

Kenyan Curriculum Reforms and Mother Tongue Education: Issues, Challenges and Implementation Strategies

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Abstract

The implementation of mother tongue education (MTE) remains a challenge across Africa and Kenya in particular. This continues despite the fact that the maintenance and development of language and literacy skills in one's mother tongue (MT) plays a critical role in facilitating second language (L2) learning, developing additive bilingualism and continuous cognitive development. Consequently, Kenya has had several education commissions in both colonial and post-colonial periods, which, together with the Constitution of Kenya have had a bearing on the language policy. However, the language policy has not been supported by a careful implementation strategy for MTE. Presently, Kenya is undergoing curriculum reforms from the ongoing 8-4-4 system, where learners study for eight years of basic (primary) education, four years of secondary education and four years of university education to a new system of 2-6-3-3-3. The 2-6-3-3-3 system comprises two years of pre-primary, six years of primary (three years lower and three years upper primary), six years of secondary (three years junior and three years senior) and three years of university education. While English has been given preponderant attention in the new curriculum, the role of MT has also been re-emphasized because it has not received as much attention as it deserves in the past. It is against this background and the ongoing debates on MTE that this paper attempts to examine the challenges that are likely to impede the implementation of MTE in the 2-6-3-3-3 curriculum reforms as outlined in the education policy. The paper further suggests some implementation strategies to avert the challenges. The study was conducted in Bungoma County in Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to identify key respondents from 10 schools which were used to pilot the new curriculum. The respondents included Grade 3 teachers, head teachers and quality assurance officers (QASOs). Focus group discussions (FGDs), unstructured interviews and document analysis were used to elicit data. The findings revealed that the implementation of MTE policy is likely to flop if it is not supported by careful implementation strategies that take care of teacher training, the production of teaching/learning materials and attempts to change the attitudes of parents towards indigenous languages. The paper advocates for implementation strategies such as greater resource allocation, teacher training on L1 methodologies, a change in attitude with regard to MTE, political will and clearer policy objectives to achieve the aims of an effective MTE system in Kenya.

Keywords: competency-based curriculum; implementation; mother tongue education policy; Kenya

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