citizen and every society”, with developing countries making constitutional commitments to provide universal primary education for all (World Declaration on Education For All 1990, pp. 6-7). But as the 2015 deadline for achieving the six goals of the Education for All (EFA) conference draws closer, many countries are not on track to achieving the wide range of individual and development targets set out in Jomtien and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 (EFA Summary Report 2010, p. 4). The six EFA goals are:

1. comprehensive early childhood education and care
2. free and compulsory quality primary education for children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances and those from ethnic minorities
3. life skills training for young people and adults
4. basic and continuing education for adults, particularly women, and improved adult literacy by 50% by 2015
5. gender equality in provision of education
6. improving the quality of education for improved learning outcomes, particularly in numeracy, literacy and life skills (UNESCO 2000, pp. 15-17).

The initial response to removing barriers to basic education was improving access to schooling, which was taken to mean increasing the numbers of schools and teachers and then getting as many children into schools as possible (Dyer 2002, p. 419). But while this may have increased enrolment rates and provided positive quantitative data, it failed to consider the qualitative issues inside of schools. Tests carried out in several developing countries



revealed that many students had not attained the competency levels required for their level of schooling. Thus, EFA reports that “millions of children are leaving school without having acquired basic skills” and “there are still 72 million primary aged children out of school” (EFA Summary Report 2010, p. 4). Further, the 2005 EFA Report on the quality of education (pp. 42-43) notes an enormous gap between the number of pupils graduating from school and those among them mastering a minimum level of literacy.

Low quality education often has a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups and leads to large school and resource wastage as learners drop out, are pushed out or end up repeating grades (see e.g. Alexander 2000; Bowden 2002). Further, low quality education undermines the expected developmental role of education with parents sometimes deciding to reallocate scarce resources to other sectors rather than education. But as Alemayu (2001, p. 46) notes, “[a lack of education] is the main single factor associated with the probability of being poor, hence improving educational performance should form a core element in the poverty reduction strategy”.

Various studies have shown that meeting a minimum of standards, including improving school facilities, having teachers who are sufficiently trained and have a mastery of content and pedagogy and, the focus of this paper, having appropriate language strategies, can significantly improve educational quality (EFA 2005, pp. 43, 45). Appropriate language-in-education (LiE) policies that enable teachers to instruct in the language a child speaks most at home and understands well enough to learn academic content through, that is their mother tongue, as they learn a different language improves pupils’ critical engagement with content, foster an environment of mutual learning and improve inclusion as shall be discussed in this paper.

To this end, the Dakar Framework for Action (2000, p. 8) recognises the need to tailor primary education to reach those belonging to ethnic minorities to make education contextually located and locally accessible. Learners who understand the language they are instructed in are more likely to engage meaningfully with content, question what they do not understand and even enjoy the challenge of new things. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) notes that people learn best when they are taught in a language they understand well (2006, p. 3). UNESCO (2005, p. 1) adds that, “...one of the biggest obstacles to Education



For All remains in place: the use of foreign languages for teaching and learning”. This is evidenced by Pinnock (2009, p. 9) who notes that 72% of out-of-school children are found in linguistically diverse countries that enforce a non-indigenous language for schooling. Educators thus note the value of mother-tongue based education to improve the reach and quality of education. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, p. 103) add, the higher the number of educated people in a country, the better the living standards as crime rates decrease, participation in civic and community activities increases and incomes rise.

Increasing evidence that mother tongue-based education has a positive impact on educational and learning outcomes has influenced LiE policies in several developing countries. This dissertation will look at what benefits developing countries stand to gain in the first chapter. Most supporters of mother tongue-based learning are agreed that a child’s home language can effectively be used as a language of instruction in the early years of their schooling as a bridge to learning a foreign language. This paper will therefore limit itself to a discussion of the benefits of mother tongue-based education in the early years of primary schooling. Kenya implemented a language policy in schools in 1976 that decrees children are taught in their mother tongues in the first three years of primary school, the second chapter discusses this policy and education in Kenya. The third and fourth chapters will look at the challenges faced in implementing such a language policy using Kenya as a case study and with supporting arguments from other countries before suggesting potential solutions.

Kenya is ethnically heterogeneous and the language policy recognises the difficulties of attempting to implement mother-tongue learning in regions where different ethnicities reside. In such situations, the policy advocates the use of Kiswahili – the other of Kenya’s national languages alongside English – as the language of instruction in the early years of primary school. This dissertation will therefore limit itself to analysing the challenges of implementing multilingual learning in ethnically homogenous schools where national languages are not the main languages spoken at home. This therefore limits the analysis further to rural schools in Kenya. To analyse the benefits of and challenges facing mother tongue-based education, this paper will review literature and research findings from various educators, academics and development organisations. It will also present potential solutions to some of the challenges in instituting effective LiE policies using insights from various



mother tongue-based systems implemented around the world, particularly in countries of Southeast Asia where there is institutional support for mother tongue-based education, and interviews with some linguists. The paper will also make use of government documents for clearer statements about Kenya's LiE policy objectives. Various sociologists have carried out ethnographic studies of Kenyan classroom practices, and these will be referred to for practical examples of language practices in Kenyan schools. Where these studies have been carried out in ethnically homogenous classrooms, it is assumed that the findings will hold in similar contexts in different regions.

1. The case for mother tongue-based education

The 2010 EFA report on reaching the marginalised sombrely notes that, "...children who are members of an ethnic or linguistic minority [or] an indigenous group ... enter school with poorer prospects of success and emerge with fewer years of education and lower levels of achievement" (p. 25). The report advises that to effectively teach the around 221 million children worldwide who speak a different language at home from the one used for instruction in schools, there is need to first teach them in their home language (L1) while gradually introducing the national or official language (L2) (ibid. p. 26). This chapter will look at some of the benefits of a mother tongue-based education system under three main sub-headings: learning outcomes, inclusion and indigenous language development.

Learning outcomes

Most developing countries are characterised by multilingual societies yet foreign languages of instruction pervade a majority of education systems. A system where instruction is carried out in a language children do not speak is referred to as submersion, as it is comparable to forcibly holding a child under water (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, p. 105). However, research has shown that mother tongue-based schooling significantly improves learning (see e.g. Benson 2004b; Trudell 2005; SIL 2006; UNESCO 2006; Kosonen 2009; Young 2009). The use of a familiar language to teach children literacy is more effective than a submersion system as learners "can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies" to learn how to read and write (Benson 2004a, p. 1). This means that since children can already speak the language, they can learn to associate sounds with the symbols they see, thus facilitating understanding. When



literacy skills, such as reading, are taught in a foreign language, the children first have to gain familiarity with the sound before they can master the symbol. Such cognitive development takes time, which is a luxury submersion does not allow. This forces learners and teachers to resort to rote teaching and learning, where the children merely memorise what the teacher says without necessarily understanding the meaning.

Yet, despite the poor learning outcomes associated with submersion education, it is wrongly regarded the fastest way to teach children the L2 (Trudell 2005, p. 239; Kosonen and Young 2009, p. 13). Baldauf and Kaplan (2004, p. 6) note the prevalence of the myth that the more time spent educating a child via a language of wider communication, the more they master it. But in most cases, such practices tend to push children out of schools as learners fail to find meaning in what they are hearing and intellectually disengage. This makes it much harder to regain their attention later on, or even retain them in the schooling system beyond the primary level. Teaching in a child's home language however means that the learning of new concepts does not have to be postponed until learners grasp L2. As a result, teachers and learners are able to negotiate meanings together, thus competency in L2 is gained through mutual interaction rather than memorisation and rote learning.

