

“They Do Not Know Much, but Then, You Have to Cover the Syllabus”: The Quality Imperative – A Dilemma for Teachers in Early Grade Multilingual Classrooms in Kenyan Primary Schools

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Abstract

The centrality of language in any education system cannot be overemphasized. Wolff (2006:50) sums this up by stating that “language is not everything in education, but without language everything is nothing in education”. As such, language mediates knowledge acquisition even when the content of education is not language. The question then arises as to which language is best to use in education. There are no straight answers to this, as education in most countries of the world takes place in multilingual contexts. In Kenya, the language-in-education policy supports the use of the learner’s first language as the language of instruction in the first three years of school. The policy, however, remains largely unimplemented for various reasons, among them the multiplicity of first languages that may be represented in one classroom. This article reports on some outcomes of a recently completed doctoral study that investigated teachers’ attitudes, skills and strategies in their management of linguistic diversity in multilingual classrooms. Specifically, the article reports on what informs teachers’ language choices and prioritizations beyond the policy rhetoric. The study disclosed that the language of examinations and textbooks, the pressure to cover the syllabus, and individual teachers’ language repertoires primarily determine which languages are prioritized and how they are used. The findings suggest that quality education for all may remain elusive in multilingual contexts until the language question has been adequately addressed.

Keywords: language choices, multilingual classrooms, language of instruction, language-in education policy

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