THE PROSPECT OF LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION IN BOTSWANA: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

Although the languages in education policy has not been officially published, the current initiatives debates geared towards its implementation demonstrate excitement and caution by stakeholders and researchers. The excitement is in the sense that this will be one way that the country fulfils its ideals of democratization, of language rights, and of improving pedagogy for learners who do not have the national language, Setswana, as their home language. The cautions expressed by some emanate from the realization that the timelines that are suggested will not afford the Government to make appropriate preparations towards the January 2023 date. Associated with these trepidations, it is also the argument made in this paper that, while the Government believes the initiative will create an inclusive curriculum that will deliver education for all and the Vision 2036 ideals of knowledge economy, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) quality of life standards, the draft policy as is being discussed at Government levels may not be a smooth riding through implementation processes. This article assesses the situation and points out points out issues that need to be taken into consideration for the policy to be gainful once signed into a formal legal document.

Keywords: Botswana languages, language policy in education, democratization of the curriculum, inclusive education

1.0 Introduction

It is important to state from the onset that the development of the current languages in education policy is a sequel of research and associated debates that have occurred in Botswana over a long time. For over three decades researchers and language communities have tackled this question and engaged the Government of Botswana along the way (Motshabi & Saugetad, 2004). Various studies had reported disturbing situations regarding the education of children of marginalized communities (Le Roux, 1999). Nyati-Ramahobo (1999, 2000) has over the years made spirited advocacy for mother tongue literacy. Kwamwendo et al. (2009) and many others have made a case of mother tongue education for the Khoisan. In recent years Mokibelo (2016) made pre-emptive arguments for the implementation of an inclusive language-in-education policy, pointing out that such a policy would make the country achieve "Education for All Goals", at least at primary school level. Extensive debates by researchers have convincingly made a case that mother-tongue education was a verdure matter in the Botswana education system.

The ideas expressed in this article constitute a reflection occasioned by research in Botswana, on the one hand, and on the other hand by the recent developments and debates on the introduction of Botswana local languages in education. The label of local languages, in this paper, makes a distinction of indigenous languages which are spoken in the country, but which do not take

a national function such as that of Setswana currently. These local languages exist, are predominant and function as mother tongues in their geographical areas (Chebanne & Kewagamang, 2020). The reflection, within this context and critical juncture seeks to contribute to debates on the implementation of these languages in education at lower primary school level. Because these languages are many, and often to the astonishment of some citizens, it is important to provide a historical background on how Botswana is multilingual and multicultural.

2.0 Background: Botswana ethnic groups and languages
2.1 Marginalized groups and languages

In most academic literature on Botswana and its development, the question of ethnic languages is rarely presented, and therefore the view that Botswana has citizen called Batswana who speak Setswana circulate without paying attention to the ethnic composition of the country. These ethnic groups speak mother-tongue languages that are not Setswana. Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural country (Smeija, 2003). The presentation by Anderson and Janson (1997) on Botswana languages was not a new revelation. Linguistic and ethnic realities of Botswana were noted during the colonial period by Schapera (1954), and Dornan (1917).

Languages of Botswana are essentially distributed in within various broad groups: Sotho-Tswana which comprises Setswana, Shekgalagari, Sebirwa, and Tswapong, Shona-Nyai which comprises Kalanga, Nambya, and Shona, Herero-Kavango which includes Herero, Yeyi, Kwangale, Chiikuhane, Thimbukushu, and Rumanyo, San which comprises !Xóõ, Ju|'haonsi, ǂHuan, and Sasi and finally Khoe which includes G‖ana, G|ui, Naro, Shua, Danisana, Cua, Goro, Tshwa, Cire-cire, Ts'ixa, Khwedam (A‖nikhwe, Bugakhwe, |Anda and Khwe), and some already extinct languages (Deti, Haise, Cara, and Caite) (Andersson & Janson, 1997; Smeija, 2003). Khoisan languages are the most varied and diverse. Within this diversity of languages is also the question of vitality, demography, and development. Khoisan languages are losing their vitality in important social language domains. They are also spoken by demographically minute speech communities. They are less researched and are therefore not properly documented for literacy (Batibo, 2015 a&b).

