CREATING EQUITABLE LANGUAGE SPACES: LANGUAGE AS A GATEKEEPING TOOL IN ZIMBABWEAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The Zimbabwean education system has adopted English as the primary medium of instruction despite the country's linguistic diversity, which includes 16 officially recognised languages. There are standardised expectations across the academic landscape in Zimbabwe where classroom instruction, textbooks, and national examinations are exclusively conducted in English. Consequently, students who lack proficiency in English face systemic disadvantages, perpetuating inequalities in educational access and achievement. Beyond academic performance, the dominance of English exacerbates sociocultural disparities among learners, influencing their sense of identity, belonging, and power relations within schools. Children whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds deviate from the dominant "English" narrative often experience marginalisation, as the prevailing language norms dictate who is recognised as a legitimate learner in the classroom. This paper investigates the impact of Zimbabwe's language policy on diverse cultural groups, with a focus on the inequities embedded in linguistic spaces and the resulting dynamics within classrooms. Framed by theories of cultural capital and linguistic human rights, the study interrogates how English functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, systematically excluding indigenous languages and reinforcing hierarchies of linguistic privilege. It further explores whether the education system can realistically transition toward equitable language practices that validate multilingual identities and empower all learners. By critically analysing policy implementation and classroom realities, the paper contributes to broader debates on language rights and inclusive education in Zimbabwe

Keywords: *linguistic spaces, language rights, gatekeeper, multilingualism, educational equity*

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Introduction

Language is part of the heritage of humanity. Ngulube (2012) asserts that language is fundamental to the ability to communicate and get literal messages, expressions and ideas through. Owing to Zimbabwe's colonial past, English is the official language in the country. Though English is the official language, schools in Zimbabwe have to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population as the children use and speak different languages from home and are of different cultural backgrounds. It is worth noting that students become social beings through power laden systems that is the schools that they learn in and the tools that they use in schools. However, positioning and power in schools has led to the emergence of social and academic identities.

Foucault (1980) argued that everyone is caught up in the circulation of power, though not on equal terms. He viewed power as ubiquitous, dynamic, "micro-physics" that circulates through all social interaction. Hence power is everywhere, everyone is involved and inequality exists. It is in this regard that King and Scott (2014) focus on language rights in the classroom. Language serves as a powerful tool in mainstream ideologies. Language is also a tool that stratifies students in the classroom. In the Zimbabwean classroom, English serves as a gatekeeper for students' success and thus King and Scott (2014) call for a more democratic notion of language usage that denies the "gatekeeper" of English into specific education tasks.

Gatekeeping means that proficiency in English determines access to opportunities. However, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues that gatekeeping reflects colonial legacy as structures and systems built during colonial eras still persist in contemporary world through control of knowledge production and social life. Therefore, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) challenges this gatekeeping and advocates for an inclusive intellectual landscape.
The school structure in Zimbabwe, as in many other African countries, believe that linguistic success can be measured by how much English a student speaks, hence almost all abilities are tested in English. Using Bourdieu's cultural capital and Skutnabb -Kangas linguistic human rights theory, this paper shows how language acts as a barrier to negotiating cultural identities for students. As language influences who has power and access to knowledge and skills, this paper seeks to understand the language dynamics in the classroom and assess how English has become a gatekeeping language, shutting other languages out and come up with mitigation measures to enhance effective learning and teaching. Linguistic entitlements are a human right (Prah 2006) and as such, creation of equitable language spaces leads to human rights issues. As Thondlana (2002) mentioned, the Harare Declaration of 1997 which rose from the UNESCOs Intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa underscored the need for respect of linguistic rights as human rights.

