



Proceeding Paper

Indigenous Multilingual Education in Vhembe, South Africa [†]

Marc D. Patterson * and Samantha Gardyne

Institute of Development Studies, School of People, Environment & Planning,
Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University, Tennent Drive, Papaioea 4472, Aotearoa New Zealand;
s.gardyne@massey.ac.nz

* Correspondence: pattersonmarc@gmail.com

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Abstract: This research with primary school teachers in the Vhembe district of South Africa investigated the role of Tshivenda as an Indigenous language of instruction in developing learners' capabilities in education. Interviews with 12 teachers found numerous ways in which teachers drew on their learners' funds of knowledge in Tshivenda to connect with their culture, family and community, ensure their emotional well-being and to explain abstract concepts in an inclusive way while enhancing engagement in learning. These findings are significant for addressing Sustainable Development Goal 4 for Quality Education in Vhembe and ensuring Indigenous and minority language children have equitable access to their learning.

Keywords: education; multilingual; mother-tongue; indigenous



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1. Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 for Quality Education is challenged by estimates that up to 40% of the world's children do not have the option to learn in their own language [1]. The denial of Indigenous language rights has been part of larger structures of colonization, assimilation, oppression and underdevelopment that the UN's SDG indicators have struggled to capture [2]. This paper therefore links inclusive education in target 4.5 [3] to Indigenous rights of self-determination in schooling under UNDRIP [4]. Leading the way in re-claiming these rights, South Africa made an Indigenous language spoken by around 2% of South Africans one of 11 official languages in its 1996 democratic constitution [5]. With this commitment, Tshivenda continues to be chosen as the language of learning and teaching by School Governing Bodies (SGBs), particularly in Vhembe district where the language remains strong.

However, after Tshivenda immersion through the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3), the South African curriculum (CAPS) switches to English as the language of instruction from Grade 4 onwards, and Tshivenda is confined to its own siloed subject [6]. While the aim is to create equal access to English as the country's first additional language, this research asks whether this policy supports equitable access to quality education across subject areas. This study explored educators' perceptions of the role of Tshivenda language instruction in developing the capabilities of primary school learners in Vhembe, South Africa [7,8].

2. Literature Review

SDG target 4.1 calls for "free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education" [3] (p. 35) that feeds into targets 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4, progressing from early childhood into vocational and tertiary education. As such, primary school education lays the foundation for further learning as children build on their early learning skills [7–9]. Considering the SDGs' call for equity in education, this research asks whether children who grow up

speaking Tshivenda have inclusive, equitable access to their education [9]. Robeyns (2017) notes that it is important to identify specific conversion factors which can differ between groups and individuals, to see if a child is able to convert their resources, such as textbooks, into the quality education outcomes schools are aiming for [10,11].

Personal conversion factors include the language(s) one speaks and comprehends. The language repertoire that a child acquires at home and in the community even before entering school is a core resource to communicate and engage them in learning [12,13]. This principle is the basis of South Africa's Foundation Phase language policy [14,15], as well as the latest teaching resources including the UNESCO teacher's guide to reading instruction [16]. Children's home language is rich with their learning from interactions with family and their environment and this is embedded with "knowledge about language and of local beliefs, culture, environment, history, livelihoods, safety and well-being" [16] (p. 14), what Luis Moll (1992) calls 'funds of knowledge' that form an important foundation for teachers to build on for further learning about language and the world [17].

The personal conversion factor of a learners' dynamic English fluency is significant because if the language of instruction is not targeted at an appropriate level, then learners will become frustrated and stop engaging in class [18]. In addition, due to the importance of home language foundation, transitioning to a second language of instruction too early in an 'early exit' model can confuse learners' cognitive development [19]. English submersion teaching is therefore considered poor quality compared to multilingual approaches that include learners' home language [15,17,20,21].

Our language development through childhood is heavily influenced by social conversion factors because the language(s) we speak with friends and family at home and in the community extend our emotional connections to learning. Back et al.'s (2020) work with Park's (2014) notion of 'emotional scaffolding' takes into account emerging multilingual learners' anxiety in engaging in a second language [22]. Back et al. (2020) found strong evidence for alleviating learner anxiety in the classroom and increased interaction in discussions by allowing learners to engage new language and material using their home language through translanguaging techniques. Home language interactions supported learner socialization in the classroom; encouraged them to take ownership of their learning; allowed teachers to better understand and respond to the emotions of their learners; and helped set a cognitive stability that was positive for learning outcomes [22].