Cummins (1979, pp. 233-236) proposes the interdependence theory to explain the positive transfer of literacy skills from L1 to L2. He argues that the level of literacy competence in L2 that a child attains is partially a function of the level of competence the child has in L1 at the time L2 teaching begins intensively. Thus, if an education system submerges learners in L2 without first trying to further develop the skill they already have in L1, the school risks impeding their competency in L2 for years to come, while also limiting continued, autonomous development of their L1. This is because the sustained use of a foreign language of instruction in schools negatively impacts the way children learn to think, thus interfering with their cognitive development. Wigglesworth and Simpson (2008, p. 14) support the idea that a child's initial acquisition of language is vital to their learning how to think. Therefore, when an education system imposes a foreign language on children, disregarding their initial contact with language and pattern of processing new information, it inhibits their development of cognitive function.



An educational model that encourages mutual learning rather than submersion is referred to as immersion. Here, “the immersion teacher is familiar with the child’s language and cultural background and can therefore respond appropriately to his needs. The immersion child’s L1 is never denigrated by the teacher...” (Cummins 1979, p. 225). So while the L1 of a child in a submersion system is viewed as a handicap hindering competency in L2, in the immersion system, it is viewed as an asset to the acquisition of a new language. As Cummins summarises: “what is communicated to children in immersion programs is their success, whereas in submersion programs children are often made to feel acutely aware of their failure” (ibid.). Immersion programmes therefore validate a child’s home knowledge, culture and language.

Such positive reinforcement decreases rates of repetition, failure and dropouts, and “provides long-term benefits like higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence and higher aspirations for schooling and life” (UNESCO 2006, pp. 2-3). L1 classrooms allow children to express themselves, contribute to discussions and develop their intellects as conversations are carried out in a familiar language. This is thought to lead to more satisfaction from the education system, therefore reducing dropouts. And because learners are able to keep up with what is going on or at least feel they can ask questions where they do not understand, rates of failure and repetition decrease. In contrast, learners in submersion classrooms “are forced to sit silently or repeat mechanically, leading to frustration and ultimately repetition, failure and dropout” (Benson 2004a, p. 2).

The use of a foreign language in schools, in Freirian terms, makes children objects of their world, rather than subjects. Freire (1973, pp. 47-49) notes that as we all have human experiences and participation in our world, we all have something of value within us. The role of educators is to offer children instruments to enable them to critically understand the value of their experiences and express them through reading and writing. In this way, the educational experience comes from the inside out. To adequately express their experiences and articulate their knowledge, children require an environment that uses the language they speak. Submersion in a foreign language denies children the opportunity to articulate their world. An American counsellor in conversation with the then US Senator Barack Obama notes that a real education is one that gives a child “an understanding of himself, his world,

his culture, his community....that's what makes a child hungry to learn – the promise of being part of something, of mastering his environment” (Obama 1995, p. 258).

Inclusion

A learner's ethnolinguistic heritage, which refers to the ethnic and speech community the child is born into, determines the degree to which they will have interacted with and have access to the language of the dominant group (Benson 2004b, p. 113). An education system that fosters instruction mainly in the language of the dominant group greatly disadvantages minorities and marginalised communities, denying them their right to a quality education. An L2-dominant education system therefore allows the elite unequal access to the language of education, governance and other official domains (UNESCO 2005, p. 1). UNESCO further notes, “over 50 percent of citizens of low-income countries work in the informal sector....these activities do not usually expose either children or adults to the dominant official language that would help them in school” (ibid.). With such a high proportion of the population in developing countries being excluded, the gap between the rich and the poor is bound to keep growing, creating tensions and disaffection. And as Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, pp. 105-108) show, the more unequal a country is, the worse children's educational attainment is.

An L1-based system, however, presents the opportunity to even out the playing field and improve access to education for all sectors of society, which can improve the growth and development of a country. As evidenced by Lin and Martin (2005, p. 13), mother tongue-based learning has been found to “help rural or poor urban working-class schoolchildren to acquire global, standard languages and literacies for wider communication and socioeconomic mobility”. Unfortunately, policy decisions about which language to teach in schools are rarely made based on the needs of the majority but rather favour the dominant class. Semali (2009, p. 196) notes, “The language question is about power....redistributing power, privilege and resources internationally”, something dominant groups are resistant to. This often means the needs of the vulnerable and marginalised populations, even if they form the majority, are likely to be ignored as decision makers cater to the elite.



Trim (1999, pp. 8, 13) notes that the central aim of language in education is to help people articulate and be consciously aware of the full range of their experiences, knowledge and understanding, which as earlier mentioned, is greatly aided by a mother tongue-based education system, especially in communities where access to the dominant language is limited. When a foreign language dominates instruction, learners are bound to have questions, doubts and hesitations that remain unexpressed, which could lead to dangerous resentments. In agreement with this, Shotton (2002, p. 415) notes that as education is structured, especially for the poorest and weakest, all it does is disregard the experiences of learners, censor their knowledge and confirm them as objects for manipulation.

Kuper (2003, p. 89) notes, “between five and twenty thousand languages are spoken in the world, each of them reflecting a unique view of the world, pattern of thought and culture”. A mother tongue-based system therefore allows learners to articulate their heritage, helping them appreciate their history and raising the status of their linguistic group. As The International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) (1997) notes that people educated in foreign languages cannot confidently express their worldview if they have to “compete with those embodied in the foreign language of prestige”. If people are deprived of the chance to express their knowledge or needs, the deprivation may increase feelings of resentment and exclusion, which could fragment a country. The use of L1 in schools has been found to reduce the incidence of political instability and conflict as it draws linguistic minorities into wider society, while the enforced use of L2 entrenches feelings of being the Other (Prah 2009, p. 154).

There is, however, the risk of increased ethnicisation and even greater division within a country if mother tongue-based learning is overly focused on. The Department for International Development (DfID) cautions that, “a narrow focus on ... a minority language of instruction may reinforce social and economic marginalisation” (1999, p. 26). If developed extensively, the focus on local languages may create tribal enclaves that reduce attempts at building a unified nation-state. However, this should not derail attempts at creating L1-based schools, as fragmentation concerns can be addressed by an education system that uses a learner’s first language for the first few years of primary schooling as a bridge to learning the national or official language. This engages learners, validates their culture and keeps them grounded in their identity while enabling them to integrate with wider society. As the



UNESCO paper *Education in a Multilingual World* (2003, pp. 8, 14) urges, schooling systems should strike a balance between enabling people to use their local languages and providing them with access to literacy in the national language.

The use of a mother tongue also elevates indigenous languages' status and usefulness, "which has the potential to improve social relations and political participation as well as education", thus reducing competition between ethnic groups (Benson 2004b, p. 119). The potential to improve the status of indigenous languages is important as in several countries, local languages came to be associated with primitiveness. Ngugi (1986) notes that during colonial times, African children learnt to associate their mother tongues with stupidity, humiliation and low status, and the language of the colonisers, English, with intelligence and success. Benson (2004a, p. 2) adds that "many ex-British colonies inherited mother tongue schooling as part of separate and unequal development", particularly in South Africa. This legacy of undermining local languages and placing foreign ones on a pedestal still prevails in several developing countries. A mother tongue-based education system, however, enables the development of local languages thus increasing their value.

An L1-based programme also improves kinship ties (Trudell 2005; UNESCO 2005; Pinnock 2009). If schooling progresses with little influence from the home and family, children, especially for those from remote areas or villages, may find it hard to reintegrate into their society after finishing school, destroying important social ties. However, the use of local languages in schools means that members of a community can play a more active role in the education of their children, discussing concepts and ideas negotiated in the classroom. It also provides an opportunity for community members to participate in preparing instructional materials for learners thus preserving cultural heritage (Young 2009, p. 123). A mother tongue-based system also allows parents greater social control over what teachers do and what decisions schools make (UNESCO 2005, pp. 4-5; Trudell 2005, p. 241). Trudell notes that in villages where English is mainly inaccessible, teachers are not immune to exploiting their power as holders of a language the community views as valuable. But when a school uses the same language as that used in the community, it reduces the risk of learners, especially girls, being abused. It also provides the opportunity for parents to express their needs, making schools more responsive to the community's needs.