The internal dynamics of Botswana languages shows that minor languages such as the Khoisan languages are absorbed or assimilated into demographically advantaged languages such as the Sotho-Tswana, Shona-Nyai, and Herero-Kavango languages (Chebanne, 2015a; Batibo, 2015a&b). Conversely, languages that are not used in education are also disadvantaged in that the young speakers from those languages adopt languages they meet in school, and this strengthens the role or function of especially Setswana (Monaka & Chebanne, 2021).

2.2 The predominance of Setswana

Although missionaries opted to limit their Bible translations to Setswana, they were much aware of linguistic diversities of the territory (Moffat, 1842; Livingstone, 1875-1885; Wookey, 1913). In the 1800s Setswana was propelled across southern Africa by the translation of the Bible into it and the spreading of missionary work across the region. The concomitant development of literacy materials in Setswana and the building of missionary schools where Setswana was taught, read and written was another boost (Mgadla, 1986). Setswana became the language spoken by majority of people in the country, as first, second and third language. "Over

the years, it has been argued that it facilitates unity and contributes significantly towards the building of one nation, that it is the pride of "Batswana," a cultural symbol by which the various ethnic groups identify themselves" (Monaka & Chebanne, 2019, p. 76), and this has given an impression of linguistic homogeneity in the country.

2.3 Language and education

The advantage of Setswana then was that it was widely spoken or understood, from the Lesotho Mountains to the Okavango and Zambezi (Livingstone, 1875-1885). The colonial process of deciding on territory status used Setswana to determine the name of the territory and to unify different ethnic and linguistic communities that were associated with the Setswana ethnic group (Janson & Tsonope, 1991; Ramsay et al. 1996). When education, which came first through the missionaries, was introduced, Setswana and the colonial language, English, were used side by side in education (Mgadla, 1986). It is pretty the same language use scenario which was taken up at independence, when English and Setswana became the only languages of education, with Setswana mainly at primary school. English monopolized the secondary and tertiary education levels ((Monaka & Chebanne, 2019; Smeija, 2003).

Although Nama, Silozi, isiNdebele and iKalanga did feature in an informal away in literacy at the first year of primary schools in their regions, the practice was discontinued after independence (Chebanne & Nyati-Ramahobo, 2003). Therefore, pre- and post-colonial discourses on Botswana languages paint a homogeneity that refuses heterogeneity of ethnic and language communities (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999). The absence of other languages was viewed by some as an opportunity for the nation to take a homogenous indemnity, ethnically and linguistically (Janson & Tsonope, 1991). However, the monolingual representation of the country was also viewed by others as assimilationist and hegemonic. It also became a heated political issue that resulted in the abrogation of the Sections 77, 78, and 78 of the Constitution that recognized Setswana ethnic groups as the only ones composing the nation (Mazonde, 2002).

3.0 Languages in education debates

Debates on languages in education in Botswana have always persisted since independence (Mazonde, 2002). In the 1980s the issues were taken up in ethnic community advocacy nationwide, and they sought revitalization of languages and cultural identity, and agitated for inclusion in education. These issues gained momentum from 1993 after the publication of the National Commission on Education (Botswana Government, 1993) which recommended a third language in schools. During the consultations, different ethnic groups advocated for the inclusion of their languages in education. However, although the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 retained the third language recommendation, it limited it to foreign language, French, despite the fact that research and debates on language in education which had been topical for decades recommended mother-tongue education in schools Nyati-Ramahobo (1999, 2004), and had demonstrated that the Botswana education system with its minimalistic approach on the language issue was not an ideal one and was not equitable for learners. Many researchers presented problems with the current language in education policy and how it impacted negatively on the pedagogical processes, and indeed on how the cultural content of the curriculum presented a serious

bias for learners at formative level (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017; Dipholo, 2010). To date, it is not clear what the fundamental reasons for avoiding local languages were.

