

Early Childhood Education and Language Policy Dynamics Examined through Basil Bernstein's Lens

Abstract

This paper studies and compares the use of local languages as a medium of instruction in early grades. It focuses on the benefits and implications drawing on Basil Bernstein's framing and control lens. A stratified sample of early childhood centers was used with a total of 10 teachers. A total of 100 lessons were observed with 124 tasks.

The study was qualitative in nature and used participant and non-participant observation and interviews. The results of the study show that there are major divides that linger among the classes in society which are visible in geographical locations of schools and have a great influence on the language of instruction. The results show that local languages are not taught in private schools due to limitations in language command and skill set required to adequately teach.

The study recommends that the pre service training programs should equip early childhood education teachers with adequate skills in local language teaching. Further, there is need for wider consultation with all stakeholders if issues of medium of instruction are to be a consensus at pre-grade.

Key words: *Private schools, early childhood, education, education language policy, local language*

Introduction

Zambia's curriculum framework (2013) and National Literacy Framework (2-13) assert that the language of instruction at Early Childhood Level up to grades 1 – 4 are the seven local languages namely Chitonga, Cinyanja, Ichibemba, Kiikaonde, Lunda, Luvale and Silozi. Both policies hoped to create an enabling learning experience which would help children explore a bilingual program with literacy skills acquired in local languages which are expected to support the acquisition of literacy in English. A total shift from the Primary Reading Program (PRP), which hinged on the New Breakthrough to Literacy Methodology employing a whole language approach to reading instruction. This was replaced by an approach of reading instruction embedded in explicit lessons in key performance areas such as phonics, daily instruction to enhance pupils reading, speaking

and writing in local languages. Regardless of these swinging discourses on language of instruction, the effect of low reading levels has continued as can be noted from 2018 and 2021 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Monitoring Impact on Learning Outcomes (MILO), USAID (2022). Under the EGRA evaluation in five provinces of Zambia only 10.2% could read and comprehend grade level text while findings under MILO pointed to 2.3% attained minimum proficiency. In 2022, the EGRA findings saw a decrease in learner's performance in initial reading skills and higher-level reading skills from baseline to midline, while pre-reading skills have remained unchanged. Summatively, less than 1 in 20 pupils is reading at the minimum proficiency level, USAID (2022). These findings resonate with Lancet (2007) who posits that over 200 million children under the age of five in the developing world are at risk of not reaching their full development potential because they suffer from the negative consequences of poverty, nutritional deficiencies and inadequate learning opportunities. The effects of poverty and lack of interaction in early education are cumulative and the absence of appropriate childcare and education can exacerbate further the poor outcomes in their future academic pursuits. Despite all this evidence Atinc & Gustafsson- Wright (2013), assert that no country in the developing world can boast of comprehensive programmes that reach all children. Enrollments remain woefully inadequate in Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East and North Africa. It must be noted that with this gloomy scenario, most national averages hide inequalities across socio-economic groups in access and certainly quality.

The importance of early education was recognized at an early stage of Zambia's educational development. According to Phiri (2014) and Ndeleki (2015), ECE was a pre requisite for children in colonial times. Children had to go through substandard A and B, and the medium of instruction were the local languages which included; Loza, Nyanja, Bemba and Tonga, Kashoki (1978). As early as 1957 the first legal instrument to govern and oversee it was enacted under the nurseries act of 1957. The Act is still in effect and provides legal backing for providers of early childhood services. In the 1960s when major changes were made to the education system, ECE was removed from the education sector and responsibility entrusted with local government under the social welfare centers called *olofeya* ECF (2013). In 1972, the Zambia Pre-School Association (ZPA) was created as a mother body to oversee matters pertaining to early childhood education at nursery and pre-school level. It further broadened its mandate to include teacher training of ECE teachers. Apart from the ZPA, the local councils maintained registers of childhood centers within their

localities without monitoring their performance. In the preceding years all the three educational policies identified it as an important level of education. In spite of these developments the growth of early education in Zambia has been fragmented and gradual. A lot of progress in the area was observed after the two conferences on education in 1990 and 2000 reason being that early education was one of the prioritized areas. This in turn led to increased attention on ECE institutions as a learning arena. Nygard (2017), Hennem, Pettersvold & Ostrem (2015:308), state that this has led to a keener focus on children's goal attainment, which has led to learning being more structured and goal oriented. The need for a more structured and goal oriented system has called for the need to have a language policy which will guide the mapping of skills central for discourses in today's ECE policy. The language of instruction plays a pertinent role in transmission, control and in the long term how knowledge will manifest itself in the school environment through its day to day practices, Bernstein (2000/1995), Nygard (2017).

Government through the Ministry of General Education (MOGE) establishes the premise for pedagogical practice and this provides for solid frames for communication and weak guidelines give weak frames. Framing according to Bernstein (1980), points to the relationship between transmitters (the preschool teachers) and acquirers (the children). This process leads to maturation of a discourse.