Indigenous language development

There have been reservations about the lexical capacity of indigenous languages to express the realities of modern science and technology and thus be effective in classroom instruction. Critics also note local languages' limited geographical significance, lack of standardisation and orthography of most of them and the proliferation of dialects (Prah 2009, p. 156; Herman 2009, p. 188). In considering the use of local languages for instruction, however, their subjective and objective characteristics must first be considered, in line with Stern (1983, p. 9). The objective characteristics of a language medium have to do with its standardisation. That is, to make a suitable language of instruction (LOI), a local language should be codified – organised into a system or code – to minimise its variations; elaborated to enable it to be adapted to a wide range of functions; and, written down so people can have material to read in it. The higher up in an education system a language is to be used, the more standard it needs to be. The subjective characteristics of a language are: the language should be considered suitable by users and worth the effort to acquire; it should be teachable to the required standard with sufficient resources for its dissemination; and, it should be experienced in use in a natural, informal, undirected language environment such as the home (ibid.). In most cases, an L2 meets these criteria better than an L1. However, L1s can be developed to satisfy these criteria.

Hailey (1938, p. 157) notes that the lexical capacity of indigenous languages can be increased and that even with dialectal differences, most languages have similar structures that can be standardised. An education system that utilises L1 enables the development of agreed orthographies in order to transmit curriculum content to learners. These agreed-upon writing and spelling systems will however need to accurately represent speech patterns acceptable to speakers of the language and be easy to transcribe in order to produce reading materials. This requires collaboration between linguists, educators, publishers and local community members (Young 2009, p. 124).

This chapter has identified and discussed some of the major benefits of an effective mother tongue-based education system under three main subheadings: learning outcomes, inclusion and language development. While there is a vast array of evidence showing an L1-based system can improve education in developing countries, it can only work where “basic human



needs are being met so that schooling can take place, and ... mother tongue-based schooling can be properly implemented” (Benson 2004a, p. 3). Thus, merely changing the language of instruction without addressing pressing political and social issues in a country will not significantly improve educational outcomes. But even if minimally implemented, because language cuts across issues of race, ethnicity, gender and poverty, an L1-based system has the potential to reach those traditionally left behind or marginalised (ibid., p. 4). The following chapters will discuss why effective implementation of a mother tongue-based education system is problematic using Kenya as a case study.

2. Language-in-Education Policy in Kenya

This chapter introduces the case study, Kenya, in three sections. The first section gives an overview of language in Kenya, the second documents the development of the current LiE policy in the country, and the third section highlights aspects of the current state of education in Kenya that are important for the discussion in this dissertation.

Language in Kenya

Kenya is a multilingual and multiethnic country with an estimated population of 40 million people who speak about 50 languages and dialects, though estimates range from 30 to 70 (Githiora 2008, p. 236). The range in number of languages is most likely because the boundary between language and dialect is blurry. As Githiora (ibid.) notes, dialect boundaries tend to be obscured when culture or ethnicity is used as a criteria for demarcating the difference between language and dialect, rather than linguistic criteria of structure or typology. That is, people with a common culture may end up grouped as speaking a similar language but with different dialects, as opposed to them being grouped as having different languages. As evidenced by Githiora, the Abaluyia in Kenya, who share common cultural beliefs and practices, are identified as speakers of the Luluyia language, but they in fact speak a cluster of closely related dialects, estimated to be 16 to 26, rather than the same language. Other examples include the Kalenjin, who are identified as a single community yet comprise seven different ethnic groups– Kispigis, Nandi, Pokot, Marakwet, Keiyo, Tugen and Sabaot – each with its own dialect and some, mutually unintelligible. Also, the Mijikenda community



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is made up of nine different ethnic groups - the Kauma, Chonyi, Jibana, Giriama, Kamabe, Ribe, Rabai, Duruma and Digo (The UN Refugee Council (UNHCR) 2003).

About 98% of Kenya's population is African and the languages they speak are classified into three main linguistic families: the Bantu, the Nilotes and the Cushites. About 65% of Kenyans speak a Bantu language (for instance, Kiswahili, Kikamba, Gikuyu and Luluyia), 30% speak a Nilotic language (for instance, Maa, Kalenjin and Dholuo) and 3% speak a Cushitic language (for instance, Somali, Orma and Borana). Some indigenous languages such as El Molo and Ogiek, which are very nearly extinct, have been assimilated into larger language communities such as the Maasai and Kalenjin. The Kikuyu are Kenya's largest ethnic group and make up 22% of the population. The next largest groups are: the Luyia at 14%, Luo at 13%, Kalenjin at 12%, Kamba at 11%, and Kisii and Meru at 6% each (United States Library of Congress 2007, p. 7). The remaining 2% non-African population speak Indo-European languages including Punjabi, Gujarati, Hindi and English (UNHCR 2003).

Kenya has the enviable potential to carve out a national identity using an indigenous language, Kiswahili, which an estimated two-thirds of the population speak (Githiora 2008, p. 236). Githiora adds, "Swahili is widely accepted as ...the language of communication among Kenyans of all regional and social backgrounds". It is considered a unifying language that cuts across ethnic and socioeconomic barriers, and that perpetuates a feeling of "shared fate" and "intimacy" (Brown and Gilman 1960, p. 254).

Development of Kenya's language-in-education policy

Language policy (LP) refers to "all the language practices, beliefs and management decisions of a community or polity" (Spolsky 2004, p. 9). Language policy therefore determines which languages should get status and priority in society by being labelled 'standard', 'official', 'local', 'national' and so on. LP also has the potential to legitimise marginalised languages and therefore manipulates and imposes language behaviour (Shohamy 2006, p. 47).

Formal education was started in Kenya by missionaries in 1846 with the setting up of a school in Rabai, a town along the coast. Early language policies in education encouraged the use of mother tongues as local languages were used in the communication of religious messages; missionaries were convinced people better understood the Bible if it was taught in



their home language (Eshiwani 1993, p.15; Muthwii 2007, p. 47). And when the country was later colonised by Britain, the use of mother tongue in schools persisted following recommendations from the Education Commission for Africa, an American organisation the British requested to organise an education system for its colonies in 1922. The report published in 1924 recognises the importance of local languages in preserving what is good and fostering self-respect in indigenous populations. It notes that imposing the use of European languages "...is unwise and unjust. The disregard of the Native language is a hindrance even to the acquisition of the European language" (Jones 1924, p. 19).

Later, the African Education Report recommended the use of Kiswahili as the language of instruction in lower primary schools across the country as communities migrated and regions became more ethnically mixed (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1949). However, a report on the educational policy in East and Central Africa in 1951 insisted on African students learning in one of 20 indigenous languages, thus Kiswahili was banned as the LOI (Eshiwani 1993, p. 25). In 1952, researchers were commissioned to analyse Britain's education policies in its protectorates and colonies in Tropical Africa. The report recommended mother tongue-based learning and the 1951 ban was lifted; from 1953, pupils were to be instructed for the first four years in their mother tongues with areas that had mixed ethnicities using Kiswahili (Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office 1953; Yates 1964, p. 218). Muthwii (2002, p. 8) notes that the recommendations of the 1953 report were fully implemented by the colonial government, thus for most of the 50s, Kenyan pupils learnt in their L1 for the first four years with English taught as a subject before becoming the LOI from class 5-8. The major vernacular language of each locality was used for instruction.