On the other hand, marginalized ethnic communities felt that the delay in introducing mother tongue in education was a ploy to perpetuate ethnic hegemony of Setswana at the detriment of linguistic diversity in the country (Kamwendo et al., 2009). When languages in education debates got associated and misconstrued with debates against the architects of the Constitution, especially Sections 77, 78, and 79, it was to a significant extent evidence that the whole set up of the socio-political and education system was conceived to entrench and promote Setswana hegemony, ethnically and linguistically (Mazonde, 2002). The Sections were eventually repealed in a referendum which was as divisive as it was deemed controversial, but that did not grant ethnic languages opportunity to be introduced in education still (Chebanne & Moumakwa, 2017). Issues got heated when the Khoisan agitated for the recognition of their ancient territories where they could be free to enjoy their cultures. The landmark High Court Judgment in 2006 that gave them the right to their ancient lands demonstrated the problem of recognition of minority rights within the current constitutional framework.

As already mentioned, critical discourses on language rights, language planning, and the need for introduction of local languages were advocated by many researchers including Nyati-Ramahobo (1999, 2004), Batibo (2015 a&b) and Chebanne (2015a&b). Certain curriculum transformation initiatives motivated by poor performance, especially in areas where Setswana was not a mother tongue (Brock-Utne, 2010), demonstrated that there was a problem that needed policy change. But when in 2012 the Education and Training Sector Strategy Plan (ETSSP) was mooted and recommended for implementation in 2015, it had a recommendation that mother tongue education should be introduced to capacitate children in early ages of education (Botswana Government, 2012). However, when its five-year plan lapsed in 2020, no mother tongue experiment had been undertaken. The ETSSP as an official plan seemed to respond to the long-held view that some learners were either left out of education, or not facilitated in learning because of language challenges that were long identified by Nyati-Ramahobo (1999) and others. Critical interrogations on the equity and democratization in education were also raised by educationists (Brock-Utne, 2010). The impetus of these debates resulted in the ruling party, Botswana Democratic Party, promising to introduce local languages in education in their 2019 election manifesto. This electioneering promise was followed up in the State of the Nation Address of in 2020 which saw the Ministry of Basic Education embarking on a national consultation on the development of an inclusive languages in education policy, which is still under process.

While debates contributed and contribute to the better appreciation of the language situation in Botswana, and to language policy in education, they need to provide an unambiguous contribution to the process of implementation of mother tongue education. In anticipation of the outcomes of the policy, Chebanne and Kewagamang (2020) developed a model for implementing mother tongue education in schools. This model made the following assumptions: (i) Botswana languages could not all take the same status in education; (ii) Botswana languages did not have the same geographical distribution which would necessitate them featuring in every school; (iii) Botswana languages had varying functionality in their social language use domains, and (v) These

languages did not have the same development, and only a phased-in implementation in literacy could be undertaken. This model assumed that mother tongues would be part of the curriculum as subjects. However, as it will be seen later, the proposed policy assumes their role to be that of a medium of instruction.

4.0 The draft languages in education policy

In early 2022, when the Minister of Basic Education presented the draft languages in education policy to Parliament, it was clear that the draft policy sought to introduce all developed local languages in education which had hitherto not been used in schools. They were proposed to be introduced according to their areas where majority of children speak them as mother tongue. In presenting the proposed languages in education policy (Botswana Daily News, January 2022), the Minister of Basic Education reported to Parliament that:

(i)   The development of the policy was within the framework of the Ministry's vision of, "Towards a 21st Century Inclusive Curriculum", that emphasized plurilingualism and interculturalism.

(ii)   It was aligned with Vision 2036 values of tolerant, moral, and inclusive society that provides opportunities for all.

(iii)   It was premised on the national principles of democracy, development, self-reliance, unity and *botho*.

(iv)   It was guided by research from international agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF, and local and international research that demonstrated that teaching in mother tongue at formative years assisted learners to create a foundation for conceptual, cognitive, and effective development.