Background to the study

Language is just a social resource without clear boundaries of nation, territory and social group (Thomason, 2017). Garcia and Wei (2016, 10) consider the shift in focus from language as a product to language as practice, whereby the focus becomes "the speakers creative and critical use of linguistic resources to mediate cognitively complex activities". Language thus becomes a social practice. Students interact with each other in the classroom, an ongoing process that is expected to happen in English in the school system. However, the shift in focus emphasises that speakers utilise their multilingualism resources in a manner to navigate and mediate social and cognitive activities. Institutions focus on English more than other languages, following policies as governed. However, it is worth noting that, African languages that are discarded can unlock new opportunities equitably in a digitally globalised world. According to Dellulis (2015) the concept of gatekeeper was first introduced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947, 1951) in explaining the focal points of social changes in communities. Gatekeeping is basically a selection process, a filtering process that involves different people. As the gatekeeper, language affects how students learn in the classroom (Ngulube 2012).

Education in Zimbabwe still follows a monolingual trajectory (Charamba (2020). Although English is the lingua franca in Zimbabwe, it is home language to less than 1% of the population in the country (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour 2012). Language is thus a powerful tool in the classroom. Those students who do not know the language are silenced. They remain dormant and do not participate in classroom activities, and this does not build self-esteem in them, their esteem remains low. Waniek-Klimczak (2011)) argues thus that anybody being introduced to a new culture for the first time is likely to experience culture shock. This happens to language also. This experience is not limited to social norms or environment but to language learning and communication also (Aqabani 2025)

Each language reflects a unique worldview and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. In this, each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of people. The language remains a reflection of this culture for some time even after the culture which underlies it decays and crumbles, often under the impact of an intrusive, powerful, usually metropolitan, different culture. However, with the dearth and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and worldview is lost forever (Wurm, 2001: 13) in Skutnabb-Kangas (2002).

In Zimbabwe, English is the dominant language. It is the language of modernity, science and progress. Everything in Zimbabwe, from academia to industry is tied to proficiency in English. However, Mungwini (2012) notes that most rural and working-class Zimbabwean children have low English repertoires, as they are mostly conversant in indigenous languages. They thus enter school at a disadvantage. This requires that indigenous and minority children be educated through the medium of their mother tongue and use this medium in official situations including schools. Romaine (2006) thus questions whether it is legitimate to insist that all children be schooled in the majority language of the country.

Research questions

The study intends to answer the following questions:
1. What systemic disadvantages do students face in the classroom and what exacerbates these disparities among learners in the classroom?
2. What impact does the Zimbabwe language policy have on diverse cultural groups in the classroom?
3. Can the education system in Zimbabwe realistically transition towards equitable language practices?

The Language policy in Zimbabwe

Section 6 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe accords official language status in Zimbabwe to 16 languages. These officially recognized languages are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa. Zimbabwe's colonial heritage is British, with Shona and Ndebele accounting for the greater part of the population, the rest from these officially recognised languages are minority. Chimhundu (2002) asserts that the role of governments has attracted sustained attention in the discourse about language policy in Africa. Hence Hungwe (2007) raised the language issue question and the role of indigenous languages as a resource for teaching and learning.

Chabata (2008) argues that the linguistic situation in Zimbabwe is very complicated as there are no clear boundaries on where language begins or ends. The Zimbabwe Education Act 1987, amended in 1990, states that even though languages have the same expressive ability, English is dominant as a language in all systems from the policy itself, syllabi or examination systems. The policy starts from the 1987 Education Act to the 1990 Cultural Policy in Zimbabwe, the 1990 Report on the Survey of the Teaching and Learning of Minority languages in Zimbabwe, the 1997 Position Paper on Zimbabwe's Language Policy, the 1998 National Language Policy Advisory Panel report to the 1999

Nziramasanga Commission Report on Education and Training in Zimbabwe. They all consistently reiterate the need to empower Zimbabweans through a comprehensive policy that diversifies the functions of all languages spoken in Zimbabwe and this has been the major highlight in Zimbabwe. The National Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe clearly stipulated in its objectives then of:

> Ensuring the development and promotion of African languages such that business, science and technology as well as history and literature will be accessible to Zimbabweans in national languages. To this end, research and other activities in the development of relevant terminologies will be funded and promoted in order to meet the demand of national languages in an industrial society (Government of Zimbabwe 1990: 21, cited in Ndhlovu 2008).

