

Teachers' Views and Practice: The Place of the Mother Tongue in the Implementation of the Kenyan Language-in-education Policy

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Abstract

This paper reports on an ethnographic study which investigated the varied responses of teachers to both the Kenyan language-in-education policy (Mother Tongue as subject and as medium of instruction) and the process by which it is being implemented in Sabaot, one of the fifty indigenous languages in Kenya. The Sabaot people who live on Mt Elgon are in a similar predicament to minority groups elsewhere as their language suffers the effect of colonisation and faces the pressure of globalisation. In an effort to 'reverse language shift' (Fishman, 1991) and maintain the language (Pauwels, 2004), while at the same time raise education standards (Cummins, 2000), the policy was recently implemented in a number of Sabaot schools. The study was conducted in one of these schools during a time of significant unrest on Mt Elgon. Data was collected over a seven month period and consisted of analysing documents, observing and interviewing in one school. The findings show that the policy is only partially implemented as the mother tongue is only used to a small extent before students are transitioned to Kiswahili, the national language, and English, the official language. Constraints affecting policy implementation are examined as are the underlying reasons teachers are motivated to implement the policy. Implications for the Kenyan context, which may also be relevant to other multilingual contexts, are discussed

Keywords: teachers views, teachers practice, mother tongue implementation, Kenyan-language-in-education policy

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