(v)   That the policy would introduce local languages as medium of instruction from Reception to Standard 2, and the criterion of most known language in a locality will be used in the local school.

(vi)   The usual school subjects would remain, but Setswana would be introduced at Standard 1 and English would be used as sole medium of instruction from Standard 3. Setswana would be compulsory in all schools, public and private.

(vii)   That 11 languages would come at the first phase, viz: Shiyeyi, Thimbukushu, iKalanga, Shekgalagari, Chiikuhane (Subiya), isiNdebele, Afrikaans, Naro, chiShona, OtjiHerero/OtjiMbanderu, Sign language. However, subsequent to further national consultations, two languages were added, viz, Nama and Khwedam (the four Khoe languages of the Okavango: A‖ni, Buga, |Anda and Khwe).

(viii) The use of the languages in education would enhance pedagogy and create a child friendly school.

(ix)   Importantly, the policy also specified the status of the local languages and their role in contributing to the knowledge economy and skills development at regional level.

(x)   The proposed date of implementation was January 2022 but was subsequently pushed forward to January 2023.

The lofty objectives of the draft policy would be to bring about equity and equality, and to democratize the curriculum, guarantee that no child will be left behind because of language

hurdles, and that Reception, Standard 1 and Standard 2 would benefit from mother tongue as a means of conceptualization. Enhancing pedagogy through mother tongue would allow passage from the known to unknown, creating inclusive environment for learning, and nationally, bringing about the appreciation of language and culture in the advancement towards a more inclusive economy, as expressed in Vision 2036. Other important issues would be the strengthening of the status of Setswana to become a truly national language, and that it would be enforced as compulsory in all schools, public and private. It would be introduced in tandem with these local languages to become the sole medium of instruction from Standard 3 onwards, and English would be introduced at Standard 2 (Botswana Daily News, March 2022). The draft language in education policy assumes the model developed by Chebanne and Kewagamang (2020) as modified in Table 1.

Table 1. Language use domains in Botswana
(Adapted from Chebanne & Kewagamang, 2020).

Language	Status / Language use domain	Comments
Setswana	**National**: Education; public information; national programs intended for inter-ethnic audiences	Inter-ethnic language, used in public and private information systems especially in rural areas. Compulsory for all schools (Private and public)
English	**Officia**l: Education in all levels; public information; national programmes	Limited usage but intervenes in all official domains.
Local languages (13)	**Regional**: inter-ethnic communication	Widely and vibrantly spoken in the regions where they occur. Can be used as mother tongue for ethnically different communities.
Personal (13 languages and dialects, comprising three language families)	**Family** and **personal** domains	Limited to mono-ethnic usage and limited to rural and family domains. Some of these languages will be documented and orthography developed for Phase 2 implementation).

A quick comment is that all these local languages will be introduced according to their functionality and development, and only in areas where they are predominantly spoken by children who do not speak Setswana. The remaining languages that are small and less developed, and are not readily taken up by children, will be documented and planned for future implementation, such as in teaching them as subjects as an optional choice by students. It is important to note that Setswana and English will still retain their respective status of national and official languages.

5.0 Critical issues of implementation of languages in education
5.1 Views from the public

It is imperative in discussing the draft language policy as presented in Parliament and reported in the various media to note that if implemented, it would be a big democratic lip for Botswana. As reported in the media, ethnic communities and language advocacy groups were unanimous in welcoming the draft policy. However, critical issues from the public were that it could be a political tool used for electioneering. Others felt it was a promise to the nation but like the past initiatives, it would not see the light of day. Yet others felt it was a rushed initiative and would fail. These are important views, and they need to be critically assessed.

