

## **Nyimbili Friday and Musonda Kasungo Marygrace**

### **Language Policy Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Zambian Primary Classrooms**

#### **Abstract**

This chapter brings to light the role of the classroom language use to the provision of inclusive education in the Zambian context citing debates on how this has failed and developed learner isolation from the classroom activities. Language inefficiencies have been linked to academic failure and the inability to use one of the seven languages or English has been used as a yardstick to eliminate students from the Zambian education system which is against human rights. Therefore, this chapter attempts to provide an explanation to this cause, how it can be tackled and how inclusive the education can be in future if certain policies are aligned to the changing linguistic environment in our communities. It has also provided solutions to the lapses left in the language of instruction policy and how best the education system can be provided to enable bilingual and multilingual education in education.

**Key words:** *translanguaging, linguistic inclusivity, linguistic exclusivity, language policy.*

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#### **A historical perspective of language as a tool for inclusivity and exclusivity in Zambian schools**

Many scholars (Mwanza, 2016, 2020, Mkandawire, 2020 and Nyimbili, 2021) have documented on how policy changes have provided linguistic exclusivity instead of inclusivity in the Zambian education system. On the one hand, linguistic inclusivity in this write up is the process by which the classroom language is suiting the majority of the learners from different background, and they use it as a language of play within class and outside. On the other hand, linguistic exclusivity is the process where the policy in education empowers the education actors like teachers and administrators to suppress the

learners by imposing one language used for academic purposes while the learners who fail to perform using that language are considered incapable. This results into children dropping out of school and the trend can be traced from the time the missionaries came to settle in Zambia.

### **Inclusivity education before missionaries in Zambia**

The 2022 census conducted in Zambia gives us a picture on the languages which are spoken in Zambia as follows: Bemba 33.4%, Nyanja 14.7%, Tonga 11.4%, Lozi 5.5%, Chewa 4.5%, Nsenga 2.9%, Tumbuka 2.5%, Lunda (North Western) 1.9%, Kaonde 1.8%, Lala 1.8%, Lamba 1.8%, English (official) 1.7%, Luvale 1.5%, Mambwe 1.3%, Namwanga 1.2%, Lenje 1.1%, Bisa 1%, other 9.7%, and unspecified 0.2% (Census, 2022). The language statistics confirm that our communities of today are multilingual and are not dominated by English as people think hence linguistic inclusivity should be key in the education system so as not to suppress other speakers of other languages who are also in need of education.

The education system which was practiced before the arrival of the missionaries was centred on traditional norms, culture and communal values in the different ethnic grouping where the tribes existed around Zambia (Mwanakatwe, 1968). This form of education was formal from the communal point of view while it is called informal from the western point of view. The informality brings about a notion that the education system was not relevant to the changing world and yet it was relevant for cultural development and preservation. To divide the attention and thinking of the local community where the missionaries settled, they thought of first learning the language of the community and then use it to teach the language they thought was more relevant, English, to the people. With this in mind, the communities were introduced to language mixing, code switching and translation between their language and the language of the missionaries in order for them to understand each other. It can be speculated in this context that translanguaging as a means for language learning is not a new phenomenon but has existed as long as man came into contact with other languages which are supposed to be learnt and this can be the first form of inclusivity which was recorded but not followed up.

Every language which was found in the community was important to the community and the white settlers as they were able to use it to build the initial literacy for their goal of bible translation at an opportune time. Every traditional class which existed in the ethnic communities used an inclusive language of instruction because that was the language which was known by the people. It can also be argued that the relevance of the local language which was in the community was seen to facilitate local knowledge acquisition hence it is still emphasised in the national policy in education that learners learn better in their local or mother tongue unlike a second language (MOE, 1972; 1996). This is the point which brings about inclusive education through language in the Zambian education system and yet the implementation is not as planned. Since then, we have had a monolingual policy to language of instruction and learning which was tied to the communities around the country until the missionaries brought about bilingual education which led to exclusivity implementation.

### **Exclusivity education during missionaries and colonial rule in Zambia**

Exclusive education implementation in the Zambian education system manifested through language choices which eliminated some languages and left some chosen few languages as language of instruction in the Zambian communities at the choice of the missionaries. Evidence points to the fact that prior to 1899, the first European missionaries used local languages to preach and teach in their churches and schools (Gordon, 2014). This move, at this early stage, provided an inclusive education system as the local languages in the different communities were used to their advantage, in the education system introduced by the missionaries.

