CONFLICT BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE:
THE CASE OF LESOTHO PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Sub-theme: Educational Policies and their Impact/Implication on the Quality of Education

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The dilemma between the educational policy and the practice in schools remains one of the 21st century challenges facing many African countries. The debates centred on instruction of learners in mother tongue seem to be escalating at an alarming rate without universal resolutions which could be applied to the diverse communities in the African continent. The situation has in a number of cases resulted in a mirage of conditions which has profound implications on the quality of education.

Lesotho like many of the countries in the continent is faced with a similar dilemma. The policy on education stipulates that learners from grade 1 to grade 3 should be instructed in the mother tongue. The policy is very silent about the language of assessment at these particular grades. The policy statement therefore has been labeled to have quite a number of ambiguities in it. First, the question of whose mother tongue the policy is referring to remains unanswered. Could it be the mother tongue of the teacher who will be giving out the instruction at the time or could it be of some of the learners in the class? The tendency for some people has been to interpret the policy as referring to Sesotho language when talking about mother tongue. This interpretation has fueled sizzling debates around marginalizing of minority groups in the country. Issues of equity in the provision of education in the country have been challenged as a result. The issue of code switching in several instances has also surfaced as a cause for concern. Thus the magnitude of the challenge varies from one bilingual community to another.

The issues raised in this discussion and more which may be looked into necessitates some robust investigations into the issue of language policies in education and their possible implications for
the overall quality of the system. Thus the paper attempts to unravel the state of affairs in Lesotho Primary schools as a paradigm.

Key words: Educational Language policy, Assessment, Instruction, Code switching, bilingualism.

**Introduction**

Currently the education system in Lesotho is 7:3:2:4, which represents 7 years of primary, 3 years of Junior Secondary, 2 years of Senior Secondary and 4 years of University Education. The new education structure publicized in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework combines the seven years of primary schooling with the three years of Junior Secondary to form what is termed Basic Education level.

Formal education in Lesotho started shortly after the arrival of the missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in 1833. The main function of education then was to maintain the Christian order and tradition. The establishment of schools therefore, was the business of the churches from the beginning and curriculum development was not the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Training; instead heads of churches were solely responsible for the school curricular (MoET 1978:27).

In 1868, Lesotho became a colony of Britain. This state of affairs coupled with the fact that education in Lesotho was mainly the responsibility of churches, paved the course which education was to take in the country. As Tlebere (2006) puts it, Christian missionaries also fostered the aspirations of the colonizers by ensuring that English became the language of education while on the other hand the British used the language of the colonizer as a strategy to convert the Basotho people to their religious beliefs and culture. According to Gill, Smits and Schmitz (1993: 62), there was a deliberate attempt by the missionaries to challenge the old Sotho society with the aim of replacing it with the western Christian ones. The inherited system of education in Lesotho can be said to have had one main objective, thus:

the main objective was to create a new class of persons who form an aristocratic, privileged and loyal group to act as interpreters between them and the people at large (The kingdom of Lesotho Ministry of Education 1978: 49).
The history behind the origins of formal education in Lesotho forms the main lens through which education in the country is viewed throughout this paper.

**Methodology**

This paper reports mainly on two data collection techniques thus; policy document analysis and questionnaire data. The two main policy documents are the curriculum document for classes 1, 2, 3 and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework.

The analysis of questionnaire data focuses on the specific data collected on the language of instruction at classes 3 and 6. The questionnaire data was collected during the 2006, 2008 and 2010 Lesotho National Assessment of Educational Progress Surveys. The surveys employed a stratified random sample of 184 primary schools. The target population for the 2006, 2008 and 2010 surveys was all learners who were on the third and sixth grade of the primary school at the time the data was collected, excluding those attending special education needs classes.