Later, however, the use of mother tongues as languages of instruction was blamed for the poor performance of African and Asian children in examinations – which were written in English – compared to European pupils. To improve performance, the Ministry of Education established a special centre in 1957 to prepare materials and teachers for the experimental introduction of English as the LOI in all schools from Class 1 (Sifuna 1980, p. 142). The experiment, initially undertaken in schools for Asians in the late 50s, spread rapidly to African schools. Termed the English-Medium Scheme in 1957, it was later renamed the New Primary Approach (NPA) by the Ministry of Education following its "explosive expansion" across the country (Hutasoit and Prator 1965, pp. 1-2). For instance, in 1961, only one



African standard one class was using the new materials but the Ministry of Education reported that by 1965, 2,871 standard one classes were using NPA materials, though Kiswahili remained a compulsory subject. Use of NPA materials spread to even more schools with independence in 1963 (Sifuna 1980, p. 143).

The popularity of the NPA approach, however, was not necessarily as a result of its use of English as the LOI. As Hutasoit and Prator (1965, p. 1) note, the reason the new English-medium curriculum became so popular so quickly was because: 1. it solved a multiplicity of practical and political problems brought about by giving instruction in a variety of languages; 2. it brought with it a concept of education centred around learners and activities; 3. it provided much more adequate texts and teaching materials than had been available before; and, 4. it was carried out under the ideal conditions of close supervision and continuous in-service training of teachers. However, with increased demand for the NPA system in schools, meeting the demand and sustaining these four key points that made it successful proved to be untenable. As Sifuna (1980, p. 144) reports,

... rapid expansion had outstripped the stock of human and material resources available for implementing it properly. An increasing number of untrained teachers had been assigned to NPA work possibly after a brief preparation course at a teachers' college. Supervision was grossly inadequate and classroom and teaching facilities were very poor. The end result of these conditions was lack of uniformity in the quality of the NPA programme.

These problems tended to be most common in rural schools, with only areas that had effective supervision such as urban and high cost primary schools able to keep up with the NPA approach (ibid.).

In the 70s, arguments for the use of mother tongue from local and international education practitioners and development institutions returned in earnest, with educators such as Anderson (1970, pp. 148-9) reminding governments, "... a vernacular medium is educationally preferable because sound teaching must, to some degree, interact with the home life of the child and must initially be based on concepts formed during the child's pre-school experiences". Thus, as debate in the education sector shifted to L1 use and with NPA not being the panacea it was thought to be, Kenya revised its language-in-education policy. In



1976, the Ministry of Education's (MoE) policy stated that the language of instruction in classes 1-3 should be the language of the school's catchment area until class 4 after which English would be the main LOI (MoE 1976). The MoE notes that the policy would work as follows: learners who come from a common ethnic community within the neighbourhood of the school be taught in the language they speak at home; those with a mixed ethnic background be taught in Kiswahili, "which is the national language of Kenya and a *lingua franca* for many countries in Africa"; while those in urban schools be taught in English as it "would be used widely where such learners were from" (p.1). The benefits of using a child's home language were acknowledged as useful for the establishment of basic language skills which can then be transferred to the learning of English and Kiswahili. This was a constructivist approach, as the policy intended to help learners make sense of new information and skills by utilising previous knowledge (Baker 2001, p. 327). The teacher's role is identified as to build on what the child already knows (MoE 1976, p. 3).

The 1976 National Language Policy warns that should the country not fully implement the policy, it risks: high repetition rates; lack of national unity as some communities will feel marginalised; alienation of learners from their heritage culture, home community and parents; higher rates of crime, alcoholism and suicide; underutilisation of human resources; and, loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, among others. This 1976 policy is still the current official language-in-education policy of Kenya.

The current state of education in Kenya

The issue of indigenous languages in education has not received as much attention as it deserves in the country. Muthwii (2007, p. 48) notes that even the last major review of the education policy in 1999, popularly known as the Koech Commission, hardly addressed the "problems and contradictions Kenya has with regards to LOI in schools". Bunyi (2005, p. 132) adds that when in 2002 Kenya revised its curriculum and published the language policy in local newspapers, it sparked controversy. Critics of the policy, unaware it had been in place since 1976, insisted that teaching in mother tongue was archaic, a waste of time in this era of globalisation and irrelevant given the status English commands as the language of technology. When such opinions are expressed, it is hard to disagree with Waruingi's (2009,



p. 30) observation that learning in Kenya is not about imparting knowledge or culture but grasping English and therefore earning the right to claim being educated.

However, Pinnock (2009, pp. 27, 50) notes that contexts where risks associated with teaching in a language unfamiliar to children are serious include those where: 1. there is a high level of conflict or fragility; 2. high linguistic fractionalisation; 3. less developed with high number of rural population; 4. large population without access to mother tongue-based learning. Kenya is listed as meeting all criteria, which has the associated effects of: 1. likelihood of extended fragility; 2. exclusion from education in rural areas; 3. inappropriate language strategies contributing to long-term instability and division along linguistic and ethnic lines; and, 4. strong likelihood of educational failure. Pinnock further notes that 99.44% of Kenyan learners do not have access to L1 education.

The Kenyan education system employs an 8-4-4 format, where learners go through eight years of primary school, four years of secondary school and then four years in university. At the end of eight years in primary school, learners across the country sit for their Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations. They are tested on their grasp of three compulsory subjects, Mathematics, English and Kiswahili, plus two optional subjects. Except for the Kiswahili paper written in Kiswahili, examinations are written in English.

There are over 17,000 primary schools offering formal education in the country (Bunyi 2006, p. 4). The Kenyan government declared primary education free and compulsory in 2003 and an estimated 1.3 million new children enrolled in public primary schools that year, raising the total number of learners to approximately 8 million (Kinuthia 2009). On average, Kenya's primary schools have a teacher:pupil ratio of 1:47, but in some areas, it is as high as 1:100 (UNESCO 2005, p. 6; Kinuthia 2009; UIS 2010). Already, 17.9% of government spending is on education, which accounts for 7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Fifty-five percent of this amount is spent on primary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2010).

National averages show impressive progress in education in Kenya. For instance, primary enrolment rates were at 82% for girls and 81% for boys in 2008, there is a 90% survival rate to the last primary grade and the country has a literacy rate of 80% among youth aged 15-24 (UIS 2010; UNICEF 2010). However, on a district by district level, the findings paint a grim



picture of inequality and underachievement. As a result, the government established the National Assessment Centre (NAC) to monitor literacy levels and learning achievements on a regional rather than national level. And in 2010, the Uwezo Kenya organisation, in collaboration with the NAC which harmonises all assessment activities, released the first Annual Learning Assessment (ALA) report on levels of basic literacy and numeracy in the country. The researchers conducted field tests in 70 out of the 158 districts in the country, in about 10% of primary schools in the country and assessed 102,666 pupils aged 3-16 on their understanding of Class 2 tests (Uwezo Kenya 2010, pp. III, 3). This level of competency was selected as, “It is internationally recognised that after two years of schooling a pupil should demonstrate sufficient reading fluency and comprehension” (ibid., p. 12). The findings were: 85% of children in Class 2 cannot read a passage in English, 25% in Class 5 cannot read the same passage, and 4% in Class 8 cannot read the passage meaning they leave primary school without being able to read English (ibid. p. 15).

The ALA report also notes that there are children in pockets of arid and semi-arid regions who are overlooked in national averages. For instance, while the national average for children out of school in the country is 5 out of every 100, in arid and semi-arid regions (particularly in the Eastern and North-Eastern regions), the figure is almost eight times worse. In some arid districts, 40% of primary school-age children do not attend any school, while in the more fertile districts in the Central region of the country, a much lower 1% of children are out of school (Uwezo Kenya 2010, pp. 15-17). Countrywide, an estimated 1 million primary age children are not in school (USAID Kenya 2010).

