

# How do Lower Grades Schools in KwaZulu-Natal Develop Literacy in IsiZulu through Language Policies?

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## Abstract

Studies have proven that the Basic Education Department in South Africa faces a numerous challenges as learners fail to do well in areas of language and literacy. The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it describes and discusses the basic education current situation by outlining the educational landscape, relevant policy imperatives and policy implementation challenges in post-apartheid education. Secondly, it argues that Indigenous African languages have a role to play in improving the ailing basic education sector in South Africa through its contribution as an alternative tool to learning and assessment of learners. It is further suggested that the initiatives of literacy development must be socially responsive and population-focused in order to make meaningful contributions to the literacy development in the South African education sector. The potential role of African Indigenous African languages is discussed with suggestions for further actions required for schools and the basic education department to enable a contextually relevant practice in a resource-constrained education system.

**Keywords:** Indigenous African languages, literacy, basic education, foundation phase, intermediate phase.

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the absence or lack-of use of the African languages (isiZulu) as an alternative tool of teaching literacy in KwaZulu-Natal schools despite the availability of a supportive legislative framework, such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the Language in Education Policy (1997), the revised National Curriculum Statements as represented by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (Government Gazette, 2011). The problem of literacy in South Africa is identified in several other studies. For example the Howie, et al. (2007) report on children's reading literacy competence. This report evaluated the performance of intermediate school learners from 40 countries. On this research the test was conducted in the language learners have been taught since Grade 1. The results show that South Africa's literacy performance is far below international benchmark. The current study however, investigates the use of isiZulu as indigenous African languages in school's language policies; as a vital tool in teaching literacy practices in intermediate schools. Indigenous African languages are a vital tool in literacy development, in that they help learners to a great extent to develop both fluency and accuracy in language. They also expose learners reasonably in retaining comprehensive skills and in development of vocabularies. This technique also helps teachers to provide input that makes the language spoken in class both comprehensive and engaging. The main objective of the study is to investigate how language policies therefore are implemented to ensure adequate use of indigenous African languages for literacy development.

### Problem statement

Literacy is one of the key parts of the global developmental goals. It is also a very complex concept with multiple definitions. Some scholars view literacy as the number of years an individual spends in school, others consider it as a language skills possessed by the individual to make them function properly in school (Olajide, 2007). Some consider literacy in a more holistic approach, where listening, speaking (oral skills), reading and writing (literacy skills) is involved. According to Uzodinma (1993) there are various types of literacy, ranging from pre-literacy, document literacy, graphic literacy and computer literacy. Nonetheless reading is central to literacy. Creating literate societies is essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, achieving gender equality and ensuring peace and democracy.' Masuura (2005:5). The United

Nations recognizes literacy as human right. Recently, however literacy has been leaning towards a broader consideration of literacy as a social practice and/cross- cultural perspective. Within this framework an important aspect the inclusion of the African languages as an alternative tool to develop literacy. The education content knowledge taught in schools if it seeks to develop literacy; it has to stop depriving learner's opportunities of bringing their home languages and social experiences to class. When learners attend schools that has adopted western traditions, learners from African traditions find themselves abandoning all what they have learnt (knowledge) in their cultural context through their home languages. Further-more they find themselves forced to start learning new language, content and knowledge that are unfamiliar to them. This according to Macedo (1994) is knowledge mismatch and incompatibles that are both deliberate and unconscious in the classrooms. It is within this background that this paper argues for the incorporation of indigenous African languages into school's language policies to ensure adequate literacy development in African languages.

### **The Purpose and rationale of the study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate Language policies of two schools and to find out if they heed the national call to promote literacy development in isiZulu. It also seeks to ascertain the challenges or successes regarding the promotion of isiZulu literacy development through language policy implementation.