**Findings**

*Documents analysis*

The syllabus documents are the most important documents to consider when dealing with issues of teaching and learning. Analysis of the Sesotho subject in the syllabus revealed that, the general aim of teaching Sesotho at standards 1 to 3 has been stated in English Language. Thus the aim is stated as follows:

> The general aim of teaching Sesotho is to enable pupils to develop a clear understanding and appreciation of their mother tongue, which is also the official language, so that they can use it correctly and effectively in their everyday life (Ministry of Education 1997: iv).

The specific objectives for Sesotho are stated in both English and Sesotho (Ministry of Education 1997: 1). Objective 1 thus read;

- listen with understanding and react accordingly to:-
  - Spoken Sesotho
  - Texts written in Sesotho
  - Oral literature: *litsom* (*there word is misspelled in the syllabus, the correct word should have been ‘litšomo’*), lilotho, liboko le lithothokiso.
Objective 4 also reads as follows:

‘Write “litlhaku”, “litema”, words sentences, different types of letters, compositions and reports with correct use of punctuation marks’.

The learning outcomes for Sesotho like the learning outcomes for other subjects have a general stem which introduces the learning outcome, for example the general stem for the class 1 Mathematics is a statement which state ‘at the completion of standard 1, Pupils will be able to:’ and the first learning outcome reads as follows; ‘sort objects by size, colour and shape’. The wording for the learning outcomes as can be deduced from the example in this case is constructed based on the stem that precedes it. In the case of Sesotho subject, the stem is still stated as in other subjects but the immediate learning outcomes are stated in Sesotho which brings about confusion to the user. Taking the first learning outcome for Sesotho Subject, the sentence would read like ‘at the completion of standard 1, pupils will be able to: 1. Lumelisa le ho arabela tumeliso ka nepo le tlhompho (Ministry of Education 1997:2).

Except for Sesotho subject, all learning outcomes for the other subjects are written in English. The inconsistency in the language used in presenting the syllabus can be interpreted as a mismatch between the policy and what is actually practiced.

The issue of incompatibility arises when two languages are combined in a single sentence. It is quite a challenge for teachers to translate the scientific terms into the native language. An example of such translations would be where the teacher is conducting a Mathematics lesson and the topic is on shapes. The translation of the word ‘square’ is usually pronounced as ‘sekoere’ while the word ‘triangle’ is pronounced as ‘teraenkele’. The two translations also have a bearing on the manner in which learners spell the scientific words. The mismatch between the pronunciation and the way in which the words are actually spelled brings yet some form of confusion to the learners.

The Ministry of Education & Training (2009:8) in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework stipulates that;
while acknowledging, as the Lesotho Constitution states, that Sesotho and English are the two official languages, and in recognition of the fact that there are other languages besides Sesotho and English, mother tongue will be used as a medium of instruction up to class 3 while English will be taught as a subject at this and other levels. From grade 4 English shall begin to be used as a medium of instruction and to be taught as a subject as well.

Though the policy clearly articulates that the language of instruction at grades 1-3 should be mother tongue, the prescribed text books are however written in English. This further magnifies the challenge in that, teachers have to do their own translations of the content. Different teachers are most likely to come up with differing translations which can lead to some distortion of the meaning in context. The policy is also very silent about the language of assessment. Treating teaching as a separate entity from assessment defeats the entire process of constructive alignment. As indicated by Brown (2001: 4), effective assessment methods and tasks should be related to the learning outcomes and the methods of learning.

According to Girolametto, Weitzman and Greenberg (2012: 47), lack of experience of rich literacy interactions in the home hampers the development of learners emergent literacy skills. On the same note, as stated by Girolametto et al (2012: 47); early childhood settings have a tremendous potential to become important sources of emergent literacy experiences.

