

Why is mother tongue based education so significant?

In most parts of the world, discussion about whether children's mother tongues, or home languages should be used for learning at school, is a 'no brainer'. After all, we all know that we need to understand what we are hearing or reading to learn effectively. Or do we? English speaking mother tongue South African parents do. Few would dream of putting their child in a school that offers education through anything but English except perhaps if one parent is German or French speaking and an International school is considered because it offers a bilingual curriculum. In such cases, the benefits of being bilingual are clear as are the benefits of learning other languages which have the potential to help open doors to lucrative and empowering careers. Why then are African language speakers denied the same opportunities in South Africa when for most children, English starts off a foreign language and has to be learned, at school?

In SA, language is not a neutral issue, and one language is vastly more equal than others. Many people do not remember that pre 1976, African languages were taught in for eight years (until Standard 6), but this was Apartheid's 'moedertaal onderwys'. In 1979, following the Soweto uprising, the 1953 Bantu Education Act was amended to a policy of three years of mother tongue with a switch in the fourth year to English. This is the de facto situation that we still have in schools today, despite having a language in education policy since 1997 that promotes mother tongue based bilingual education. As I will explain below, shifting to English medium alone after three years hinders both learning in general and learning English. But many South Africans believe this to be a necessary learning path for their children as they have still not had access to relevant information to help them separate out absolutely legitimate and deeply held feelings and attitudes against 'moedertaal onderwys' from the fact that it is not a language itself that is the problem, but the evil of the Apartheid system.

Any language can be used for any function, including the teaching of maths and science – but like muscles in our bodies, languages grow when used, and shrink when neglected. More than sufficient 'evidence based' research on language and literacy exists to persuade even the biggest sceptic that the argument for mother tongue is not an 'either –or' argument against English, but an argument for a pedagogically sound approach to learning for all children, that involves both the mother tongue and English. But the sceptics have to be prepared to listen.

It is essential to appreciate that the brain is not a container with finite space that has two or more distinct compartments for each language. In fact, knowledge and skills transfer from one language to another, in oral and written forms. So, while aspects like grammar and vocabulary obviously differ from language to language, once a child learns the many concepts about print and cuing strategies for reading in one language she applies them to the next. Children learn to read and write successfully in two languages simultaneously or successively! It all depends on context, resources and teaching approach.

Language learning is successful under specific conditions and we know that for all children, these include the following:

- 1) Children need at least six to eight years to come to know a language well. New concepts, skills and knowledge should be added to what children already know, and can do. The repository for all of this for young children is their mother tongue/s. Hence the principle of an 'additive approach' to language learning and the value of at least six years of mother tongue education, with the gradual introduction of English as a co-teaching medium until the end of Primary school, as promoted but not implemented in the 1997 Language in Education Policy.

- 2) Role models for a new language need to be proficient in that language and well trained to understand how to teach an additional language and why particular approaches to teaching are more beneficial than others. Hence the need for all teachers to have a good enough command over the language they are teaching or using as a teaching medium.

3) Supportive language-rich environments help children learn. These are environments where conversations and storytelling happen regularly. Many adults do this best in their home languages. Story telling is a bridge to reading and writing, in one or more languages. Engagement with the power of print is the beginning of learning to read and write. Hence the urgent need to publish and provide storybooks for children in African languages as well as English, to mentor adults to become reading and writing role models and to support reading clubs where all children can have regular enjoyable interactions with reading and writing in both their mother tongue and English.

Multilingualism in South Africa won't go away. Indeed it is the global norm. The secret to success for all South Africans is to work towards a mother tongue based bilingual education system. This will produce motivated and knowledgeable citizens who can speak, read and write African languages and English.

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