The Zimbabwean Education Act, specifically the 1987 Education Act, amended in 1990 state that English remains the national official language, though the three main languages in Zimbabwe namely English, Shona and Ndebele will be taught in primary schools starting from Grade 1. From Grade 1 to 3 the medium of instruction can be either Shona or Ndebele. English is adopted from Grade 4 onwards. The 2013 Constitution further amended that Shona and Ndebele be taught as subjects with an equal time allocation as English throughout all levels of schooling. Shona and English will be taught in areas where the majority of residents speak English and Shona and thus Ndebele and English will be taught in areas where the majority speak Ndebele. The Secretary's circular minute No 3 stipulates that other languages as Kalanga, Nambya and Shangani are to be taught up to Grade 7.

Ndamba (2013), Nhongo (2013) Sibanda (2019), Dube and Wozniak (2021) and Maseko (2021) have provided insights into the language policy in Zimbabwe and how policy and practice have been mismatched even though the 2013 and 2020 Amendment Act formally recognise more languages. Ndlovu (2024) argued that the 2024 language policy continues to prioritise English as the dominant language of instruction, though it has been officially amended to include more indigenous languages. Challenges still remain in the implementation of inclusive language policies within the education system.

Literature review

Literature was reviewed following the theoretical frameworks as well as the use of English and indigenous languages in the classrooms showing teacher attitudes and perceptions from the local, regional and international contexts. Discourses that label English as a problem are frequent. English is a limiting factor for students' progress as it is complex and difficult to many second language users. Cunningham and Little (2023)

opine that English is outside and parallel, and lack of proficiency in English is used as a gatekeeping measure for exclusion.

Lareau (2011) used Bourdieu's framework in her study on Unequal Childhoods and the findings show that linguistic and social advantages in middle class families are shown through various capital that parents provide for their children. Language use of middle-class families generates children with more extensive vocabularies. Less class families utilise linguistically less complex directives with their children and this leads to less developed vocabulary and less practice in institutionalised discourse. The study further showed that parents with privileged status also show privileged attitudes in schools and sometimes threaten to leave schools if their children are not awarded higher status positions in the schools.

In line with this, King and Scott (2014) reviewed the Lau vs Nichols (1974) case arguing that non-English speaking students were being denied equal access to education based on their inability to comprehend English This brought out reforms in the USA that included the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). King and Scott (2014) thus argue that the linguistic intricacies are buried in notions of social and linguistic capital which Latinos and other English as second language users do not have.

Choudry et al (2016) found out in their study that the structures of social networks are important to how educational capital may be accessed, and this is one way in which the social space operates. They thus contribute to debate on how ethnicity and gender affect learning outcomes. Drawing on Lee's (2010) criticism of Bourdieu's imprecision, they concur that social relations and accessible networks are better understood not as social capital in themselves but as sources of social capital. This relates to Von Otter and Sternberg (2015) who argue that relationships in an advantaged network tend to have higher utility rather than relationships in a disadvantaged network.

Erling et al. (2017) assert that learners hold the view that policies on English medium instruction contribute to keeping learners from non-affluent backgrounds from learning English. For most students from non-affluent backgrounds, they do not have the opportunity to study English outside of the classroom, yet the school also is not conducive for developing their home language. This supports Mlays (2010) findings that some rural parents lack educational awareness and cannot afford to purchase supplementary reading material in addition to paying school fees.

Language should not be a matter of communicative skills but equality of knowledge making dynamics and opportunities. In their argument on language use in scientific - academic contexts, Kelly (2015) argue that multiple languages should be used to promote

transnational dialogue. They challenge assumptions made on the use of English as a lingua franca in scientific-academic contexts as a manifestation of unequal distribution of knowledge production and uptake. This is supported by Ashrafova (2025)'s argument that though English has attained un-parallel global prominence, there is need for a more balanced linguistic environment in which multilingualism and linguistic justice are prioritised in the global world.