Prior to the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in the year 2000, most of the preschools were run very informally by individuals who either turned them into day care centers or some form of grade 1 extension. The integration of early Childhood Care and Development centers in the structure of formal education affirms that the MoET has plans afoot to improve the delivery of Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development (IECCD). The dilemma here still lays with the policy on the language of instruction. The policy does not pronounce the language that should be used for teaching and learning at this level. The tendency therefore amongst parents is to enroll their children in ECCD centers which are reputable as English medium centers. This goes back to the legacy of recognizing English language as a high status language.
Questionnaire data

In order to ascertain an extent to which teachers implement the language policy, both learners and teachers were requested to indicate the language of instruction in Mathematics. Mathematics was by design selected in order to eliminate possible confusions which may arise while dealing with such subjects as English Language and Sesotho.

In 2006 survey, the findings from grade 3 showed that 40% of the learners were instructed Mathematics in English only, about 34.5% indicated that they were instructed in Sesotho only, 25.1% were instructed using both English and Sesotho and 0.4% were instructed using other languages besides English and Sesotho such as zulu.

Taking the question further to grade 6, the findings show that about 55.9% of the class 6 learners were taught Mathematics in English only, 1.7% of them showed that they were taught in Sesotho while 42.4% of them indicated that they were taught Mathematics in Sesotho and English.

In the same survey of 2006, grade 3 teachers were requested to indicate the language of instruction that they use at grade 3. About 55.8% of the teachers reported that they instructed learners in Sesotho only, 40.9% indicated that they carry out instruction in English only while 3.3% of them indicated that they use both English and Sesotho to instruct learners.

A similar question was posed two years later to the 2008 cohort. At class 3, 43.2% of learners illustrated that they were instructed Mathematics in English only, 29.1% were taught using Sesotho only, whilst 27.4% were taught using both English and Sesotho (code switching). There were also those learners (0.3%) who reported to be instructed in other languages besides English and Sesotho. Teachers were requested to indicate the language of instruction which they use to instruct learners at class 1 to 3 and in response, 35% showed that they use Sesotho, 55% used English while 10% used both.

At class 6, 47% of learners confided that they are instructed Mathematics in English only, 15% are taught in Sesotho only, whilst 38% are taught in both English and Sesotho.
Class 6 teachers were requested to give their own opinion with regard to what they consider as the language of instruction at classes 1-3. Majority of class 6 teachers (37%) were of the opinion that classes 1-3 were instructed in English language only. A slightly lower percentage of the teachers (33%) indicated that to their knowledge, classes 1-3 were instructed in Sesotho only while 7% of the teachers indicated that code switching is used (English and Sesotho). Almost a quarter of the teachers (23%) were not certain about the language of instruction at classes 1-3.

Four years later in the 2010 survey, a similar investigation was carried out. The findings from the 2010 survey indicated that at grade 3, about 37% of the learners reported that they were taught Mathematics in English, 27.1% showed that they were instructed in Sesotho, about 33.5% indicated that both Sesotho and English were used for instructing them while 2.4% indicated that they were instructed in other languages besides English and Sesotho.

The majority of class 3 teachers indicated that they instruct their learners in Sesotho (46.9%). There is another group of teachers (11.7%) who indicated that they use other languages besides Sesotho and English for instruction. About 41.4% indicated that they instruct learners in English only.

A similar question was also posed to the grade 6 learners and slightly more than half of them (51.2%) reported that they were instructed Mathematics in English. The second larger percentage of learners (45.7%), indicated that teachers use both English and Sesotho during the instructional process. About 3.0% of the learners showed that they were instructed Mathematics in Sesotho only whiles those who were instructed in other languages constituted 0.1%.

**Discussion**

The concurrent use of English and Sesotho in the primary syllabus for grades 1 to 3 somehow lays a foundation for a much greater confusion in the classroom. Stating the learning outcomes in English while instruction is expected to be in Sesotho can result in either a situation where teachers decide not to share the learning outcomes with the learners, or teachers may formulate their own translations of the learning outcomes into the local language. The challenge with the different translations is that a lot of mis-interpretations may occur.
The concepts in the syllabus are written in English and this also necessitates a lot of translations done by the teacher.