This chapter has given an overview of language in Kenya and discussed the development of the multilingual LiE policy. It has also highlighted statistics that indicate the state of education in the country, showing that education in Kenya is plagued by low competency levels in districts traditionally marginalised. This helps highlight the need for the government to provide greater support for its language policy, in light of the benefits it holds for improving learning outcomes for the large percentage of children being left behind. But to do this adequately, the country will have to address and overcome the policy challenges discussed in the following two chapters.

3. Educational challenges in implementing a mother tongue-based language-in-education policy

As illustrated in the first chapter, mother tongue-based education has been shown to have sound pedagogical advantages and various developing countries have attempted to institute various models of it (see, e.g. Benson 2004b; Trudell 2005; Kosonen 2009; Sure and Ogechi 2009). However, for its effective use in the Kenyan system, a number of challenges need to be addressed. For the purposes of this dissertation, these challenges are categorised into two parts: educational challenges and political challenges, and will be discussed in this and the following chapter. There are several educational barriers preventing the effective implementation of a mother tongue-based system; this chapter will discuss some significant ones under the following subheadings: teachers, instructional materials and LiE policy and planning.

Teachers

One of the issues that predominates discussion on the effectiveness of L1-based systems is the ability of teachers to efficiently and effectively transmit cognitive skills and values in the learners' L1 (International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) 1997). However, most education systems that attempt to institute policies that encourage learning through a child's home language suffer from an acute shortage of teachers who speak or have access to these home languages, yet one of the criteria for effective usage of local languages for instruction is that there must be enough teachers to teach in it (Fasold 1984, p. 292; Thomas 2009, p. 90). A majority of out-of-school children, as earlier mentioned, are speakers of minority languages meaning that eventually there will be a dearth of educators literate in these languages if little is done to make quality education available to all sectors of society. In Kenya, the 2009 ALA report notes that traditionally marginalised communities report a much higher percentage of out-of-school children (Uwezo Kenya 2009, pp. 16-17). For instance, districts in Central province that have a large Kikuyu population have only 1% of primary age children out of school while arid districts with a high number of marginalised communities have up to 22% out of school children. This unequal access could sour relations between ethnic groups further as dominant groups continue to benefit from the availability of educated teachers and those marginalised are left even further behind. Unfortunately,



however, increasing the number of available teachers is not going to be easy. One of Kenya's major newspapers, the *Daily Nation*, reports there is a shortage of 66,000 teachers in the country, yet pupils at a recent awards ceremony all indicated they would rather become engineers and doctors than teachers (Ndung'u 2010). Despite teachers at the ceremony blaming the low salaries they receive for the lack of interest from learners for their profession, it could also be because of the negative experience learners get in classrooms.

Benson (2004b, p. 117) found that when teachers are not native speakers of the a child's L1 or lack sufficient training on how to carry out mother tongue-based teaching, they avoid the 'unknown good' and regress to the 'known bad'. That is, teachers revert to old systems of teacher-controlled interactions, where pupils are merely required to repeat content after the teacher and given little room to ask any questions or express hesitations they may have. In L2-dominant systems, this interaction characterises all years of primary schooling, making the experience unpleasant for children. Bunyi's (2005, pp. 140-147) ethnographic study of Kenyan lessons showed that classroom interactions in an L2-dominant school are dominated by safe talk – where the teacher makes little demand on learners, encourages choral answers, repetition of phrases and copying of notes from chalkboards or textbooks, undermining efforts to bring up a new generation of teachers. When teaching becomes mechanical and stifling, pupils are likely to want to distance themselves from primary school as soon as possible. Thus, without adequate support for an L1-based language policy, schools end up encouraging an orientation towards error-free regurgitation of curriculum content rather than the expression of ideas and interaction with new information (Stenhouse 1971).

One of the reasons cited for teachers regressing to the 'known bad' is that they often fail to implement "the child-centred teaching strategies in which they were trained - and reportedly believed in - because of the pressure of high-stakes examinations for their students" (Capper 2000, p. 18). This means teachers are more likely to focus on acquisition of the L2, which in most cases is done through submersion, as it is the language of examination even though the language policy advocates use of L1. In Kenya, the Ministry of Education sent out a memo in 1976 to all schools to inform them of the new LiE policy, but within a few years of inadequate support for the development of local languages and poor accountability structures, the policy was soon ignored. Most teachers, motivated by the fact that English would be the language of instruction in higher classes and of examinations, chose to teach in English as



opposed to the mother tongue, in the mistaken belief that the earlier it is introduced as the LOI, the faster pupils are likely to attain competency in it (Muthwii 2002, p. 5; Bunyi 2005). This reaction received little protest from parents and learners as many believed that submersion in the L2 would help pupils gain speedy access to greater socioeconomic opportunities (Trudell 2005; Benson 2004a; Maeda 2009). But perhaps such opinions are expressed because local languages have not received sufficient attention, making L1-based programmes ineffective. And as Benson (2004a, p. 7) found, parents tend to favour L2 learning only when governments present them with an either-or choice for their children's schooling – either an L1-dominant system or an L2-dominant system. However, if parents are presented with a well-developed mother tongue-based educational system, they overwhelmingly choose this over an L2-dominant system. Trudell's study (2005, pp. 237-251) exemplifies this result with the PROPELCA programme in Cameroon which won over minority language speakers in the north as it offers “pedagogical and cultural relevance to local realities”, while still providing access to the official languages, French and English.

Another challenge that must be addressed as concerns teachers is the wrong assumption that if teachers can speak a child's L1 then they can teach in it, which makes education ministries lax about providing specific training for L1 teachers. Benson (2004b, p. 114), however, notes that without specific formal training on multilingual strategies and practices, instruction is likely to be ineffective. An editorial in Kenya's *Daily Nation* (2009) notes primary school teachers, who undergo a two-year training course after completing their secondary education, are trained in over 10 subjects, which include all subjects taught in primary school plus professional pedagogical courses. Such a system can be ineffective as it fails to equip trainees with intensive, specialist knowledge in a few subjects and instead gives them a general idea about everything. This kind of training means that teachers lack the opportunity to gain the necessary competence and specific training in mother tongue-based teaching and how to use it as a bridge to competency in L2.

The ideal situation for a mother tongue-first education system is to “identify teachers who are fluent in the language, familiar with the local culture and respected by others in the community” (Young 2009, p. 129). In communities with an insufficient number of trained teachers, the use of community assistants – speakers of the local language who can receive some training to help trained teachers communicate curriculum content – can help bridge



gaps between the teacher and learners. Also, as Young (*ibid.*) documents of Malaysia, teachers who are speakers of the indigenous language can be trained in L1 instruction and they can then train other teachers in their district or in the community, which enables continuous in-service training and builds up networks among multilingual teachers and the community. Training workshops for community assistants and L1 teachers also provide an opportunity to enrich indigenous education as community members share their knowledge about the local language and culture, which can provide tutorial strategies.

Instructional materials

The lack of instructional materials also hinders transmission of content in local languages. The IIEP (1997) notes that up until the 1980s many of the indigenous languages in Kenya did not have a written form. However, later attempts to provide reading materials have proved challenging as the issue of providing instructional materials in local languages is heavily influenced by donor interests, evangelical motives, strong economic interests from overseas publishing companies and global power relations (Brock-Utne 2000, p. xviii; Brock-Utne 2005, p. 174; Waruingi 2009, p. 30). Brock-Utne (2000) gives examples of the British and French governments' roles in advocating for the use of their languages in schools in their former colonies through bilateral aid to support language acquisition. The aid, which comes through school texts written in French or English or money to support literacy in these languages, makes it difficult for cash-strapped governments to focus on local language development. Waruingi (2009, p. 30) notes that the Kenya Book Foundation regularly receives obsolete editions of books "complete with snowballs and snowmen" from Western countries for donation to selected schools, even though they are largely irrelevant to the Kenyan environment and curriculum. Further, Waruingi, who was involved in a UNESCO-run Basic Learning Materials (BLM) Initiative that ran from 1996-2001 in Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali and Burkina Faso, adds the initiative did not achieve its aim of providing instructional materials in local languages (2010, personal communication). The reasons he cited are: lack of policy incentives and political will; lack of the skills set required for effective development of BLM, like writers, curriculum developers, publishing and printing infrastructure; and opposition from transnational publishing and commercial interests. Thus, without adequate LiE policy, political will and allocation of



resources for the development of local languages, a mother tongue-based education system like the one advocated by the Kenyan language policy has little chance of being successful.