Oakes (2005) found out that students are grouped by their linguistic skills and once that happens, King and Scott (2014) say this becomes subtractive schooling. Knowledge distributed to the students then reads like a Bloom's taxonomy diagram with the lowest students stating that they had learned spelling while the high tracked students are quoted saying they learnt about different theories of psychology. This aligns with Mashuro and Higgs (2025) study which approached the issue of English as a language of learning and teaching which creates bias towards social justice. The study was carried out in Chivi District and regarded the 2015 policy shift in language planning which dictates the introduction of English as the language of learning and teaching starting from Grade 3 instead of Grade 4 as stated in the 1987 Education Act. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education 2019). This brought in issues of social justice in schools. This is connected to Mashuro's (2021) study which had focused on problems that Grade 3 learners faced when using English as the language of learning and teaching at the expense of their heritage language. Ndeleki (2015) study in Zambia established that teachers associated the use of indigenous language systems with an inferiority complex while the use of English enjoyed high status. Hence Mashuro and Higgs (2025) argue that the Zimbabwean language policy is an instrument of exploitation seeking to erase learners' identities which is represented by their heritage language. It assimilates them into an English-speaking society which is portrayed as being elite and possessing better future outcomes.

Dludlu (2016) explored Swazi learners' perceptions of English as a gatekeeper in the Swaziland system and realised that learners who fail to achieve a credit pass in English cannot proceed to higher education and only 13% of the student population achieve that credit pass. English is thus a barrier to academic success especially to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Dludlu (2016) further noted that students expressed a desire for Siswati to be a language of instruction. The Swaziland system is such that the language of instruction from Grade 1 to 3 is Siswati after which English takes over from Grade 4. It is mandatory for students to pass examinations in English to proceed to the next level. Thus May (2007) argues that the South African system that uses English as the medium of instruction act as the barrier to full societal participation of native speakers and is the gatekeeper of humanity. It is thus a language of the powerful elite, a tool of oppression and dehumanisation. It is against this background even within the

Zimbabwean context that Mashuro (2021) highlights the implications of using English as a language of instruction in Chivi District and emphasises the need for linguistic diversity to promote social justice in education.

Theories

The study is informed by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Skutnabb-Kangas' Linguistic Human Rights Theory. The theories relate as Skutnabb-Kangas focuses on how language intersects with issues of equity, identity and cultural survival, while Bourdieu focuses on how cultural capital reproduce social inequality. Skutnabb-Kangas argues how denial of linguistic rights leads to discrimination; the focus is thus on language use, especially the mother tongue as a fundamental right. In Bourdieu's theory, language is part of cultural capital therefore the theories overlap as they both highlight how language is central to power and show how schools privilege some children and disadvantage others through language use. Skutnabb-Kangas (2013) asserts that the non-material resources of the dominant groups are presented as better adapted to meet the needs of modern society. In fact the non-material resources of the dominated groups are stigmatised as traditional and inferior, hence marginalised.

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory

This is an influential theory in explaining how cultural resources contribute to social inequality. Cultural capital refers to non-economic resources that enable social mobility and influence one's position in society, for example knowledge, education and ways of speaking. Embodied cultural capital include language competence, accent, style of communication, normally acquired through socialisation in the family and education.

Social capital is related to unequal access in education (Choudry and Black 2016). Social capital does not have one definition but rather centres on the relationships that individuals have (Filipovic and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, 2023). It connects individuals and it is based on trust, common norms and reciprocity (June-Anderson 2018). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argued that the possession of social and cultural capital was directly related to the degree of success of students. The classroom is a social space with dynamic relations between peers and teachers. Access to social capital relates to peer or peer to teacher relations. Relations are mediated by gender, ethnicity and class, therefore showing how schools reproduce social relations of power. The theory is applicable to this study as it has emphasis on cultural capital and cultural shock.