Translanguaging involves strategies that are "used purposefully to encourage students to work through a normal process of language-learning, mixing, switching, interpreting, and translating towards being able to use two or more languages" [17] (p.167). The concept builds on the latest research into language of instruction that finds the judicious use of home language with target language is not only successful in second language learning, but also creates a more emotionally grounded learning environment for students [15,22–24]. In addition, translanguaging recognizes the value of exploratory talk where learners translate between their home language and English, demonstrating the cognitive process of bilingualism for the class. Makalela (2016) regards this communicative process, that sees harmony across languages, as consistent with African philosophy, proposing work with ubuntu translanguaging where "one rediscovers a plural vision of interdependence, fluid, and overlapping and discursive system that matches ways of communicating where the use of one language is incomplete without the other" [25] (p. 9). This ethic is taken to heart with the inclusion of Tshivenda terminology in the findings of this study.

3. Methodology

The qualitative approach (Scheyvens ed. 2014) used in this research sought to build an understanding of language capabilities in Vhembe in an inductive manner through interviews with 12 teachers who worked at schools across the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa [26]. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic preventing international travel, the remote fieldwork relied on relationships with colleagues and educators during the lead author's 3 years teaching in Vhembe and the substantive involvement of Mutshinyani

Nesane who acted as a research assistant and cultural advisor. We secured funding for Mutshinyani through the Massey University Graduate Research Fund. Mutshinyani provided invaluable experience and assistance in the processes of considering ethical approaches towards how we sought informed consent; recruited participants; conducted interviews; used language in our interviews; transcribed, translated and coded interviews; and finally, how we followed up with participants to confirm findings.

The 12 teachers were identified through a snowball selection technique [27]. Interviews were conducted remotely by mobile phone, establishing contact with teachers through an instant messaging app, setting up an interview time and then calling their phone directly so there would be no costs to the participants. We used an online to landline service to dial South African numbers. Recordings of the interviews were kept on a password protected device with names and identifying details changed for anonymity.

One advantage to conducting interviews during the first COVID-19 national lockdown period was that teachers were at home and seeking outside connections during the global pandemic. Due to the additional time available, participants were eager to talk and share their ideas regarding the study. The drawbacks to digital engagement were the lack of in-person catch-ups that can be very strong in relationship building, and the loss of subtle visual cues and body language that can be important in communication [28].

Following the first round of interviews, participants were asked to engage in follow up conversations so that they could be involved in confirming statements, reflecting on their meaning and giving feedback on the results [29]. This meant that once transcripts were written up, they were shared and discussed with the teachers. During this process, we shared our interpretation of these results and asked for feedback [30]. The teachers were happy to see their own statements as quotes, and backed their inclusion in this work.

The interview questions and their subsequent analysis built on Sen (1999) and Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach [7,8], and the methodologies of Yap & Yu (2016) and Walker (2009) [31,32]. The interviews thereby sought to establish (a) the valued capabilities for primary education in Vhembe, South Africa, (b) conversion factors that determined learners' success and challenges in attaining these capabilities, and (c) how Tshivenda fit into these wider aims towards quality education [31,32].

4. Findings

This section begins with teachers' discussion about those skills and values that are important for learners to acquire in their primary schools. The successes and challenges to teaching these centered around the diversity of learners in the classroom, the language learners understood, the influence of their parents and family life, the emotions children felt at school, their language attitudes, and providing practical activities for learners to connect to their lessons. Discussions with teachers found that even as learners' English abilities increased, Tshivenda retained a key role in their classrooms because it was the one that all learners understood well; that connected to their relationships with parents and grandparents; that supported emotional well-being; and finally, as the language that allowed teachers to communicate abstract concepts through the language of learners' cultural and environmental context.

