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## **CAN MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS BECOME A REALITY?**

*By Theuns Eloff: Chairman, FW de Klerk Foundation Advisory Board*

During her recent budget speech, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, referred to President Ramaphosa's target in his State of the Nation address that every learner should be able to read with comprehension by the age of ten. She notes that the language issue is a key factor affecting reading ability and literacy, and then refers to the importance of African languages as teaching and reading languages. However, the phrase "mother tongue education" was not mentioned in her speech.

In a recent article on News24, Prof Kathleen Heugh, a South African who is currently Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of South Australia, wrote about the importance of mother tongue education. She is an expert in post-apartheid language policy in South Africa and has advised governments in more than 30 countries on the role of mother tongue, minority languages and multilingual education. She pointed out that UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) began a study in 2005 of educational language in policies in 25 countries. By mid-2006, they reported to ministers of education that for a learner to study in English, French or Portuguese, a minimum of six years of mother tongue education is needed, as well as simultaneous good education in English, French or Portuguese. Under less than optimal conditions and with fewer good resources (as in South Africa and Ethiopia), the minimum period for mother-tongue education and good English becomes eight years.

In South Africa, it is the policy that in non-Afrikaans schools there will be three years of mother tongue education before switching to English. But the quality of English teaching is very poor during those three years and beyond, with teachers who cannot speak it well or teach properly in English - especially in rural schools. The result is that in most rural areas where black children attend school, the cognitive development that comes with mother tongue education is not present. This is one of the reasons why so many learners cannot read with comprehension by the age of ten. Some experts also believe that lack of mother tongue education in the first six years is also the cause of South Africa's poor math performance.

It is therefore incomprehensible that ANC politicians do not take international research on mother tongue education seriously. It is inexcusable that they, through their own prejudices about language, harm and even destroy the futures of millions of children, educationally and vocationally.

In the black community (as opposed to ANC circles), there are signs that leaders are beginning to recognise the importance of mother tongue education. In academic circles, there are several linguists who are publicly questioning the government's language policy. In November 2016, an international conference on mother tongue education was held in Pretoria. In September 2017 and February 2018, the CRL Rights Commission held two conferences in which the importance of multilingualism, among others in promoting social cohesion, was



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discussed. Following a workshop by interested parties in 2018, it was decided that a "Multilingualism Advocacy Forum" should be established to promote mother tongue education and to investigate the broader implementation thereof. An *ad hoc* committee for this has already set to work.

There seem to be three main reasons why ANC policy treats mother tongue education so neglectfully and at most, pays it lip service. The first is a fear that it could lead to "balkanisation", where more emphasis is placed on ethnicity than on a broad South African-ness - something apartheid contemplated. The second is that the political elite in the ANC (but also in other parties) are mostly urbanised and have a command of English, consider it the language of aspiration and view it as an instrument of integration and nation building. In their own policy documents, the ANC is positive about acculturation, and the building of one new English-speaking nation. The third reason has to do with Afrikaans as a language of instruction. Since the ANC government has not done enough to build new schools for a fast-growing, especially urban, population, every year there is a lack of access to education for many black learners. Well-equipped and managed Afrikaans schools are regarded as a prime target to achieve this access - though most of them already overcrowded (as proved by the Overvaal case). Afrikaans schools are further regarded (by politicians like Panyasa Lesufi) as a remnant of apartheid, that must be dispensed with at all costs.

Prof Heugh concluded her News24 article by saying that the new onslaught against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction is not helpful. It only reduces opportunities for children to learn in a language they know best. It takes the country away from the multilingualism that learners need to prepare for the future. The only learners who can benefit under these circumstances are those who have English as their home language and the children of the political elite - and that does not promote equality. It is significant that these words come from an English-speaking South African - but someone who is familiar with international research in the field of mother tongue education.

It is against this backdrop - and the pressure against public schools where Afrikaans is used as a language of instruction - that the MOS Initiative was recently launched. In Afrikaans, "MOS" stands for "Mother Tongue in Independent Schools" and is the product of a long process in which all the organisations involved in Afrikaans education have participated. The word "mos" also refers to the plant that grows almost everywhere and needs little moisture to thrive; and then also to the unique Afrikaans word used as a confirmation of the obvious: it is "mos" beautiful!

The MOS Initiative is a private company that will create a network of sustainable, independent Afrikaans schools that will operate across South Africa - open to all, community-oriented, affordable and with high standards and innovative learning. It will offer prospective investors the prospect of a good return on their capital, while it will also provide dividends for Afrikaans education.

The MOS Initiative will not undermine public schools that currently use Afrikaans as a language of instruction, but rather focus on areas where there are no (longer) Afrikaans



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schools and where there is still a need for them. Affordability and accessibility will be key issues that need to be addressed. And to ensure that Afrikaans-speaking learners are well equipped for their future - in line with international research - consideration is being given to making English first language and another African language compulsory in MOS schools. It will promote multilingualism and equip learners to play an active role in the broader South African community. Afrikaans learners who are fluent in another African language and can speak fluently will also help overcome the stigma of Afrikaans schools being racist.

It will take a lot of time and effort for this ambitious project to succeed, but there is consensus among leaders in the Afrikaans education arena of the urgency to make a start now.

Against the backdrop of what is stated above, it is important to realise that the MOS Initiative will pave the way to later possibly offer mother tongue education in independent schools for other indigenous languages. As with Afrikaans, there is evidence to support that the international minimum of eight years of mother tongue education does not have to be the maximum. There is no reason why, within the context mentioned above, that mother tongue education cannot extend into matric and even to the end of a first degree at university.

The phenomenon of independent (“private”) schools is not as strange in the black community (and in fact in the rest of Africa) as it is for Afrikaans-speakers. Over the past five years, dozens of independent schools have sprung up around Johannesburg, providing parents with a quality alternative to the failed public education systems. And although these schools offer education in English, there is room for mother-tongue education in schools that are not Afrikaans. And because the government is apparently not going to make it happen, the private sector will (again) have to step in. In so doing, South Africans are merely claiming the rights guaranteed by section 29 of our Constitution. International research undeniably proves that mother tongue education is essential for every learner to become a full and functional citizen - that's “mos” the truth!

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