Filipovic and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, (2023) argue that there is little agreement among academics regarding the essence and definition of social capital theory. However, it

relates to social network structure, social relations, trust, reciprocity and cooperation. The linguistic intricacies are hidden in notions of social and linguistic capital which second language users lack (King and Scott 2014). These patterns of domination and inequality in the social structure can be enhanced through language. Through cultural reproduction theory, status is transferred from one generation to the next (Bourdieu 2003) and permeating through the idea of cultural reproduction is power.

Skutnabb-Kangas' linguistic human rights theory

The theory discusses linguistic human rights particularly in relation to minority and indigenous languages, education and power. The theory argues that language rights are a human right. People denied the right to use, learn and develop their mother tongue have their human rights violated and this becomes linguistic genocide. Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) talks of the right to education in the first language, mother tongue usage and how languages die due to not being used. She thus advocates for strong mother tongue based multilingual education and pushes for governments to recognise linguistic human rights as fundamental. Dominant language policies in education can lead to the marginalisation and even destruction of minority languages, effectively constituting linguistic genocide. Schools are everyday committing linguistic genocide, forcibly moving children from one group (minority) to another (dominant) through linguistic and cultural forced assimilation in schools (Skutnabb-Kangas 2013).

Skutnabb-Kangas' research has been influential in shaping international discussions on linguistic human rights and the need for more inclusive and equitable language policies. The expressive interest in language as a marker of identity is necessary. The instrumental interest in language as a means of communication is also necessary. These are necessary and enrichment -oriented rights (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2022).

Data collection

The study adopted a qualitative research design. The selection was within the interpetivist paradigm which emphasises understanding of human experiences through the views of participants. Cresswell (2013) note that qualitative research involves direct experience during field work in order to be able to understand and interpret the setting as well as individuals. Mirhosseini & Pearson (2025) take the argument further noting that qualitative research should be timely, original, rigorous and relevant, making explicit grounds on which authors claim justification of their findings. Using Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Skutnabb-Kangas' Linguistic Human Rights theory, an investigation into how language acts as a gatekeeping tool was conducted.

The study focused on multilingual classrooms from a population of all secondary school students in Gweru High density suburb. A sample of 30 students was purposively selected from one high school in the high density area of Mkoba. Questionnaires were distributed to these 30 students at the chosen school. The questionnaire consisted of open ended questions to help gather the views of the leaners. Since the classrooms are multilingual, the students were divided into groups according to the languages that they speak at home. The researcher then distributed questionnaires to students representing all language groups. This was useful for representation purposes and allowed for a more accurate generalisation of findings (Noor &Golzar 2022). Furthermore, classroom observations were made to carefully observe any patterned differences among learners.

Together with a desktop analysis of language policy documents in Zimbabwe, the researcher was able to focus on multilingual classrooms which use English as a formal method of communication. The analysis of policy documents helped explore how language policies influence the creation of equitable language spaces in a society where there are several linguistic identities. Thematic analysis as carried out (Tonkikh etal 2022). The researcher tried to be as objective as possible in analysis of findings.

Discussion of findings

This section presents and discusses the findings following the three research questions mentioned earlier.

Research question 1: What systemic disadvantages do students face in the classroom and what exacerbates these disparities among learners in the classroom?

The fact that the Zimbabwe education system privileges English as a language of instruction denies linguistic rights to many children. Though the constitution recognises 16 languages, the language of instruction is mostly English. The policy is designed in such a way that the mother tongue is used from ECD to Grade 4 after which the teachers adopt and revert to teaching in English. Students who are not proficient in English are labelled slow, at this stage, even though they might be proficient in indigenous languages. Teachers expect students to speak English in class and sometimes this idea is reinforced through punishment.

From the observations, a cultural divide occurs in the classroom. Teachers group children in class according to their ability after performing different exercises. Those who are extremely good are placed in Group 1 or are made to sit in the front rows and the sequence follows with the good students, average till it gets to the slow learners. Though this can enhance competition and inspire children to learn in a bid to outperform the other and also be placed in the first group, students learn different concepts as some are faster

than others and tasks are given according to group ability (Oakes 2005). Bourdieu's argument is clearly reflected showing that schools reward those who are proficient in English more, thereby perpetuating inequality.