Zambia can be categorized as a multilingual society because it is a society where many languages are spoken. Zambia has 73 ethnic grouping and over 30 languages are spoken. It has (Zambia) seven national languages and English is the official language. According to Kashoki (1978) Zambia has been divided in seven zones done according to geographical designations. Zambia's education system has experienced numerous changes since independence. The language policy has not fallen short of these changes. The language of instruction issue has dominated historical literature since the colonial times. In order to encourage the African to embrace western education, Language proved to be a rigorous weapon. As much as the Africans wanted to learn the white man's language, the missionaries were also keen to learn African languages in the different parts they settled in.

Theoretical Framework – Basil Bernstein's Language Codes

Bourne, (2000), like Bernstein (1996), believed in the possibilities of schooling in bringing about social transformation through individual enhancement, inclusion and participation. Education is seen as an experience of boundaries with a focus on social outcomes which are examined by contrasting horizontal and vertical forms of discourse. O’Keeffe (2001) quoting Bernstein pointed out that the significant differences in the classification and framing of rules of each teaching practice relate to the social class position of the schools, and the assumptions of the families served by the schools. Codes are pertinent to Bernstein’s message systems which in this case are reflected in the curriculum, Bernstein (1979), Atkinson, (1985). The local language policy can constitute a message system, in this case clearly stating the means of transmission of the curriculum. Bourne (200, Bernstein (1996), believe in the possibilities of schooling in bringing about social transformation through individual enhancement, inclusion and participation. Proponents of the use of a familiar language in class believe that the Child’s Learning Capacity will be at its opportimal.

Horizontal discourse is the day to day ‘commonsense’ knowledge observed through local segmental, context dependent tacit, multi layered and highly contradictory across contexts. As for vertical discourse, Bernstein (1996), describes it as discourse which is highly explicit, with a systematic principled structure and hierarchically organized in the form of specialized languages. ECE as a level within the education system is based on age appropriateness, selects and regulates what is to be imparted using a particular language of communication.

The language policy is a vertical discourse which according to Bernstein (1996), is highly explicit, with a systematic principles structure. The horizontal discourse is what prevails away from the policy dictated to by the interested groups and the surrounding environment. The vertical discourse is very visible unlike the horizontal which is invisible. These concepts can be categorized within his concepts of classification and framing. The invisible pedagogy is conceived through weak classification and framing and the visible is envisioned through strong classification and frames. Bernstein (1975), identified invisible (horizontal) and visible (vertical) pedagogy which can be categorized within his concepts of classification and framing. The invisible pedagogy is conceived through weak classification and frames and visible pedagogy is envisioned through strong classification and frames. What differentiates the two is the transmission channel.

Aim of the Study

The historical development of ECE language of instruction in Zambia reflects the difficult circumstances under which it has developed and continues to. The precarious policy environment continues to affect its advancement. In an era where the use of local languages as medium of instruction is been encouraged in the early years, the multilingual environment continues to be a thorny issue. Therefore, central aim of this investigation was to assess the implementation of the Local Language Policy in privately owned early childhood centers through Basil Bernstein's s Code theory. The sociological frame of reference imposed Bernstein's Classification and Framing to be used to answer questions of social reproduction, power and control that are reflected within the provision of ECE by privately owned centers.

Methodology

The study undertook a particular sampling technique in order to capture the different types of ECE centers in affluent neighborhoods and those in the slums of Lusaka. Ten centers in total were selected based on the area .The centers catered for children aged 5-6 years old. With the numerous different types of providers, the centers were selected on the basis of their geographical location, source of funding and class.

The researcher employed participant and non-participant observation, field notes and informal conversations with children and practitioners to gather data from each school, interviews were conducted with the center managers and teachers and five lessons were observed video recorded from each center. A total of 100 lessons were observed with 124 tasks across the study areas as stipulated by the national curriculum.

The basic resource levels of the classrooms were available in all the ten centers but were not sufficient for those from the poor neighborhoods considering that the pupil-teacher ratio was high. Schools which had presumably high fees (K4000 – K6000), the ratio was 1:15 those in the middle range (K2500 – k3500) had 1: 25 and those in the lower range (K400 – K800) had as many as 1:45 ratio. It must be noted that those in the higher and middle range had two people responsible for each class, a qualified ECE teacher and a trained helper. In the lower range. the trend is the presence of trained helpers who provide cheaper labor as compared to qualified teachers.

Findings

Table 1 : The participants had the following demographic features;

	Middle class	Working Class
Age of Children	5-6	5-6
Social Class status	Employed middle class parents	Employed and unemployed working class parents
Funding	Privately Funded	Privately funded
Fee paying center	Yes	Yes
Teacher Qualification	Degree and Diploma holders	Volunteers or trained assistant pre-school teachers

The class observations were able to illuminate a number of issues. . The major themes that were elucidated from the data gathering were as follows; language policy, social class classification and framing.

