

Multilingualism and education: comparing policy and practice in Botswana & Zambia

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Despite the multilingual ecologies of communities and multilingual repertoires of individuals, monoglossic approaches to language policy pervade educational contexts in Africa. These approaches also ignore a substantial international evidence base on the benefits of mother tongue based multilingual education. This presentation reports on findings emerging from an ongoing study on multilingual education contexts in Zambia and Botswana.

Botswana recognises English as the official language and Setswana as the national language. In the first year of primary education in Botswana (Standard One), Setswana is used as the medium of instruction (MOI) while English is taught as a subject. However, from the second year of primary education onwards, these two languages swap positions and English becomes the medium of instruction for all subsequent levels. Although 78% of the population report speaking Setswana at home, there are an estimated 25-28 different languages spoken in Botswana, and many of the smaller regional languages have no official status in educational contexts. Zambia, like Botswana, has English as the official language but recognises seven local languages as national/regional languages. The current medium of instruction policy is to use “familiar” languages in the early years of learning and then switch to English in Grade Five. While “familiar language” refers to any Zambian language, in practice the seven regional languages are favoured. Additionally, this policy is not sustainable – nor practicable – in many multilingual contexts and communities where actual language practice in the classroom tends to favour English as the medium of instruction from Grade One onwards. With up to 80 ethnic groups and over 70 languages in the country, actual language practices are pluralistic and therefore at loggerheads with the often artificial classroom context.

Both of these approaches: 1) maintain the dominance of English; 2) make little or no space for the language practices of vast proportions of the popular in the country. Based on linguistic ethnography work in both Botswana and Zambia, we will compare and contrast how these differing policy approaches are carried out in practice and discuss the reality of multilingualism within classrooms. We discuss the challenges towards implementing more inclusive, multilingual approaches to language in education, the tensions this gives rise to, as well as present possible solutions or approaches to these challenges.