The lack of material in mother tongue is also often explained away by the excuse that there are too many languages in African countries to justify publishing in them (Prah 2009, pp. 302-303; Rubagumya 2009, p. 19). However, while it has long been said that the number of languages in Africa is large, this number greatly varies among linguists and sociologists. This paper earlier mentioned that the range given for languages in Kenya varies between 30 and 70, partly because early missionaries classified dialects as different languages. However, work done by the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) since the year 2000 has revealed that about 85% of Africans speak 12-15 core languages as first, second or third languages. So far, CASAS has transcribed and harmonised the orthographies of 23 core African languages (Prah 2010, personal communication). Their main aim is that by standardising core African languages, the economies of scale that follow should make it possible to, among other things, produce learning materials for mother tongue-based education. Rubagumya (2009, p. 19) adds that Uganda is currently working on transcribing a language called Runyakitara, which standardises four related languages – Runyankore, Rukiga, Runyoro and Rutooro – which are also closely related to Kihaya and Kinyambo spoken in Tanzania, presenting the chance for cross-border language development. Regional African languages such as Kiswahili, Fulani, Wolof and Lingala also present the chance for wide-scale indigenous language development.

However, the fruits of the CASAS and Uganda project are likely to take a long time to be realised. A much more immediate response to reducing the cost of publishing is to involve community members in the rendition of local languages into written scripts. Young (2009, pp. 131-132), documenting good practices in multilingual schools in Southeast Asia, notes that in the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Brunei, local community members made excellent teachers if trained before they taught, had regular in-service training and were involved in the production of instructional materials. The communities in these countries worked with linguists and ethnographers to develop L1 materials with age-appropriate language and reflecting cultural situations familiar to learners. Members wrote the text and drew the illustrations during materials production workshops, and the texts were reproduced for schools using simple, cheap methods. Involving the community gave non-school



members a sense of inclusion in the country's education system and helped them preserve their culture while still communicating concepts that meet national curriculum targets. Involving the community also helped standardise the language used to express curriculum content.

Language-in-education policy and planning

A mother tongue-based education system with a sufficient number of well trained teachers and adequate instructional materials cannot successfully be implemented if the LiE policy is weak or ill thought-out. The dominant theory in traditional language policy formulation is referred to as rational or positivist and it assumes that "socially efficient policies can be formulated from objective assessments of the needs, processes and outcomes of language relationships" (Canagarajah 2005, p. 195). That is, policy-makers assume that all they have to do is spell out how language is to be used in education, and principals, teachers and learners shall toe the line. All that has happened, however, is that the process has increased tensions between policy-makers' intentions and the actual outcomes, practices and effects of policy in education. As Bamgbose (1991, p. 113) notes, Kenya's policy makes sweeping statements about how language shall be used without specifying how the implementation process will be carried out, and the result is "the opposite of what is recommended has been going on, without any notice of the contradiction involved. Part of the reason this happens is that the top-down imposition fails to take into account the capacity of education departments to communicate the requirements of the policy (Probyn 2005, p. 160). However, language planning is a constant negotiation process of the interests of various social groups and their changing priorities and should therefore consider language practices first before writing policy.

Therefore, the major concern for policy makers is not so much how to develop languages as which languages should be developed, for what purpose and how and for what ends, and how to develop local, threatened languages amid global, spreading ones (Hornberger 2006, pp. 27-28). As Gregersen (1977, p. 204) notes, despite anticolonial sentiments, over 60% of scientific and technical publications are in English, making literacy in the language necessary. Kenya's language policy is however weakened by its assumption that language is a discrete entity whose use can be manipulated. For instance, it states a child's home



language be used only until Class 3, teachers and learners will make the switch without any residual tensions, yet as Lin and Martin (2005, p. 10) note, language cannot be bound to territories and neat categories. When policy lays down strict limits on how language can be used, it neglects the everyday reality of usage between teachers and students and largely becomes irrelevant to them and unresponsive to their needs.

This rigid stance also fails to take into account the kind of language that has emerged as a result of communities' interactions. Canagarajah (2005, pp. 194-200) notes that communities negotiate the mix of languages, literacies and discourse and select those that best suit their interests rather than strictly abide by those government policy promotes. Current approaches to language planning and policy are becoming more cognizant of the fact that the language used by teachers and students does not exist neatly in discrete categories, especially since language is itself a fluid, dynamic construction. Thus language policy research has adopted a more critical approach that "acknowledges that policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and that policy-makers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups" (Tollefson 2006, p. 42).

The critical approach aims to reduce social, political and economic inequalities caused by language policies by examining the process through which schools reproduce inequalities (ibid., p. 43). A critical theory approach to language policy is thus concerned with a revitalisation of indigenous languages to bring about social justice (see e.g. Bourdieu 1991; May 1999; Wright 2004; Tollefson 2006; Shohamy 2006). One of the ways to construct more meaningful policy is through collecting and responding to ethnographic data, and moving policy formulation towards a bottom-up approach. In this way, the way language is used by teachers and students and the ideological attitudes and allegiances social groups have towards language informs policy in a more localised context. For instance, Bunyi (2005, pp. 133-150) found while doing an ethnographic study of rural primary schools in Kenya, that the common linguistic practices in the classroom included: code-switching, where teachers and students use different languages to facilitate communication; safe talk, where teachers and students find ways of accomplishing lessons without making too many intellectual or linguistic demands; and, the use of hybrid codes, which are nativised versions of official languages, for instance Sheng in Kenya, which is a mix of English and Kiswahili.



These local strategies, some of which have the potential to be successfully developed for better content understanding, are hardly considered in traditional policy models and are thus not accommodated. But research shows that even though most teachers consider code-switching as illicit rather than a valid linguistic tool, it has the potential to give learners the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions and to express themselves, especially if they have not yet fully grasped the L2 (Probyn 2005, p. 163). Negative attitudes against such local strategies to bridge the gap between home languages and English are thought to stem from inadequate teacher training and the indirect policy message that when using language, no concessions are to be made for learners' proficiency.

This is exemplified in a circular sent out to Kenyan schools in 1976 following the enactment of the language policy, where the Ministry of Education rigidly states that teachers should "cease immediately" from the use of a mix of mother-tongue and English from Class 4 as "it is never necessary. Its only effect is to reduce the success potential in C.P.E. [Certificate of Primary Education]" (Ministry of Education Inspectorate 1976). This implies that the use of L1 is meant to ensure learners pass their end of primary school examinations, which are written in English, undermining efforts to provide an effective L1-based system as the message in the policy makes it seem that teachers and pupils are better off learning English as soon as possible if they hope to pass their examinations. With local languages given little attention beyond Class 3, then "... parents', students', teachers' and principals' choices are necessarily constrained under the hegemonic effect of the dominance of English in the society's social mobility mechanisms" (Lin and Martin 2005, p. 11). Kenya's contradictory LiE policy thus requires clearer objectives to avoid loose interpretation during implementation.