Exclusivity in education provision through language education was first eminent when the missionaries introduced English as a language of instruction in schools due to their hidden agenda of achieving the acquisition of the three 'Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) which was to their advantage. Banda and Mwanza (2020) argue that whereas the missionaries who had arrived before the 1800s to set up mission posts and schools depended on local languages for their work, the British South Africa Company came with

English mother tongue settlers and hunters who influenced language use in schools. Banda (2009) speculates that the settlers relied on mission schools to provide education to Africans who worked as artisans and general labourers in homes and farms, and also worked as administrative staff, for example, clerks and support staff to Europeans. This was an earlier attempt to make the schools realise the need for bilingual education system and later suppress the other language due to its unforeseen future in the community if studied.

In following this pattern, Mwanza and Banda (2020) further argued that bilingual education was prominent during the first phase which started with the partition of Africa in 1888 until 1924. The British South Africa Company (BSA) ruled what was to become Zambia from around 1890 to 1924 on behalf of Britain and they provided their own preferred education system using their language of choice. Despite the British rule not making significant changes to the language use for inclusivity purposes, they introduced a three-tier system. The first learning of initial literacy was in a local language and a regional language was used for the children whose languages were considered ‘minor’ in other communities. Then, learners could transition to using English language in the main stream upper primary school.

It should be stated here that the regional languages before independence are not as we see them today in the constitution. We had only four: Chinyanja (Chewa), Chitonga, Silozi and Ichibemba while the rest were added after independence. Linguistic exclusivity comes from far and not today. The North westerners were suppressed linguistically when they were imposed on the use of Lozi as a regional language and this was because the land was under protectorate of the Lozi king. Perhaps it was common sense that every person under the leadership of the Litunga should speak the King’s language hence they were imposed to use Lozi. However, the learning was rather difficult as the North western languages were not mutually intelligible with Silozi hence there was frustration amongst learners since the learning tool, language was not favourable to knowledge acquisition. During this period, fewer schools were built and sponsored by the colonial government as they realised that when the masses get educated, they are likely to revolt faster than when they are illiterate in their communities.

What lessons can we learn from the colonial rule? Firstly, their role was to ensure knowledge suppression through linguistic isolation. This meant that only the few people who were able to use and speak English language could have access to jobs in the white ran factories and were able to be seen through their new language. As much as this can be argued that it is enlightenment since the new language provided new opportunities, it can be regarded as a new way of creating further local language suppression as a negative linguistic attitude was slowly building amongst the speakers of local languages, after seeing that their languages were not an economic factor in the new Zambian community.

The established linguistic regions were not demarcated using empirical evidence during the missionary and colonial rule as they only did what they thought would work. From history, it is evident that the Chewa speaking community and Kingdom spread from Zambia into Malawi and Mozambique which demonstrates its linguistic influence from then to date. However, recent migration from the rural communities into towns created a multilingual community which has remained intact up to date. Therefore, migrants and their children face linguistic suppression since there has not been a relevant policy to make them have access to education using their local languages and this is the exclusivity being explained in this context.

### **Exclusivity education after independence in Zambia**

Nyimbili (2021) stated that upon the attainment of independence, the new Zambian government continued with the pre-independence education language policy of using a dominant local language as medium of instruction, as well as school subject in each region. Other scholars demonstrate that in 1965, the government decided to revise the policy and recommended that English be used as the language of instruction from first year of primary school up to university level (Ohannessian and Kashoki, 1978). This change was enacted into law in 1966 in the Education Act which guided the provision of education in Zambia. With this constitutional enactment, seven languages were then introduced as regional languages (Chitonga, Silozi, Chinyanja, Ichibemba, Luvale, KiKaonde and Lunda). As it can be seen, three languages from Northwestern province were added as part of the main languages. The criteria used can be said to be motivated by political

ambitions since North western was a region which did not have a linguistic representation at the national front. The other languages which were in these regions were to submit to the chosen languages by the government and an imposition meant that access to education was even harder than ever.