Teachers in Vhembe encountered various successes and challenges in helping their learners attain valued capabilities in their education. While learners differed in preferences and ability, including special needs and learners who picked up English quickly, Tshivenda remained the language of inclusion that all learners were able to understand. By using their learners' home language in the classroom, teachers were able to ensure they remained grounded in knowledge about their culture and themselves, connecting to their relationships with their parents and grandparents at home, bringing in emotions of *u vhofolowa* (to feel free), *u difulufhela* (to feel confident), *u takalela* (to enjoy), and *u dihudza* (to be proud) at school.

Tshivenda was valued as a core part of a learners' life and without knowledge of their own culture and origins their learners would be lost, in a figurative and psychological sense.

Tshivenda is valued in and of itself as the source of culture and identity. The intrinsic nature of Tshivenda to both the teachers and their learners is also expressed in the consequences of its loss: *“If you take a language from a person, aaiih, you have taken everything [from] that person, because a language makes us who we are”* (VB).

“Our learners must learn their language, their mother-tongue... you know your culture through your language...they can be able to learn where they come from, where is their home, through their language Tshivenda” (VI). One of the ways that families pass on this knowledge is by u dzedza, to tell stories by the cooking fire, such as the lungano folktales that contain lessons for children that are centered in their Venda culture.

More than learning about an abstract past, the language is relevant to learners everyday as Tshivenda is central to *vhudavidzani havhudi*, good communication in learners' living relationships with their family at home and elders in the community: *“if the learners don't know their home language I think they will lose communication with their parents or their grandmother at home”* (VG). It is also the language of clearest communication. As one teacher said quite simply: *“It is their mother-tongue, they know that they can understand everything”* (VH).

Tshivenda is therefore valued as a core part of a learners' life, how they understand themselves, their origins and their culture through their relationships with their parents, grandparents and teachers at school. In addition, Tshivenda tied together many of the emotional threads in a learner's life, between their family, culture, creativity, literacy and motivation in class: *“If the learners are learning their language neh, and if they also learn their culture, they will be happy, even when they [are] dancing and singing, they show that they are understanding what they are dancing for. They even, those older ones, they can even teach the younger ones. Even when we go to the class, if I did the learners to do a composition about one of your cultural dances, it is simple for them to write because they learn from practice. It is simple. For us, that dance, it goes further”* (VE).

This example shows the rich connections between emotion, culture and *u shuma rothe*, 'working together' across the age groups, and learning. By providing opportunities for learners to engage not only in Tshivenda but in Venda forms of learning through *u tshina*, dance, teachers encourage them *u difulufhela*—to be confident in themselves, where they come from and their abilities. The singing and dancing brought learners together *u dzhenelela*, to participate, and *u shuma rothe*, work together, and teachers spoke of how activating these connections allowed learners *u tevhela*, to follow and succeed in their learning. Note that many of the words teachers used to describe their learners' emotions working in Tshivenda such as *u difulufhela* (to be confident), *u takalela* (to enjoy) and *u tevhela* (to follow and succeed) are conjugated in the relational tense (-ela) suggesting that these were not outcomes learners gained individually but in relation to how their class interacted together collectively. Teachers also identified that a common strength in communication between learners was their command of Tshivenda language. Tshivenda therefore played an important role in the inclusiveness of the classroom. *“You can only find one learner [who is struggling with Tshivenda]. And it is not hard to help that one, really it is his or her own mother tongue so really it's easy to support that learner”* (VK).

When discussing the successes and challenges they face in the classroom, teachers created a strong theme around the diversity of their learners. Learners differed in their abilities, some learning faster and others more slowly, some with special needs, some learners received more support from home and all of their learners differed in their aspirations and what they were interested in learning about: *“Learners are not the same, hence each and every learner must learn in their pace”* (VA).

As the language that learners understood, Tshivenda was a medium through which learners were able to learn new concepts. This was dynamic as learners became proficient in their new subjects, with each learner at their own pace, and Tshivenda retained a role in connecting to learners' prior knowledge across the subjects: *“When we start teaching them . . . something new, if they start from familiar territory then after that you can introduce new things.*

Like they say we learn things starting simple to the more complex. So starting from what you know it's ok, but if you start where you don't know you can become lost forever" (VH).