This chapter has discussed some of the educational challenges faced in implementing a multilingual education system under three main subheadings: teachers, instructional materials and language-in-education policy and planning. The measures suggested to overcome some of the challenges mentioned are admittedly not cheap. The cost of instituting L1 programmes is estimated to require a trained linguist to put in five years of work at an annual cost of \$50,000-\$70,000 per language. However, the cost of continuing with the status quo is also expensive as a result of the high repetition and dropout rates. Further, submersion education in L2 tends to result in a lack of genuine facility in either L1 or L2 which wastes the time and



money of both learners and educators. But as Thomas (2009, p. 88) cautions, even if resources are made available for an L1-based programme, the system must take into account various political considerations that surround the issue of language choice, some of which are discussed in the following chapter.

4. Political challenges in implementing a mother tongue-based language-in-education policy

Deciding on the language of instruction to use in schooling in multilingual countries presents a political minefield as it necessarily means elevating one language over others. But despite the complexities involved, inclusive language policies in these countries are necessary to enable citizens to “participate meaningfully in socioeconomic and political discourse” (Muthwii 2007, p. 46). This chapter will discuss some of the political challenges that prevent the effective implementation of an L1-based policy under two main subheadings: nation-building and language status.

Nation-building

The IIEP (1997) notes that for development to occur, it is necessary for all segments of the population to participate in political and economic matters. One way of increasing participation is by introducing institutional changes that enhance the status of local languages and increase their relevance in society. However, the development of local languages to even out the playing field is not without political difficulties, particularly in countries trying to forge a unified nation. Gregersen (1977, p. 203) notes that the development of most African languages has been accompanied by division or separation, with separatist sects following practically every publication of the Bible into an indigenous language. And as evidenced by May (1999, p. 5), dissidents of a multilingual education system argue that it recognises and accentuates the differences and diversity rather than uniting society.

Most educators recognise the advantages of a mother tongue-based system over a submersion system, and the right of diverse groups to receive an education that meets their demands, but they also fear that such recognition disrupts the construction of a nation. Bullivant (1981) refers to this as the “pluralist dilemma”, where policy-makers struggle to reconcile the claims



of constituent groups with the claims of the nation-state. And in an attempt to keep tensions low, most education systems have dealt with linguistic diversity in two ways: assimilation to erase the idea of diversity in order to create a nation-state; and, superficial pluralism where governments make public proclamations about supporting multicultural education but fail to provide the necessary resources for this (Kalantzis and Cope 1999, pp. 248-249). However, rather than quelling tension, governments' failure to confront the challenge of meeting the claims of constituent groups has disadvantaged a majority of the population who do not have access to the foreign language.

The common approach to language planning and policy referred to as the 'one nation, one language' model attempts to avoid the pluralist dilemma by advocating for universal literacy in at least one language to enable wider communication, yet multilingualism is an asset in a world that is becoming synchronised. The idea of a nation-state faces pressure from without in the form of globalisation, and from within as minority groups exert their right to greater public recognition. Various policy-makers have argued that an L2-based LiE policy is the best way to prevent ethnic division and contribute to the construction of a nation-state, but the reality is that it has excluded a majority of the population and worked to the benefit of minority elite, thus increasing inequality, political instability and disaffection (IIEP 1997; Canagarajah 2005, p. 196; Pennycook 2006, pp. 60-71). This is in conflict with most state policies as weakly developed language policies end up pursuing elitist aims rather than the inclusive ideals encompassed in the 'one nation' idea.

Further, the 'one nation, one language' ideology assumes that a single language will ensure a country's unity and equal development. Unfortunately, speaking a similar language does not seem to stop ethnic or clanist tendencies. For instance, despite a majority of the population speaking Amharic in Ethiopia, Somali in Somalia and Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, this has not contributed to the entrenchment of peace, improved participation or prevented retreat into ethnic or local factionalism (Gregersen 1977, p. 204; Rubagumya 1990, p. 2; Benson 2009). And as Githiora (2008, p. 235) adds, the idea of 'Kenya' as a nation is a relatively new construction, introduced by colonial boundaries, and requires the at least 42 tribes with strongly grounded, localised identities to adopt a more general, altered identity. Despite the country leaning towards linguistic commonality, the cracks in the construction of a national identity were revealed during the 2007/2008 post-election violence in the country which



started as a political protest but soon degenerated into ethnic violence with previously suppressed tribal tensions coming to the fore (Quist-Arcton 2008). In less than three months, 1,133 people were killed and an estimated 350,000 displaced (Mayaka 2009).

This tribal violence could also have been sparked by the failure of the government to recognise linguistic diversity, which has been found to contribute to political instability. For instance, Ouane (2003, p. 73) notes that the Pakistani government's decision to name Urdu the only official national language, ignoring the significant influence of Bengali speakers had a destabilising effect in Pakistan. Similarly, struggles for recognition among non-dominant ethnolinguistic communities in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have led to conflict and instability (*ibid.*). Kenya, realising the need for the country's communities to be more receptive to its linguistic diversity and to address the ethnic tensions that exist in plural societies, set up the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) in 2008 to facilitate and promote equality of opportunities among Kenya's different ethnic and racial communities (Presidential Press Service (PPS) 2009). The NCIC also advocates the use of Kiswahili to provide the population with a fairly neutral language of wider communication. However, May (1999, p. 31) crucially notes that even when there are attempts to have education systems that acknowledge the different languages, there tends to be an implicit tendency for policy to urge minority groups to work towards accommodating mainstream ideals, undermining inclusive objectives. For instance, in Kenya, smaller 'dialects' are coaxed to merge with more dominant language groups such as in the case of Gikuyu swallowing up Kimbeere, Kimeru and Kiambu (Waruingi 2009, p. 31).

Further, despite the language policy advocating for a mother tongue-based education system it favours an English-speaking elite by setting final examinations in English. Thus, the latter language continues to be the chief screening determinant as to who accesses higher education and therefore jobs and other social mobility mechanisms. Kenya's attempts to create an ethnolinguistically homogenous people literate in English, and to a smaller extent Kiswahili, perpetuates what Silverstein (1996, pp. 284-285) calls a monoglot ideology, which prohibits linguistic diversity and prevents society from seeing the value in multilingualism.

The oft-repeated refrain from governments that learning a global language grants a higher percentage of the population access to the international arena has also been disproved (see



e.g. Rugemalira et al 1990, p. 31; Brock-Utne 2000, pp. 164-170). Rugemalira et al note that countries like Japan, Norway, Finland and China have been able to keep up to date with technological development yet they have not resorted to educating children in global languages. Further, a majority of the population in most developing countries do not need to know an international language as much as they require literacy in their home language. Research shows that many in rural or remote regions hardly engage with areas beyond their locality, meaning they have greater need for literacy in their local language than in languages with a global reach (Rugemalira et al 1990, pp. 30-31; Ryanga 2002, p. 58).

Brock-Utne (2000, p. 155) adds that it is an issue of concern that “in many countries, information from the government is given in a language that 90% of the people do not speak and hardly understand”, setting the stage for unequal participation in national matters. In Kenya, struggling to erase the shadow cast by negative ethnocentricity, Githiora (2008, p. 236) notes that there has been frequent national discourse in newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, news analysis, government reports and political commentary to rally the population to nationhood. However, these forums are not accessible to the majority of the population, thus, calls to nationhood are responded to by the literate elite as opposed to the majority. The result of this is exemplified by the post-election violence of 2008. Most of the tribal violence took place in Kenya’s slums and rural areas, places with high illiteracy, poor education outcomes and widespread poverty. The 2010 constitutional referendum also perpetrated unequal participation as despite the government widely circulating the newly implemented Constitution, it printed thousands of copies in English.

Brock-Utne (2000, p. 155) however cautions that though the idea that there is a link between underdevelopment and the use of a foreign language as the official language in a country is likely, it has yet to be substantiated or rejected by sustained empirical study. Further, universal literacy in home languages will not alone move a country into widespread development and prosperity as evidenced by Kerala, an Indian state with universal literacy, the lowest infant mortality in the world and the lowest fertility rate in India but is still among the poorest states, which suggests education cannot solely be relied upon to improve the lot of marginalised communities (Bowden 2002, p. 405).