### **Research questions**

The study is guided by the two main questions, namely:

1. What does the Language policy of each school entails regarding the literacy development of IsiZulu?
2. What are the challenges/Successes regarding the Implementation of the language policy in development of isiZulu literacy?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The challenge of literacy within learning environments that are located in disadvantaged communities is a global phenomenon (Barley et al., 2007; Sherwood, 2000; Elley et al., 1997; Elley, 2000; Greaney, 1996; Stern, 1994; Crossley et al., 1994; Walker et al., 1992; Verspoor, 1989). Drawing from different theoretical orientations, many scholars have tackled this subject. The underlying principle of the South African Education Language Policies is that home language(s) must serve as a basis for learning while promoting acquisition of additional language(s) (National Education Policy Act, 1996; Language Policy, 1996; Language-in- education Policy, 1997 and the South African Schools Act, 1996). These legislations advocates for the development of an academic literacy 'construct' that promotes the use of multilingualism so that learners are not disadvantaged the during demonstration of their academic proficiency. The problem that learners in South Africa cannot read at intermediate phase level speaks directly to these deficiencies in Literacy. Within the South Africa context, this state of affairs has resulted in the proliferation of research that interrogates the reciprocal causality of poor academic performance of South African learners in Literacy and their poor reading habits (Moloi et al., 2005; Howie et al., 2007; Pretorius et al., 2007). Between 1998 and 2001 quantitative assessment of the reading abilities of undergraduate learner was taken at the University of South Africa (Unisa), and the relationship between reading ability and academic performance examination. The findings consistently revealed a robust relationship between the ability to comprehend expository texts and academic performance (Pretorius, 2005: 790). A number of studies (Lemmer et al., 2012; Nassimbeni et al., 2011; Van Staden, 2011; Hugo, 2010; Christie, 2005; Howie, 2008; Pretorius et al., 2007; Pretorius et al., 2004) have in fact corroborated the findings raised above as a system-wide problem-from primary school through to university. It is research findings such as in those studies that have encouraged this project to investigate the phenomenon, particularly the use of language policies to promote African languages literacy, and to observe schools' language policy intervention as a vehicle. It has been documented that literacy plays a vital role in the growth and development of any nation, and research has shown that the higher the rate of literacy, the better the potential to succeed (Erasmus, 2012).

### **THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical foundation of this article is the concept of language-as -a- resource orientation which stresses the importance of multilingualism, not only as a facilitator of access to learning, but also as a door to economic opportunities (Jernudd et al., 1971) . The study uses qualitative approach within a critical paradigm. This paradigm resonates well with the project because it seeks to address some elements of socio-economic change and justice. This shall be manifested on the way teachers and school's language policy-makers value the role of indigenous African languages in formal education system. Henning, van Rensburg et al., (2004) argue that critical paradigm aims at breaking down institutional structures that reproduce oppressive ideologies. Bertram et al., (2014) argue that paradigms are a strong and vital base for a research project. Therefore the critical paradigm is relevant in engaging participants in the study as Guba et al., (1994) have described this paradigm as a value-determined nature enquiry. The methodological implications for this paradigm are that the data generation methods should show participation, engagement and involvement. Therefore the data generation method to be used, mainly: questionnaires, interviews and individual discussions, will generate qualitative data, as teachers and language policy-makers, are involved. This study has enabled a researcher to gather information about the dynamics of experiences and views about the use of isiZulu as an education approach to literacy development. The survey has involved 6 isiZulu teachers, 6 school management team (SMT) members as

participants, 6 participants per school from 2 different schools. A total of 12 participants were involved in the study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Data collection

The study was conducted in randomly selected schools in and around Pinetown area (KwaDabeka and KwaSanti Townships), in KwaZulu-Natal. The main result of the findings revealed that language policy both at National level and at school level is falling short in sure-casing that literacy development of African languages is achieved. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for literacy development in African Languages to be strengthened in schools to enable pupils acquires more literacy skills. International and national studies have shown that there is a literacy crisis in the South African schools, particularly in Intermediate Phase (Grade 4-7). This paper reports on the research study that was conducted in 2 intermediate schools in KwaZulu -Natal. The research study investigated language literacy practices of Intermediate Phase teachers where isiZulu was used as a medium of instruction. Through the lens of the Sociocultural theory the study explored the extent to which language policy of each school influences literacy practices in the Intermediate Phase classrooms. Data were collected by means of interviews and document analysis.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented under two themes that are addressed by the following main questions:

1. What does the Language policy of each school entails regarding the literacy development of IsiZulu?
2. What are the challenges/Successes regarding the Implementation of the language policy in development of isiZulu literacy?