The findings suggest that students face challenges in defining concepts in English. Even though they would have started learning in English from primary school, it was discovered that for most students from disadvantaged communities, concepts are difficult to grasp in the foreign language as indicted by the following extracts.

*I do not understand English (*Student 7)
I cannot get what the teacher says in English (Student 30)
If only the teachers could sometimes use Shona I mean mix both Shona and English, then I would pass (*Student* 1)
It is easy for me to think of the answer in Ndebele then the teacher will help me turn it to English (Student 15)
The teacher speaks fast and through the nose so I cannot hear what she says. (Student 18)

The results above indicate that it is important therefore that teachers offer linguistic support to learners to enable them to perform highly in class. As discussed by Mungwini (2012), King and Scott (2015) and Erlington et al. (2017) teachers should use students' backgrounds in assessments, focusing on students' cultural orientations and linguistic capabilities. Teachers need to be aware of students' needs and help them overcome challenges in understanding the language of instruction, probably by explaining in home languages what needs to be done as indicated by the learners.

Research question 2: What impact does the Zimbabwe language policy have on diverse cultural groups in the classroom?

The Zimbabwean language policy is framed in such a way that before the fourth grade, the medium of instruction can be chosen from either Shona or Ndebele, based on the most commonly spoken and understood language among the pupils. Starting from fourth grade, English will be the medium of instruction, with Shona or Ndebele taught equally as the English language. The policy further stipulates that in areas where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages in primary schools in addition to Shona, Ndebele and English.

Through the 2015 policy amendment, Amendment section 62 of Cap 25:04 Section 6 2 ("Languages to be taught in schools"), schools shall endeavour to teach every officially recognised language and ensure that the language of instruction shall be the language of examination as well as ensure that the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction

at early childhood education. The amended policy also clarified that the school curricula shall as far as possible reflect the culture of the people of every language used or taught. From the policy review, it can be observed that the language policy in Zimbabwe has been a top-down affair leading to the marginalisation of the minority languages and their speakers. This concurs with Ndhlovu (2024) recent study in which he argues that this is a violation of linguistic human rights. There is gross marginalisation and underdevelopment of minority languages and their speakers as the policy itself states that some minority languages can only be taught if and when the Minister sees fit.

Findings also revealed that Zimbabwean classrooms are multilingual. As such students speak different languages but embrace English as the language of instruction in the end. To this end, teachers in the multilingual classrooms make and renegotiate language policy through practices and choices that they make to manage classroom multilingualism. Nhongo (2013) opines that policy is inferred from the language practices in various spaces. The ZIMSEC standards prioritise English and failure of English can exclude capable learners from progressing. It therefore closes all doors. King and Scott (2014), Kelly (2015) and Ashrafova (2025) argue that classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse hence complex and teachers need to develop assessment practices that further students' learning. Inclusive strategies that are responsive to students' knowledge are encouraged.

Research question 3: Can the education system in Zimbabwe realistically transition towards equitable language practices?

The creation of equitable language spaces in the Zimbabwean classroom seems an impossible task. Equitable language spaces are spaces where no language group is disadvantaged. From the study, those who speak minority languages are grossly disadvantaged in the Zimbabwean curriculum, as their language are not prioritised. The inequality in access of languages sets structural disadvantages right from the beginning and leads to social exclusion of learners in the classroom.

Children come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and use different languages and dialects. However, the use of English as a medium of instruction creates a gap among these learners, in terms of identity and belonging as well as power dynamics. The English speakers are dominant because of their cultural narrative. Those students who lack linguistic skills are said to be less capable and those whose first language is not English suffer in an English context classroom as they take time to adjust to the learning environment. In Zimbabwe, these linguistic rights have remained on paper, as there has been a mismatch between policy and practice. If indigenous languages are given status in

practice, then language spaces can be equal. Students should learn the dominant language as an additive, not at the expense of their own language.