What is clear, however, is that “singular projections of language onto national identity do not work anymore” (Blommaert 2006, p. 249). Education systems must recognise and incorporate the differing cultural knowledge that children bring with them to school while at the same time addressing and contesting wider hegemonic power relations that attribute a low status to their cultural capital (May 1999, p. 32). This type of reflective process allows pupils to engage with their past and remain open to the present reality with its diverse identities and competing conceptualisations. State institutions need to put more specific language policies in place rather than offering sweeping generalisations that impose homogeneity at the expense of the majority. Implementing such a process requires resources and widespread dialogue with policy-makers, educators and communities to discuss its benefits and chart a comprehensive pedagogical model that allows learners to engage with diversity while still being rooted in their identity. As things stand in Kenya, the focus on ethnicities and their educational needs may help put the spotlight on communities that have been marginalised since independence and provide them opportunities to participate in more sectors of society.

Language status

Inclusive language policies work best if people ascribe value to the suggested indigenous language of instruction. Blommaert (2006, p. 242) notes that ideological constructs about language, which are often stratified and regimented, have the following ideals: written language is valued more than spoken; standard language more than dialects; and, expert registers over lay registers. Thus, before a local language can be viewed as worth being literate in, it must first have a written and standardised form. Muthwii (2007, pp. 48-49) notes Kenya’s language policy faces tremendous challenges as regards language attitudes, with English literacy being the mark of being educated and those with literacy only in local languages viewed as being in the ‘bottom of the pile’. The problem however, may lie in the fact that local languages are not developed well enough to work effectively in all domains of society.

The practice of punishing children when they speak their home language within the school compound further lowers the status of indigenous languages. Bunyi’s ethnographic study in Kenya (2005, pp. 131-133) shows that children are punished if heard speaking their home language in the school compound even though they are expected to acquire literacy in their



L1. This is a widely occurring trend, yet the government has not explicitly spoken out against it despite official policy advocating for L1 use, propagating the low status ascribed to local languages (Thiong'o 1986; Muthwii 2007, p. 49). But gaining the consent of the elite, who tend to be the policy-makers or educators, to improve the status of local languages can be problematic as it involves shifting or sharing power. For instance, the spread of Pidgin English within West Africa has raised calls for its standardisation and development as a regional lingua franca, but many educated West Africans are against this, saying sponsoring anything other than standard English would be "degrading", as it would communicate that people of the region cannot learn standard English (Gregersen 1977, p. 204). Yet, as Pidgin is the language of wider communication in the region, standardising it would improve networks and accommodate a greater proportion of the West African population in political and socioeconomic discourse.

Sanou (1990, p. 85) notes that part of the reason English acquired such high status was because colonial language policies suggested that Africans lacked the intellectual capacity to learn in anything other than their home language. In defiance, therefore, opportunities to gain literacy in English were grasped with little thought given to how cognitive development was achieved and the importance of literacy in the L1 first. This ideology has been carried into the post-colonial era by the English-speaking elite who are the present-day policy-makers. The unfortunate result is that a privileged few have gained access and literacy in the coveted English language, with little value given to those with indigenous knowledge or literacy. Researchers have found that if children feel their abilities are viewed as diminished or inferior, they conform to the stereotype, an effect called the stereotype threat (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, p. 113). This means that if learners think they will be viewed as inferior, their abilities are diminished. In Kenya, the focus on English literacy means mother tongue speakers fail to value their knowledge and view it as inferior, which means that children are likely to discount their abilities. Without adequate support for their home language and local knowledge, children may end up lacking the courage to demonstrate their intelligence and be written off as poor performers.

The status a language acquires depends a lot on government support for it. One way the government can improve indigenous language status is by increasing its functional uses (Hornberger 2006, p. 30). Thus, making local languages LOIs means they can be used



beyond the home, and as literacy in them increases, the languages gain greater value in the community. In this way, local languages can begin to be viewed as a valuable resource and thrive alongside global languages. Institutional changes that improve the status of local languages will also improve the socioeconomic chances and political participation of a greater proportion of the population. As it is, Kenya's language policy gives the dominant classes an unfair advantage in the education system. This makes it harder for some communities to excel, pushing them further into poverty which has the potential to increase ethnic tensions. Lin and Martin (2005, p. 12) note that "... concrete institutional changes in state policy that give a place to all languages (instead of just the globally valued standard languages) ..." can reshape social selection mechanisms giving more people a chance for socioeconomic mobility.

This chapter has discussed the political challenges to instituting a mother tongue-based multilingual system under two main headings: nation-building and language status. It has noted that ideally, the language used as a medium for educating should make societal objectives – political, cultural, economic, ideological and religious objectives – attainable universally and equally for all (Trappes-Lomax 1990, p. 95). If language policy does not meet these objectives, the cost of its failure will be felt across all sectors of society rather than just by those disadvantaged by the system. A critical approach to language policy can reverse the hegemonic tradition of policy, where entrenched and accepted institutional practices ensure power remains in the hands of a few.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the potential benefits of a mother tongue-based education system, discussing how it improves learning outcomes, inclusion and indigenous language development. And while educators, development actors and other stakeholders are agreed on the need for an L1-based system that provides a bridge to acquiring literacy in languages of wider communication, implementing such a system is not without challenges. This dissertation has discussed some of these challenges and suggested potential suggestions. The challenges discussed concerned teachers, instructional materials, language-in-education policy and planning, nation-building and language status.



Instituting an effective mother tongue-based education system is expensive, but the cost of not having one in place is even higher. Some of these costs are school dropouts, repetition, keeping children out of school thus breeding ignorance, low esteem for learners and linguistic communities, political exclusion and ethnic tension. In light of the highlighted benefits an L1-based system portends for a country's development, it is worth instituting it properly. The challenges, while significant, are not insurmountable. As Luke (2005, p. xvii) notes, "the complex and contradictory push/pull demands upon governance and education in postcolonial and globalising conditions may require very edgy hybrid blends of policy and practice....". Thus, it is not beneficial to encourage literacy only in local languages at the expense of global ones if a government hopes to provide equal opportunities for its people. Yet local language literacy is useful to enabling literacy in an L2.

For an effective mother tongue-based system, there needs to be a sufficient number of trained teachers in L1-based teaching and quality instructional materials in local languages. A cascade model of teacher training, where a small number of teachers per district are trained and they in turn train their peers, is cheaper for education ministries and can help fast-track minority people into teaching. This model can also help build networks and a platform for greater interaction between teachers on L1 best practices. These training workshops can be used to inform policy-makers about practical classroom interactions, which can then be used to institute more relevant and critical LiE policy. Local communities are also important in making L1-based education work as they hold important cultural and linguistic knowledge that can enrich the mother tongue-based educational experience by providing tutorial tips and developing instructional material. However, for these communities to value their knowledge, governments must first work towards raising the status of local languages. South Africa has attempted to do this by naming nine indigenous languages among its 11 official ones, but English still maintains its prestigious status as it enjoys institutional support at the local level (Rubagumya 2009, p. 21).

This can however be reversed if, say, local government offices in regions that are predominantly ethnically homogenous allow for use of local languages and hire local people literate in the community's language. Such institutional support is a step in the right direction towards increasing the number of places indigenous languages can be functional and therefore viewed as valuable. This also creates interest in L1 literacy and increases local



support for a mother tongue-based education system. Widespread support for L1-based education can provide ministries of education with valuable input from communities on local learning needs and how best to meet them, which helps education meet its developmental role. For Kenya, this means the education sector can actualise the benefits spelt out in the 1976 LiE policy.

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