

Mother Tongues as Media of Instruction: The Case of Kenya

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Abstract

This paper advances the argument that using mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning in Kenya is the best option there is for the children's education. The use of mother tongues as the media of instruction has been a vexing issue in Kenya. Besides the indigenous languages or mother tongues, the country also has English, which was inherited from the colonial past. This ex-colonial language (English) is associated with the professions, white-collar jobs, upward mobility, power and material prosperity. On the other hand, mother tongues are seen to signify pre-modernity and lack of sophistication. Kiswahili, a mother tongue for some Kenyans and also Kenya's national and official language (alongside English), is placed in-between English and the other mother tongues in a three-tier language prestige hierarchy. Since English has the highest prestige among the languages spoken in the country, many parents want their children to learn the language well. Consequently, a policy providing for the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning has attracted reactions ranging from scepticism, at best, to hostility, at the very worst, not only from parents but also from other members of society who consider them as being of little value. There is no doubt that there are challenges standing on the way of the efforts to implement such a policy but it is still reasonable to submit that the challenges are surmountable.