*The Practice of Code Switching as a major challenge for Language Policy*

The findings from the 2006, 2008 and 2010 surveys clearly revealed that code switching seems to be a norm at grades 3 and 6. Significant percentages of both learners and teachers confided that code switching is used during instruction of Mathematics.

Coffey (2008) defines code-switching as

the practice of moving between variations of languages in different contexts. In an educational context, code-switching is defined as the practice of switching between a primary and secondary language or discourse.

On the similar grounds with slight difference, Shana (2004), defines code-switching as

one of a number of the linguistic manifestations of language contact and mixing, which variously include borrowing on the lexical and syntactic levels, language transfer, linguistic convergence, interference, language attrition, language death, ….

Blom and Gumpertz (1972) introduced three types of social constraints which presumably affect code choices of speakers. These are; setting, social situation and social event. Setting is presumed to be about the physical environment while social situation focuses on particular constellations of speakers and social event is about social setting.

A number of reasons have surfaced in favor of code switching as outlined by Greene and Walker (2004).

1. It is perceived as a ‘linguistic tool and a sign of the participants’ awareness of alternative communicative convention’
2. It is seen as a ‘strategy at negotiating power for the speaker’.
3. It ‘reflects culture and identity and promotes solidarity’

Still in favor of code switching, Choi and Kuipers (2004: 4) argue that even though using a language other than the official language of the classroom is ‘off-task’ from the teachers’ perspective, code switching is a way through which bilingual students make sense of schooling
when they are interacting with peers, curriculum and the teacher. Choi and Kuipers (2004:7) perceive code switching as a tool to construct knowledge through interaction among bilingual students. They extend the argument further by showing that there are five functions of code switching thus; calling attention, re-voicing, clarification, objectification and personalization.

Contrary to the beliefs that favor code switching, semilingualism is the belief that bilingual speakers who code-switch do so because of their lack of linguistic competence in their repertoire (Edelsky, Hudelson et al 1983). In most classroom observations in Lesotho, it has been observed that teachers code switch as a result of their lack of competence particularly in English language. Though the idea of code switching as a means of bringing clarity to the concepts being taught may have a positive impact on learning, it can also have other negative set backs.

**Conclusion**

The roots of the language dilemma in Lesotho primary schools may be said to spring forth from origins of formal education in the country. Churches and colonialism seem to have had a significant role in directing the course of education in Lesotho. Most influence seem to have been in the learning of English language as the language of the colonizer which had a tremendous impact on the belief systems of the Basotho Nation. Communicating by English became more of a primordial necessity to majority of Basotho.

This legacy, seem to have manifested further in the development of the national curriculum documents and policy documents which guide teaching and learning in primary schools. The overall effect is evident in the classrooms where more profound confusion can be witnessed. The analysis of the responses from grade 3 and grade 6 learners and teachers alike, revealed that there seems to exist a situation where teachers use their discretion to decide on the language of instruction. Code switching between English and Sesotho seems to have become a basic credo to majority of teachers. The result is that code switching is very likely to become an impediment to learners’ language acquisition consequently hindering their literacy development.

Though the paper has focused more on the language of instruction at grades 1 to 3, it is apparent that the problem is deeply rooted to the level of ECCD and the challenge seem to spread forth like cancer into the upper level as shown by the findings of grade 6. Since the primary level, is
considered as the foundation stage, these challenges are most likely to have a ripple effect on the higher tiers of education.

The portrait presented by this paper reveals the need for more robust interventions specifically geared towards remedying the situation. Failure to adequately address the conflict may largely compromise the government initiatives of improving the quality of basic education in the country. Further research is also necessary, on the effect of code switching on learners’ performance in languages. As Ben-Rafael (2009) puts it,

The language we speak or we refuse to speak have a lot to do with who we are, what subject positions we claim or contest, and what futures we invest in.
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