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THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

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The recently published Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has outraged educators and parents. The report contains the shocking revelation that 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot comprehend what they read. The causes were sought - and apparently found. The scapegoats included education policy, outcomes-based education, parents' shortcomings, teachers' inability to teach children to read, teachers' inadequate education and a school environment where learners are often bullied. And it may be true that this and other factors played a part in this disappointing outcome. This is a very complex problem.

However, one of the factors that received almost no attention is mother tongue education (or the lack thereof).

For years, Dr Fernand de Varennes, a French-Canadian linguist, has stated the undeniable value of mother-tongue education, also highlighted by international research and international organisations such as the United Nations. For example, in Mali, a former French colony, research between 1984 and 2000 showed that learners who received instruction in their mother tongue had a 32% higher pass rate than those taught in French.

The World Bank said in a report on mother tongue education in 2000 that the biggest single indicator of exclusion of education is when teaching is not in the (home) language of the learners - and that's true of 50% of the world's schoolchildren. This heritage of non-productive practices (not to have mother tongue education) leads to low levels of education and high levels of dropout and repetition. Does that sound familiar?

About the cost of mother tongue education (the reason that many shoot it down), the World Bank said in 2005 that although teaching in only the official language (in our context read English) costs 8% a year less than mother tongue education, the total cost of getting a learner through a six-year cycle *without* mother tongue education, is about 27% more, mainly due to repetition and high fallout rates.

The policy of the South African Department of Basic Education is *in theory* pro-mother tongue education. In a parliamentary question in 2006, the then Minister (Kader Asmal) responded that systemic evaluation of Grades 3 and 6 confirmed international trends, that learners who receive education in their mother tongue, performed better than those taught in another language. The Department was planning to conduct a pilot project to make mother tongue education available until Grade 6. This pilot project apparently did not materialise, because today the practice is still that learners in schools - other than English and Afrikaans single medium schools - switch from mother tongue to English in Grade 3.

In fact, one of the remarks by Celeste Combrink, acting head of the centre managing the PIRLS at the University of Pretoria, was that the poor outcomes are influenced by the fact



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that Grade 4 is when the transition occurs from teaching in African languages to English teaching. But the PIRLS tests are not only conducted in English or Afrikaans, but where applicable, also in the other nine official languages. Most of the learners did better when they wrote the test in their home language. The languages in which learners performed best were English and Afrikaans - ostensibly because they did the test in their home (mother tongue) language. One of the recommendations of the report is that the teaching of reading skills and the education in pedagogical subject knowledge of teachers must be strengthened in the foundation phase - in all languages, but especially in African languages. This is a good recommendation and may begin to appreciate the value of mother tongue education.

Although mother tongue education is not the only cause of the poor performance of South African learners, it seems to be an important factor. The question is: in 23 years (and especially since 2006), why did the government not provide mother tongue education until at least Grade 6? This is in keeping with indisputable international research and lessons. Does government only pay lip service to mother tongue education?

In a recent personal conversation with one of the intellectual leaders of the ANC (who is no longer active in politics), he made the statement that mother tongue education should switch over to English sooner rather than later. On my question why, he provided this insightful answer: "If we do not all speak English and learn in English, we will never get social cohesion in South Africa." In other words: English should be the only *de facto* official language and politically, the cost of mother tongue education is unaffordable, because it could lead to increased ethnicity and could undermine the unity of the country and the ANC.

In addition to the obvious lack of logic in this argument (if one is taught in your mother tongue at school, it does not mean that you will not learn English or have command of English), the implication is that a whole generation of young people are sacrificed for the sake of a construct like "social cohesion". That the latter is important is not to be doubted. But it is clear that the ANC government has a very specific homogeneity in mind, to the detriment of cultural, linguistic and even religious diversity. It is the ultimate proof that the ANC government merely offers lip service to multilingualism and mother tongue education - to the detriment of the whole country, and especially its young people.

The main consequence of the underappreciation of mother tongue education is that we condemn a whole generation of young people to illiteracy - and thus their ability to find and seek employment. It's a moral tragedy, and a socio-economic timebomb. Professor Wayne Hugo of the University of KZN says this illiteracy is tragic and dangerous. "We will deliver a future generation of young people who will be angry and isolated". Another problem that exists is that African languages (aside from Afrikaans) have been horribly neglected in terms of textbooks, literature and learning aids. The poor PIRLS results where the tests were conducted in African languages are evidence of this. There are fortunately indications that African languages are getting more attention than in the last 15 years.



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But one of the major problems - the elephant that almost ignores everyone - is that the internationally proven value of mother tongue education, at least until Grade 6, is not taken seriously. And it is shifted aside as a result of widespread concern about a possible new rise in ethnicity and a loss of social cohesion. Hopefully, it is not too late to start following international best practice on mother tongue education - and also to realise section 29(2) of the Constitution - where practicable - for all South Africans.

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