Understanding that some learners move faster than others, the language of learning and teaching also affects how different learners engage content. VF makes the point that Tshivenda is a more inclusive language in her classroom: *"They participate more than when we do that in English. Because when we do that in English, [only] the learners [who] will understand it well are the ones who will participate and ask questions. But the whole class will participate if we translate in Tshivenda because they understand it" (VF).*

Importantly, the teachers also noted that not only were more learners participating in class, but that learners also demonstrated higher levels of critical thinking when they engaged in Tshivenda: *"In Tshivenda it's where you can hear exactly what they want to say and even their questions are well structured" (VH). "It's that they think in Tshivenda. They participate intellectually mostly in Tshivenda" (VD).*

This critical engagement that teachers described with children in Tshivenda would seem to be at risk with the switch to English as the language of learning and teaching in Grade 4. However, this research found that teachers were pragmatic and they continued to provide opportunities for learners to understand and engage in subjects in the higher grades in their home language by code-switching between English and Tshivenda. Code-switching was an exercise that teachers described as helping learners understand more about what they were learning through Tshivenda, while also extending their language into English: *"Yeah Tshivenda helps a lot because when I teach I have to code switch to Tshivenda . . . and tell them some terms using our mother tongue so that they will grasp the topic very well. If I give them using the mother tongue it becomes easier for the learners to understand what is going on rather than using English only" (VI).*

Teachers' need to switch to English was driven by policy, *"Because they will be writing in English, the language of instruction is English" (VF).* Pedagogically, VD insists that despite the policy *"You must not throw away Tshivenda because you could throw away the whole content, trying to follow English" (VD).* Still, teachers demonstrated a great amount of togetherness to support the Department of Basic Education (DBE) policy and learners' transition to English. The exception was VA, the only retired teacher, who challenged CAPS' uniform progression. Many quoted the DBE workshops where the current advice is that if teachers must code-switch, they should retain English dominance with 60/40 English/Tshivenda: *"When we go for workshops, they will tell us that when we code-switch we mustn't dwell much on the mother-tongue" (VH).* Across this group of teachers, the practice of code-switching varied widely and this was connected to language attitudes. The main factor in whether teachers were comfortable in their code-switching appeared to be the belief, enforced by DBE policy, that English is the language of progress, modernity and knowledge. This view is consistent with the large body of literature that colonial notions of the superiority of English as a language of education allow it to dominate, obscuring post-colonial understandings of Indigenous contributions to sustainable development and preventing teachers from realizing the full benefits of quality multilingual education [12,15,21,33,34].

In summary, the thematic analysis of teacher interviews identified a number of ways in which Tshivenda enhanced engagement with their learners. Code-switching into Tshivenda had a positive impact on learning because it was the language learners understood well, connected more closely with family, learners' emotions, and was an inclusive language that invited participation and critical thinking [35].

5. Discussion

The South African Constitution (1996) Section 6 establishes Tshivenda as an official language and provides for multilingualism and elevating the status of previously marginalized Indigenous languages [5]. The value of the capability to learn and speak Tshivenda in schools was unanimous among the teachers interviewed and was consistently backed up by the constitution of South Africa, Department of Education policies and international agreements [1,3–6].

The main aim of the Department of Education's policy for language in education is "to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education" [36]. In the same way that monolingual education instils doubt and limits our capability to learn other languages, multilingual education instils confidence in children that they can engage beyond their home language and, if and when they choose, to become proficient in other languages like English [37].

Teachers were clear that the Grades R-3 Foundation Phase did not provide enough of a language foundation for their learners in Vhembe to transition to English medium instruction in Grade 4. Most teachers' observations were consistent with the literature on multilingual education that learners must be strong in their home language for English fluency to follow [12,38]. One teacher suggested "if we code-switch to English in Grade 3 it would help" (VG), this demonstrates how, in practice, the commitment to Tshivenda-English multilingualism can be trapped in one direction and be used to justify an earlier switch to English instruction [39]. These are the power dynamics that continue to confine and minimize Indigenous languages [33,39].