Through parliament and ministerial debate on the language of instruction in the country, naïve argument on uniting the country with regards to language use and lack of teachers to teach in local languages characterised the agenda to have English adopted as a language of instruction. To demonstrate how linguistic exclusivity was pushed in parliament, Mwanakatwe prepared a write up to protect the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in schools being the minister of education (Sekeleti, 1983). In addition, Higgs (1980:7) quoted Mwanakatwe's writing that, "*as vernacular will continue to be taught as is done at present after the first four years, there is no fear that the traditions, customs and culture of our people will be lost.*" This reduced the language of instruction use of the local language to a demeaning term of 'vernacular' which brought about inferiority complex amongst the users of the local languages.

Further, Nyimbili (2021) argues that the 1977 education policy change also had its own revelation considering the monolingual language policy the country had taken in 1966. The 1974 and 1976 drafts had recommended that the schools should use the local languages as medium of instruction to teach pupils initial literacy in the primary schools. They both recommended the use of the child's local language in the teaching of literacy. The final document of 1977 did not consider this proposal because there was insufficient literature in Zambia languages. There was need for serious language and material development if the Zambian languages were to be taught at that higher level and be used as a medium of instructions (Simwinga, 2006:61). The Zambians of today tend to wonder as to what materials did the missionaries use when they started these schools and what they used up to independence. This was another attempt which made the minority elite take advantage of the majority and allow English to suppress the use of local languages in the school system.

The effects of adopting this exclusivity policy makes the communities of today think English speaking is linked to academic excellence. Since younger and middle aged parents of today attended their education using the monolingual English language and were suppressed when they used their local language, it is evident on how they have opposed the use of local language to teach initial literacy and content from grade 1-4. This negative attitude to our local languages was a seed which was planted at independence through the declaration of English as a language of instructions and put the local languages in a tight corner where they were rendered irrelevant. Homes of young couples use English to communicate their daily needs and the children do not have any chance to speak their parents' local languages. The trend has resulted into culture loss and identity crisis amongst the children of today as they are frustrated in one way or the other because they cannot identify themselves to be among the Zambians who are supposed to be proud of themselves. I can speculate that their children's grandchildren will not even know where their roots came from, the tribe they are and the culture they will represent thereby creating confusion for the future Zambian children. Linguistic exclusivity in this context goes beyond language death but also cultural and generational identity death for a nation.

### **Efforts to bring about inclusivity education in Zambia**

Different attempts to bring back the glory in the Zambian education system through the provision of relevant education has been done by most policies (MOE, 1977; 1992; 1996). To bring about inclusivity, Mwanza (2017) added that in 1998, another turn took place. The New Break Through to Literacy programme (NBTL) started as a pilot study in Mungwi and Kasama districts of Northern Province. The study involved an experiment of using a familiar language as a medium of instruction in Grade One to teach literacy. The results showed that learners were able to read by the end of Grade One and that, the level of reading for grade two learners was equivalent to Grade Four learners who had undergone the English medium. The problem with this experiment was that there was no comparison with other Ichibemba speaking regions where the policy would be implemented like among Namwanga and Mambwe who are in the same region. It is clear that if the study was conducted in such areas there would have been moderations to bring

about better learning practices in such isolated areas and protect learners from failing to learn. Perhaps the planners had to foresee the continuous suppression of other languages and never minded controlling such variables in long term of implementation.

With such biased results, the project was scaled to all schools in Zambia under the programme titled “Primary Reading Programme (PRP)” (Manchishi and Chishimba 2014). The validity of this programme was not well planned hence it failed to yield the expected literacy results in multilingual areas whose regional language was different from the language of play (Zimba, 2007, Mubanga, 2012, Mwanza, 2012 and Lukama, 2016). The programme promoted the seven regional languages at the expense other languages hence there was still monolingual ideologies present in the curriculum since languages were kept at a distance from each other. Technically, bilingual education was taking place, and the community was becoming more multilingual complex than ever. Children could learn the regional language with difficulties and then start to use the language to learn which was not an easy task. The weak failed and remained behind with scanty literacy practices in the regional language of instruction while the strong were able to survive and continued to another grade of learning. This brought about divided learning and promoted linguistic exclusivity to a larger extent.