### What does the language policy of each school entails regarding the literacy development of IsiZulu?

Only one school was in a position to share the language policy of their school out of the two. Apparently, school number two at the time of this research did not have a language document at their disposal. Nonetheless most participants have reiterated similar sentiments during interviews, that poor language policy planning and implementation are a main reason for low levels in African languages literacy. It became evident during interviews that both schools, if not most schools do not have language policies that seeks to promote literacy development of African languages. This is evident when one observes a language policy one school, such is an example of Nonopha Senior Primary School. Clause 1.5 to clause 1.7.9 of the language policy of these schools reads as follows:

*Ukuzibophezela kwabafundisi: Ukukhiqiza abafundi; Abakwazi ukucabanga ngokuzimisela besebenzisa ulimi lwesiZulu...Ukuphendula nokubuza imibuzo ngolimi lwabo nokuhlaziya...Ukulandela imiyalelo ebhalwe ngolimi lukaMthaniya...Ukuxazulula izinkinga nokuthatha izinqumo besebenzisa ulimi lwabo...*

Teachers' pledge: To produce learners that; can think independently using their mother tongue...That are able to answer questions and analyse in their mother tongue...To heed instructions that are in mother tongue...To be able to solve

Problems and take decisions in their mother tongue.

These language policy clauses are very vague and are not prescriptive of how all of this is going to be implemented to develop literacy in IsiZulu (**Appendix 1**).

### Language policy document of Nonopha senior primary school

### What are the challenges/Successes regarding the Implementation of the language policy in developing isiZulu literacy?

It seemed that teachers acknowledged that there were more challenges to implementation of the language policy than successes. Most teachers proceeded to point out that their schools' policies do not have a clear mandate on how literacy in isiZulu should be developed. Monolingualism creates low achievement levels and sub-standard academic growth of second-language English speakers (Webb, 2012).

**Lack of isiZulu educational resources:** Other challenges cited by teachers was that the lack of educational resources that are written in isiZulu. According to them this is a challenge for reading is one of critical aspects of literacy. According to one teacher the involvement of parents in teaching and learning of literacy is very key and should be seen as one of the resources for isiZulu literacy development. One teacher shares the same view with the teacher from the other school and this is what he had to say

*Ukubamba iqhaza kwabazali emfundweni yabantwana yabo kubaluleke kakhulu...Iokhu kungaba nomthelela omuhle ekuthuthukiseni amakhano abo okufunda nokubhala...kubuhlungu ngoba abazali bezingane zabantu abansundu abafuni ukuzimbandakanya nemfundo yabantwana babo... Kungeke kwaba lula ukuthi umntwana agcine ukufunda kuphela uma ngabe elapha esikoleni kuphela.*

Parents's participation in learners's education is very key....When parents partake in a learner's education results are amazing and this could be viewed as a resource to develop learner's isiZulu literacy skills...what

pains me the most is the fact that most parents of learners from black schools is the lack of participation in learners's education...If parents can be used as a resource for isiZulu literacy development at home as well as lot of progress can happen.

Neke (2005), Kamwangamalu (2000) and Iyamu et al., (2007), argue that employing the mother tongue for teaching and learning makes lessons more interesting. One of the teachers during interviews argued that the policy documents such as the National Curriculum Statement (CAPS) are actually good on paper but lack a proper direction in terms of prescribing exactly what must be taught in class to develop literacy in African languages. This is what he said:

*uTaHFUZE ungusomqulu omuhle impela uma uwubuka kepha kuningi okungahambi kahle kuwona...Lapha ngingenza izibonelo ezimbalwa, isikhathi esibekiwe ukuthuthukisa amakhono ayisisekelo okukhuluma nokufunda siba sincane kakhulu okuyaye kuthiwe makube umsombuluko nokwesihlanu kuphela evikini lilinye...*

The CAPS document looks good on paper however there are a lot of loopholes...Some of these are the time that is allocated for teaching speaking and reading skills in laying a solid foundation for literacy...The time allocated according to this document is only Monday and Friday in a week...This for me does not suffice.