All 12 teachers were clear and consistent in separate interviews that their learners must learn their home language first, and another five teachers asserted that their Tshivenda foundation strengthened learners' capability to learn other disciplines, including English. These five teachers' observations are consistent with the seminal work of Cummins on the interdependence of language proficiency [12,40,41] that the policy analysis from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) also used to justify its Foundation Phase home language policy but then inexplicably abandons in Grade 4 [42]. The Grade 4 curriculum is a critical period where learners are beginning to branch out from basic literacy and descriptive language into more abstract concepts of feelings, actions, and consequences in the world around them. Not only does an indiscriminate shift to English-only teaching material cut learners off from using this strong foundation of language, it puts them back into having to learn concrete descriptive language in English, delaying their progression into negotiating more abstract concepts in their education.

Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) is instructive in discussions on the language of instruction because it recognizes the importance of engaging learners' prior knowledge as a way of progressing learners into understanding new concepts [43]. ZPD also recognizes that the aim of education is to push learners beyond their current set of functionings, which CAPS describes as crucial for social transformation [44]. When Vygotsky's ZPD is considered in the multilingual context of this research, learners' linguistic 'aptitudes, abilities and prior knowledge' were described as predominantly being in Tshivenda, while many of the new concepts in the current curriculum are in English. The finding that teachers use Tshivenda to engage and visualize concepts before moving into English shows a dynamic understanding of languaging through learners' ZPD, engaging learners' prior knowledge and then introducing curricular concepts in English. In this way we can see that the use of Tshivenda need not trap learners in their current set of functionings, and is actually a key component in active learning. Embracing learners' linguistic dynamism like this also has the potential for teachers to Translanguage between local/embedded issues in learners lives to global/abstract ideas in their education. This would move closer to fulfilling the South African curriculum's aim "that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. In this regard, the curriculum promotes knowledge in local contexts, while being sensitive to global imperatives" [44] (p.9). The local context in Vhembe is Indigenous, it is in Tshivenda, and despite the limits of the curriculum, many of these teachers embrace their learners' funds of knowledge in Tshivenda in order to take their learning further.

6. Conclusions

This research has illuminated various ways in which the capability for Indigenous Tshivenda language instruction has enhanced both the learning and well-being of children

in the classrooms of this group of teachers in Vhembe. Teachers drew on their knowledge of Tshivenda to respond to the diversity of their learners in accounts that demonstrated quality, inclusive education. In this way, teachers' code-switching practices activated familiar concepts for learners in Tshivenda and this helped them move together to more abstract concepts in English. This reflected an understanding of progression as working in learners' 'zone of proximal development' moving from the familiar to the new, with teachers underscoring the importance of: knowing your language to have the linguistic foundation to language further [12,40]; knowing your culture to value and respect other cultures [8]; and knowing yourself to have the emotional capabilities for empathy towards other people [12].

In the foundation phase, Tshivenda ensured children learned literacy, numeracy and life skills while staying connected not only with their culture and origins but also their parents and grandparents, by learning *vhudaohidzani ha vhudi*, good communication and *thonifho*, respect. Parents *u dzedza*, to tell oral histories such as the *lungano* folktales, and were able to assist creative arts curriculum with *u tshina*, to dance Venda dances such as *tshifhasi*. This active engagement in their culture allowed learners' *u dihudza*, to be proud; *u difulufhela*, to feel confident; and *u takalela*, to enjoy. Through the intermediate phase, teachers expressed how using Tshivenda allowed them to engage the full linguistic repertoire of their learners, opening up the agency for children *u vhofolowa*, to feel free; *u shuma rothe*, work together; *u dzhenelela*, to participate, and *u tevhelela*, to follow and succeed in the classroom using their home language in math, social science and natural science subjects. This dynamic reflected active learning to the extent that "*they participate intellectually mostly in Tshivenda*" (VD). However, teachers' use of Tshivenda continues to be marginalised by outdated colonial models of English submersion teaching.

Emerging research in South Africa on ubuntu translanguaging pedagogies promises to build on teachers' instincts that they need to give equitable access to the valued capabilities of both Tshivenda and English in the classroom [25]. This research shows that this type of teaching would align far better with the skills and capabilities of local Indigenous teachers who are bilingual, than an English-only curriculum that is unjustifiably suppressing active and inclusive learning through Tshivenda in schools and jeopardizing South Africa's achievement towards SDG 4 for Quality Education.

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