### **Exclusivity in inclusivity in the Zambian policy**

The challenges from the earlier policy implementation brought about new thinking of bringing on board language inclusion in the curriculum. The 2004 policy framework brought about the use of community language, zonal and regional languages. as per normal understanding, a community language is a language which is found in the community and this should be used in the school since a school is built by the community, for the community and to benefit the community. Alas, the three terms are all synonymous and mean regional language bringing no change to the earlier monolingual policies which promoted the seven regional languages. This brings the education system to still push the monolingual agenda of regional languages to continue while accelerating the death of the minor languages which are outside the regional languages.



In substantiating this claim, in 2013, the National Literacy Framework (NLF) was developed and started its implementation in the Zambian schools in 2014. Nyimbili (2021) and Mwanza (2021) state that the period of using local languages was extended to 4 years and English was supposed to take over from grade five onwards. In rationalising the policy change, Ministry of Education (2014:10) indicate that;

For many children in primary school, the language of instruction has traditionally been a different language from the one spoken in their homes. However, research shows that children learn best in their mother tongue, with a gradual transition to bilingual education.

Further, the literacy framework seemed to have had the right direction theoretically when it mentioned that:

The rationale for teaching in a local language is rooted in scientific research which supports developing a learner's language abilities – vocabulary, intrinsic knowledge of grammar rules, and use of his or her language, in order to develop reading and writing skills. The speed and ease at which a learner can do this in his own language far surpasses that at which a learner can in a foreign language (MOE, 2014:12)

This was a window for inclusivity but did not turn to be so. Mwanza (2020) who argues that literacy levels in Zambia have remained low despite various policy changes because the changes are still premised on the monolingual practices and that the learner's mother tongue is not used in the classroom learning process. Therefore, there is need to consider bilingual and multilingual education practices for improved knowledge acquisition and retention amongst learners.

### **Bilingual and multilingual pedagogy as a window for inclusivity**

Exploring the potential of bilingual pedagogical strategies must be seen as a pedagogical breakthrough in the research on how to help rural or poor urban working-class school children to acquire global, standard languages and literacies for wider communication and socio-economic flexibility. While agreeing with Canagarajah (2009) on this pedagogical suggestion, it should be pointed out that there is a diverse range of bi- and multilingual pedagogical practices in different classroom contexts. While some of these practices are pedagogically effective, some of them might be reproductive of the lack of linguistic capital of both teachers and learners.

In multilingual Zambia, different scholars have noted that translanguaging practices are some of the new practices which can help the education system provide inclusivity in the secluded education system and improve learner performance (Nyimbili and Mwanza, 2020, 2021). Linguistic inclusivity further notes that the ability and encouragement to use multiple languages in science class allows multilingual students to engage in a practice of generating and creating scientific explanations in their own voice, resulting in better academic performance (Charamba, 2013). In addition, Mkandawire, Zuilkowski, Mwansa and Manchishi (2023) revealed that teachers in multilingual classes used translanguaging, bilingual materials, remediation and reading interventions strategies to teach literacy among early graders. They further argue that parents, multilingual teachers, and bilingual learners were also used as resources in multilingual classes which was a way of encouraging multilingual practices for inclusivity in the education system.

Other scholars like Lin and Luk (2004), Cummins (2015) and Garcia (2012) have all noted that translanguaging practices are an equaliser to the education system in multilingual classrooms since they help all learners to participate in the learning process and this brings about bright faces in such classes. Therefore, it is the role of the education policies to provide the right education system which will not exclude other learners as a result of their linguistic grouping and proficiencies which are far below the natives of such languages. Through such inclusivity processes, teaching and learning will become enjoyable to the learners and teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The current primary school policies on literacy and language learning is not promoting inclusivity in its totality because it is still subjecting all learners to learn using the seven regional languages whose regions no longer remain as intact as at independence. There is need therefore to expand the regions and allow language of instruction choices to be made at community and district level because migration has taken place, and some communities are speaking other languages different from the regional language of such a region. In doing so, the current language policy is suppressing the learners in class through the imposition of a language through the constitution. Hopes are not lost, translanguaging has come to be practiced in the different classrooms as even teachers lack linguistic competencies in the regional languages which calls for classroom translanguaging, which is now common. In one way, teachers have the solution to the linguistic oppression going on but there is need to be documented in the policy so that the benefits of multilingualism practices can be appreciated in the Zambian communities.

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