Implementation of the local language policy

The government of Zambia maintains that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. In the centers visited, in the middle-class centers, the language of instruction was English but in those with children of the working class, the medium of instruction was Nyanja. This was the case because cosmopolitan centers favored the use of English over Nyanja which they considered to be for lower class children. The propagation of the local languages is representative of horizontal discourse influenced by the social milieu and beliefs against the vertical discourse propelled by policy which qualifies to be a 'massage system' with a systematic principled structure and hierarchically organized in the form

of specialized languages. At this point, we observe an environment where both the horizontal is trying to find acceptance in an English dominated system embedded in our colonial legacy. The belief that the command of the English language is a symbol of power and social control, a perception perpetuated by the colonialization of Zambia.

Social Class

The ECE centers reflected the social classes in the Zambian society, the upper, middle and lower classes. Marxism elucidates that in a capitalist society like Zambia, social classes will be present and the structures are defined by the relations existing among the classes. What differentiates the classes is first observed in the fees paid by the providers and the observable capital culture in class. The fees reflected the economic inequalities existing in society. The social class to a very large extent dictates the type of ECE centers will favor for their children and this was clearly seen.

Discussion

The predominant differences that linger among the classes in society are reflected in their home environments, which at ECE level is the most important socializing agent and educating force. It must be noted that the social class characterized in the home culture are closely linked to the level of educational achievement and student achievement. Kioko (2012) posits, that learning does not begin in school but from home with the learners' language. The need to use a familiar language arises from the need to reduce learning environment shock for the child who is moving from the informal to formal set up. Continuity enhances confidence and participation from the child, hence promoting interactive learner-centered approaches. Among the two groups, it was observed that there was undeniable differences in levels of knowledge, understandings, cognitive and language skills as well as values and attitudes. These differences according to Bernstein (1996) were able to favor the middle class children when it comes to use of the restrictive code, which they are coming with from the home environment. Children from the working class usually come with the elaborate code, which tends to disadvantage them when it comes to the restricted code. Middle class children come with a wide vocabulary hence relating well and able to grasp the restricted codes well.

According to policy, the medium of instruction at ECE level is supposed to be the mother tongue of the child or the familiar language of the immediate community. On the ground the situation is

rather different, centers in the slums, the language of instruction is Nyanja as dictated by the policy hence reflecting strong classification and framing. This scenario is as such due to a number of factors. The children are socialized in Nyanja and even the teachers are trained to be assistants or in some cases untrained volunteers are used. These volunteers it was observed had their familiar language to be Nyanja.

Paradoxically, among the working class who undeniably have so much influence on what is contained in education policies. They have so much power to direct the direction policy takes. This stated, the working class send their children to costly ECE centers and demand early instruction in English. The teachers interviewed stated that the parents even before bringing their children want to be clear about the language of instruction. The policy or vertical discourse classification is weak and so is the framing. This situation arises with the assumption that all children have English as the first language or children are exposed to. It must be noted that private schools in cosmopolitan areas have a multicultural group from diverse countries such that even when schools have an opportunity to be exempted from use of local language instruction, the challenges of language of instruction choice still persists.

Other factors which have perpetuated the weak classification and framing have been the poor regulatory mechanism by the ministry in charge. Much of their focus is on the recently adopted system of including ECE classes in most if not all primary schools. In all public schools, the medium of instruction is the familiar local language. In centers where middle class children go, the practice is that, Nyanja is occasionally taught as oral lessons. The teachers pointed out that the middle class children had a lot of difficulty in relating with Nyanja as a classroom language. The teachers further pointed out, that the use of local languages was also proving to be a challenge for them. In a diverse population as Lusaka, Nyanja is the familiar community language but children had diverse home languages. The further pointed out that they were having difficulties in teaching in Nyanja because for some this was the first time they were been exposed to the language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed a lot of differences that exist among private early childhood centers in the use of Local Languages as medium of instruction. The middle class exerts a lot of influence on the language adopted for instruction. The middle class parents had so much influence on the language

used for instruction unlike the working class parents who left the decision to be made by the teachers.

The study concluded that among private schools the issue of language of medium of instruction among children in early education still remains an issue of concern. Teachers are presented with real life classroom situations where there may be children with ten or more unfamiliar languages as L1 which don't include English or Nyanja. Therefore, the policy retains weak classification and framing and this is the case because social class influences the dynamics of classroom interaction. The home culture is to a very extent recontextualized hence weakening the policy framing. The middle class parents in cosmopolitan early childhood centers have to a very large extent exploited the issue of exemption from use of local languages purely for prestige.

The working class parents had little influence on the medium of instruction and due to the poor qualification of teachers in the slums, most of them were able to relate with teaching in Nyanja.

It must be noted that teachers observed had formed their own practices based on their personal pedagogical influenced by the school culture and the area of location they worked in.

Recommendations

1. It was observed that the local language policy exemption was favored by the middle class early childhood centers to retain English as the medium of instruction. The issue of class and multilingual diversity outweighed the benefits attributed to use of familiar language use. Therefore there is need to revisit the policy in order to bring everybody on board
2. Wider consultation should be conducted with all stakeholders if issues of medium of instruction are to be a consensus.
3. The pre service training programmes should equip ECE teachers with skills in local language teaching which most teachers don't have.

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