Kruizinga and Nathanson (2010) describes guided reading as a literacy method where children are taught how to construct meaning independently from a text, under a teacher's supportive guidance and is particularly appropriate for children in the early years of literacy development. A teacher during an interview shared similar sentiments as Kruizinga and Nathanson (2010), when he posited that learners are not according to CAPS granted a platform where they are guided by a teacher to construct meaning in isiZulu:

*Into engiyibona ishoda mina kuTaHFUZE ukuthi abafundi abanikwa ithuba lokuthi bafundiswe izinkondlo noma baxoxelwe indaba bengayibuki ngamehlo...ebese behlonywa imibuzo ukuhlola ukuthi bebe allele yini indaba lena ebikade ixoxwa...Lokhu akukho kwa- intermediate phase....Lokhu kungasiza ukuthi baqeqesheke kumakhono okukwazi ukukhumbula indaba ebixoxwa ukuze bakwazi ukuyixoxa nabo mathupha...amakhono okulalela, ukukhuluma nokubhala ayathuthuka noma ikanjani uma kwenzeke ngalendlela.*

My observation over the years is that CAPS does not allow us as educators of isiZulu at the intermediate phase to teach learners listening, speaking and writing skills in a more guided approach...One ways to do this is to narrate a story to learners whilst they sit and listen...in return they are given an opportunity to re-tell the story through questions...this method of teaching literacy will certainly teach learners listening, memorising, speaking and writing skills.

### **Intellectualisation of isiZulu**

The intellectualisation of indigenous African languages is an imperative if we are to develop literacy in these languages, appropriately. Madiba and Finlayson (2002) define this initiative as '...the planned process of accelerating the growth and development of our indigenous languages to enhance their effective interface with modern developments, theories and concepts. This was one of the challenges that were cited by some teachers during this study. IsiZulu intellectualisation is a means of promoting quality and access, thus social justice. Evidence derived from vast local, regional and international educational research on literacy development reveals that knowledge of a subject matter in a primary language and literacy can be promoted through the implementation of literacy development that uphold linguistic pluralism (Cummins, 2000). One of the teachers said:

*Ingane kumele isheshe ijwayele ukusebenzisa ulimi lwesiZulu kusukela ku-Grade 1 njalo njalo ize iqede isikole ingane...ngoba lolu yilona limi eluncele ebeleni...oluphinde lusetshenziswe emakhaya...Lokhu kungasiza ngempela ukuthuthukisa amakhono abo okubhala, ukukhuluma nokufunda.*

A learner must be introduced to isiZulu from an early stage....as early as Grade 1 throughout the whole schooling system...this is important because this is their mother tongue...This language to them is familiar because they use it all the time from home...This is the only way that could help learners improve their literacy skills.

The lack of isiZulu as a mother-tongue in learning literacy underlines pre-existing inequalities. The education history in South Africa is still characterised by social inequalities which are still rooted and evidenced in all spheres of social life, as a result of the marginalisation of the black majority and women under the previous rule of colonialism and apartheid (Gumbi & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015).

### **Involvement of the department**

The government should get more involved in enforcing multilingualism in education and all other sectors. The implementation of the Language in Education Policy, in particular, has been characterised by a lack of progress since the introduction of the new constitutional dispensation. Heugh (2006) further asserts that the government is to blame for slowing down and stalling progress in implementing language policies that will witness literacy growth in African languages. She adds that this failure has impacted negatively on the achievement of many indigenous African language mother-tongue learners within the education system and further promotes failure in literacy development of African languages.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the entire discussions in this language policy review for literacy development of isiZulu as an African language, the following recommendations may provide workable solutions for intermediate schools language policies in African languages literacy development:

The basic education should fully develop more educational resources and orthographies of indigenous languages, such as isiZulu to meet the demands of a diverse society;

South African scholars in the field of language should intensify efforts in intellectualisation (use as formal alternative medium of instruction) of indigenous languages and produce isiZulu reading materials;

The government should get more involved in enforcing multilingualism in education and all other sectors ;

A team of experts should be paying constant visits to schools to ensure total adherence to the provisions of the multilingual language policy;

IsiZulu Language should be formally introduced side by side with English for schools as the medium of instruction at basic education level;

All teachers should be encouraged to use isiZulu to help learners to develop literacy competence in the use of isiZulu as an indigenous languages in a school setting;

The government and basic education department should make sufficient funds available for implementing of language policies to develop literacy in IsiZulu.

### RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

It is important to note that there has never been a well- structured comprehensive language policy in the majority of schools in KwaZulu-Natal. However there is a need for a more integrated social approach to the teaching of literacy in African languages. There remains little evidence of a normalised, integrated, transformed, multilingual society, at least from a linguistic point of view. What exists rather is a 'linguistic discrimination and oppression' which divides those who are poor and those that are well-off in our societies based on those citizens who are communicatively competent in English, those who have a partial knowledge of the language and those who speak no English at all (Alexander 2002).

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