5.2 Languages in education: Documents and hesitations

From the time the National Commission on Education of 1993 and the subsequent White Paper, the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994, when the question of mother tongue was raised, there should have been thorough planning for its introduction and implementation in education. Vision 2016 with its pillar on the right to use and enjoy one's own culture and language indicated an ideological change from homogeneity to heterogeneity, and the enjoyment of diversity. The introduction of a question on language knowledge in the 2001 census (Statistics Botswana, 2001) also demonstrated openness to consider language and culture as a right. The thinking behind the Education and Training Sector Strategy Plan confirmed that there had been a positive evolution on languages in education. ETSSP called for the use of mother tongue to enhance learning and to ensure equity in education. However, the disinterest subsequent to these pronouncements reflected hesitation, caution, or fear of the effect of introducing languages in a socio-political landscape that was used to defining unity in terms of a singular identity, a single language, and the construction of a single national culture.

5.3 Teacher training

Hitherto, there is no single institution in the country that trains teachers in pedagogical skills in other languages besides English and Setswana. The question becomes, therefore, from where will the teachers be sourced? This is a critical question or concern in view of the timelines of January 2023 proposed for the implementation of languages in education. Experiences from neighbouring countries show that it is possible for teachers with training in the languages of school to transfer their skills to teach languages that had not hitherto been used in schools. Before the discontinuation of Silozi, isiNdebele, Nama and iKalanga in 1968 (Chebanne & Nyati-Ramahobo, 2003), literacy classes were taught by local languages speakers who were already hired to teach other school subjects. Furthermore, what other countries such as Namibia are doing is to in-service teachers who speak the local languages to be literacy teachers. It remains to be seen how Botswana will do it.

5.4 Materials development

While it is understandable that the local languages in education will be introduced in the first instance as media of instruction, it is important that children also learn to read and write their mother tongues. Without that consideration the policy will not achieve much. UNESCO and UNICEF understand mother tongue education as mother tongue literacy at the formative years (UNESCO, 2005; UNICEF, 2008). It is not clear from the pronouncements of the Ministry of Basic

Education how time slots will be created to allow for acquisition of literacy skills in mother tongue, and how the materials that are reported to be in development would be use for literacy acquisition.

5.5 Geographical overlaps of languages

Westphal (1962) and Vossen (1988), among others, have reported that certain regions of Botswana such as the Ngamiland have complex multilingualism situations with high occurrence of language diversity due to multi-ethnic populations (e.g. Shiyeyi, Setawana, OtjiHerero, ThiMbukushu, Nambya, Chiikuhane, N/ai, !Xun, Shetjhauba). Demographic proportions of these languages are such that no one language is a main local language. This fact is important and can present a real implementation challenge. Vossen (1988) studied how the question of mother tongue and ethnic affiliation became intricate: Yeyi ethnic people who were in the majority in the district spoke languages that were not their own. ThiMbukushu was spoken by more people in the district although it is ethnically a minority. Though Nambya, Herero and Ikuhane maintained their languages, they were so few and dispersed that today they would not present a sizeable number to justify their languages used as medium of instruction in Ngamiland. Only Herero, Mbukushu, and Bugakhwe were found in compact localities, and these would allow for medium of instruction in schools. Ngamiland presents challenges with regard to the definition of mother tongue, as children speak languages of their environment than the ethnic language of their parents.

Batibo (2015 a&b) argued that some languages in this category were dying, and/or moribund, and that although the ethnic identity persisted, languages were not spoken. He showed that Khoisan minority groups have tended to take up languages of the immediate surrounding such as Setswana, and in other places Shekgalagari or iKalanga. The problems and challenges are that if consideration was made to have these languages in education, how are they going to be introduced when the children do not speak to them? Medium of instruction is valid where children use a language, because importantly, this medium of instruction does not mean teaching a language as a subject (UNESCO, 2005). It is not known how these issues would be handled to ensure smooth implementation.

5.7 Resources constraints

Resource constraints that could be raised are those relating to finances and the budgetary challenges that the Ministry of Finance and the Budget Speech mentioned (Botswana Daily News, March 2022). Prioritization of funds for development and shelving of some projects as also mentioned in the State of the Nation Address in 2022, among other things, is inevitable. While the Ministry of Basic Education hinted at resources and at the availability of funds for the implementation of languages in education policy, the context of financial difficulties is quite real and daunting, and the fact that there are some uncertainties about other issues related to materials and teachers, the situation could be a difficult one. The question on resources is not theoretical but practical.