Ndhlovu (2024) argues that a national language policy enables decision makers to make choices about language issues in a comprehensive and balanced way. In a world where non -native speakers of English have outnumbered the native speakers, many teachers face multilingual classroom realities against a monolingual curriculum, therefore there is need to rethink the language education curriculum, interrogating how languages are taught in the classroom and the social and cultural factors at play. There is need to reform the status of languages stratifying learners in the classroom.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study have several important implications for the Zimbabwean education system. There is need to highlight the urgent need for policymakers and educators to recognise how language, particularly English, continues to function as a gatekeeping tool that shapes learners' academic pathways and future opportunities. Without meaningful reform, this current system that gives more importance to English language usage will continue to reproduce inequalities, especially for learners from rural or linguistically marginalised backgrounds. Teachers require training, resources, and institutional support to confidently integrate indigenous languages into instruction. This has implications for teacher education programmes, both pre-service and in-service, which must embed multilingual pedagogy as a core competency rather than optional enrichment. National assessment bodies such as ZIMSEC must re-evaluate the weight placed on English proficiency and consider more linguistically inclusive models of evaluating learners' academic competence It is important to connect assessment with policy intentions. Examinations privilege English above all other languages and if this continues the system will undermine its own goals of inclusivity and equity. Lastly, the findings draw attention to learners who feel linguistically inadequate and how they disengage and lose confidence resulting in failure. This has implications for overall academic achievement. Therefore, schools must adopt approaches that validate learners' linguistic identities as these reduce burdens associated with English dominance in the classroom and beyond.

Conclusion

English is considered high value and grants academic success and opportunities globally; therefore, it is worth noting that in Zimbabwe, English is the primary gatekeeper in education and becomes a form of exclusion in the school. Some pupils are disadvantaged from the intense use of English in the school system. Schools should be inclusive spaces

that validate learners' cultural capital and protect their languages. There is need for diverse cultural capital and use of linguistic human rights through mother-tongue based multilingual education policies. While English enables opportunities for some people, it closes doors for others. Teachers should remove stratification strategies in the classroom and allow students to negotiate in a language that they understand, preferably their first language. Multilingualism should be a resource not a problem and societies must as much as possible dismantle gatekeeping. Languages should be neutral, encompassing everyone equally in the classroom. That way, equality can be sustained in schools.

Recommendations

Addressing language as a gatekeeping tool in Zimbabwean education requires a comprehensive rethinking of how schools' approach linguistic diversity. Firstly, the Ministry of Education should begin by strengthening its curriculum review process to ensure that mother-tongue and multilingual practices continue beyond the early grades, so that language serves as a bridge to understanding rather than a barrier to learning. School leaders must also encourage teachers to reflect critically on their assumptions about language differences and to embrace linguistic diversity as an asset, not a problem within the school systems. Classrooms should avoid stratifying learners according to language proficiency, as doing so often reinforces inequities and limits students' sense of possibility. Instead, teachers should draw on existing policy frameworks that value indigenous languages and work towards integrating these languages meaningfully into instruction and classroom interaction.

For this to be successful educators require sustained professional development in multilingual pedagogy, including practical strategies such as trans-languaging and code-switching that help learners use all their linguistic resources without fear of ridicule. Creating safe linguistic spaces where learners can take risks and express themselves freely is essential for nurturing confidence and deepening comprehension. ZIMSEC's assessment practices also need to be revisited. The continued requirement that students must pass English to progress academically or professionally reinforces English as a gatekeeping mechanism that disproportionately disadvantages many learners, particularly those from rural and multilingual backgrounds. Recognising a pass in any officially approved language as sufficient would signal genuine respect for Zimbabwe's linguistic diversity and promote equity across the education system. In the end, meaningful progress will depend on aligning policy, classroom practice, and assessment so that language operates not as a filter that excludes, but as a resource that supports every learner's growth and opportunity.

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