6.0 Way forward

There are challenges world over with regard to multilingualism and multiculturalism in education (Chua, 2018; Kaviti, 2018), especially the question of the medium of instruction, which can be a complex, as Bagwasi (2016) argued in the case of Botswana. Batibo (2015a, b, c) and

Nyati-Ramahobo (1999) argued for proper planning for languages and appropriate capacitation for them to accede to successful use in education. In the implementation of Botswana local languages as medium of instruction from Reception to Standard 2, it is important that the plans be objective and realistic. This means that, firstly, the draft policy should now be singed into a legal instrument to ensure that all the processes are based on legal provisions. Secondly, the policy should be understood and appreciated by stakeholders, mainly teachers and education managers. Thirdly, the budget should be made available, so that those in charge of implementation are fully resourced, and all the processes are taken care of financially. Teacher training, through in-service or workshops, needs to have its specific budget. Fourthly, material development for languages should be expedited, together with teacher guides, and the curriculum blueprint on integration of local languages as media of instruction should be available or done so that they are used as part of teacher training. Fifthly, introduction of local languages in education must incorporate, in an overt manner, capacitation in literacy skill to enable learners to appreciate their languages and the value of their languages in cultural domains. Sixthly, and lastly, there is need to have proper coordination through education offices and facilitation of a dialogue between regional education officers, parents, and other ministries to ensure a smooth running of the policy. It will also be desirable that primary school examinations are removed with the introduction of languages in schools, or that fewer subjects are examined. This will create a conducive environment for the enjoyment of literacy in mother tongue.

As already mentioned, a policy, however good, has no absolute legal basis because it is not a law. There is therefore need for the language policy in education to quickly be integrated within the Acts of the country so that a legal framework for the right to education in mother tongue is fully protected. Questions of right to education and enjoyment of one's culture and language are contained in the third generation of Human Rights Charters that Vision 2036 and the SDGs wish to accomplish. Therefore, it is important that this proposed language in education policy be the vehicle to deliver some of this fundamental human rights in education and society. Importantly, this will make Botswana fulfil the requirements for viewing language as a resource or orienting the policy towards language as a resource (Ruiz, 2010). Authentic African solutions in language policy contribute to what McKinney (2020) argued as the decolonialization in language in education, and a means to transcend development challenges of modernity. Continued planning is, therefore, of critical importance (Chua, 2018).

7.0 Conclusion

This article sought to provide guidance to policy makers and implementers on the issues and challenges that way-lay the processes of the introduction of languages in education. It is hoped that the reflection clarified practical determinations on how the proposed 13 languages will be introduced in the school system. The paper argued that this introduction will require a strong policy framework which will be democratic and equitable. Some of these languages are minute demographically, and others are moribund and are thus no longer transferred to or taken up by younger generations. Yet others of these languages are poorly documented, and there are no established orthographies to cater for the development of their literacy materials. Some of the languages are highly dialectalized, with no clear indication of which variety could be used to

harmonize the orthography and develop literacy materials. The other issues related to these debates are resources such as teachers, classrooms, and materials development.

The prospect of the introduction of Botswana local languages in education is exciting and may contribute to a meaning socio-political development. As the minister has put it, it will enhance democracy, facilitate integration and inclusion, and improve pedagogy at early primary levels. The concerns and misgivings that some in the public have shown may need to be addressed by ensuring that this undertaking is implemented within the timelines and achieve all for which it is intended. As it is in other countries, languages of the people are elements of their ethnic and cultural rights when they are used in education and in the public domains. The concern so far is that the policy is still talked about as a draft, and this may slow the pace to its implementation or actualization. This may in turn not augur well for the country that wants to make a significant turnaround in the democratization of its curriculum.

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