



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Keynote Address by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, MP, at the Language Policy Conference held at Protea Hotel ORT Airport

27-28 July 2023

Programme Director

Deputy Minister of Basic Education: Dr Makgabo Reginah Mhaule,

Basic Education Director-General: Mr Hubert Mweli,

All Education MECs,

National Education Collaboration Trust CEO: Dr Godwin Khosa,

General Manager, Old Mutual: Ms Tabby Tsengiwe,

Dean Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Western Cape:

Prof Monwabisi Ralarala and all academics in attendance,

Organised Labour,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to the Language Policy Conference here at Protea Hotel ORT Airport.

Today, we gather with a shared vision and a common purpose - to explore the Classroom Benefits of Multilingual Teaching and Learning.

As the Minister of Basic Education, I am honoured to stand before you to share my thoughts, insights, and plans on this critical matter that lies at the heart of our basic education reform agenda.

Socrates, a Greek philosopher from Athens, aptly described education as “the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.”

This insightful quote by Socrates emphasises the importance of mother tongue instruction in education.

Instead of simply filling a student’s mind with information, education should ignite a passion for learning, foster critical thinking, and enable students to fully grasp the concepts being taught.

Mother tongue instruction serves as the foundation for this kindling of the educational flame, as it allows learners to connect with the subject matter on a deeper level, empowering them to explore and understand the world around them with greater clarity and enthusiasm.

With this concept of education in mind, educators bear the responsibility of helping the student to lead a richer and fuller life and developing his mental and spiritual qualities to the utmost.

Our gathering here today is not driven by an irrational attachment to multilingualism; rather, it is a response to a solemn call embedded within our founding Constitution and Bill of Rights.

These constitutional principles enshrine the importance of language diversity, recognising the significance of every language in our nation's tapestry.

As we delve into the discussions on language policy, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to upholding the values of our Constitution.

Our dedication should extend to ensuring the equitable recognition and preservation of all our official languages, including Sign Language, which recently was added as the 12th official language of South Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in our diverse and culturally rich nation, language is not merely a means of communication but a reflection of our identities, heritage, and shared humanity.

Embracing multilingualism in our classrooms is not just a matter of policy; it is an opportunity to empower our learners, enrich their minds, and cultivate a sense of belonging.

Throughout the years, we have implemented several language programmes within our basic educational system.

We have witnessed both successes and challenges in this endeavour.

English and Afrikaans have long served as mediums of instruction, but we recognise the importance of incorporating African languages as Languages of Learning and Teaching.

These languages hold within them a wealth of values, knowledge, and skills that can accelerate the development of our nation and continent.

One of the remarkable initiatives in our journey towards embracing multilingual education is the Eastern Cape Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Pilot Project.

Spearheaded by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE), this project is a shining example of how language can be harnessed to empower our learners and enhance their educational experience.

Since 2012, the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) has been progressively implementing the Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) strategy for Mathematics and Natural Science and Technology, starting from Grade 4.

At the core of this programme is the principle of epistemological access to the curriculum, aiming to broaden students' understanding of subject matter by teaching it in their mother tongues.

In 2017, the MTBBE programme was piloted in 72 schools in Cofimvaba and later extended to all districts in the province, with a new cohort phased in each year.

Currently, an impressive 2,015 schools across all 12 districts are actively implementing this programme.

This initiative allows learners in these schools to learn all content subjects through their home languages up to Grade 8, with Grade 9 planned for phased implementation in 2023 to complete the Senior Phase.

The results of the MTBBE project have been nothing short of remarkable.

A Grade 5 analysis reported that MTBBE learners outperformed their non-MTBBE counterparts in Mathematics (53% vs. 40%) and Natural Science and Technology (70% vs. 50%).

These findings reinforce the value of providing education in learners' mother tongues, enabling them to grasp complex concepts more effectively and excel academically.

In other words, it is akin to kindling a flame of knowledge within them rather than merely filling a vessel.

The success of the Eastern Cape Mother Tongue Bilingual Education Pilot Project has been achieved through collaborative efforts.

We thank Rhodes University, University of Fort Hare, Oxford University Press, Pearson, and Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) for their valuable support and partnership.

This pilot project serves as an inspiration and a guiding light as we embark on our journey to further promote and integrate multilingualism into our basic educational landscape.

It showcases the transformative power of embracing and nurturing our linguistic heritage, enriching the lives of our learners and fostering a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

This programme exemplifies our commitment to widening access to conceptual understanding and providing epistemological access to the curriculum.

Research worldwide affirms that learners learn best when taught in their mother tongue.

It enhances their cognitive abilities, fosters better teacher-learner relationships, and boosts their overall academic performance.

Moreover, mother tongue education helps learners maintain their linguistic heritage and identity, thereby enriching their lives and communities.

Yet, we are well aware of the challenges and resistance we may face in the journey towards fully embracing multilingualism.

That is why this conference is essential.

It aims to establish a network of support for our Language Policy Unit, explore successful multilingual pedagogical practices, document key lessons, and develop a comprehensive multilingual strategy for South Africa.

As we gather here at the Language Policy Conference, let us draw inspiration from the Eastern Cape's achievements and use this platform to explore further possibilities for multilingual education in South Africa.

Together, let us work towards a more inclusive and empowering basic education system that celebrates our diverse languages and cultures.

As we emphasise the promotion of African languages in our basic educational system, we must acknowledge the significant role played by the English language in today's interconnected world.

Our goal is not to replace English but rather to empower our learners with proficiency and pride in their mother tongues while maintaining competence in English.

Programme Director, it is evident that the English language has evolved into a global means of communication, transcending borders and cultures.

According to the British Council, approximately 1.75 billion people, a quarter of the world's population, speak English at a useful level.

It is taught in primary schools across China and serves as the working language of the entire European Union (The Guardian newspaper, international edition, Feb 2018).

Furthermore, English holds a prominent position as one of the six official languages of the United Nations, highlighting its significance in international diplomacy.

It is the most widely studied foreign language worldwide, with French coming in at a distant second (Babbel Magazine, Dylan Lyons, Jul 26, 2017).

In Africa, 54 countries are recognised by the United Nations, with 24 having English as an official language, while many others offer English as part of their educational curriculum.

In Southern Africa, English has emerged as the dominant medium of instruction (De Klerk 2002:3 et al.).

The importance of English extends beyond communication; it has become the “Lingua Franca,” supplanting French in diplomacy and German in scientific circles.

Moreover, it is pivotal in global trade (Peter Ball, Apr 19, 2017, the Heritage Portal).

In our own country, South Africa, English is the second most commonly spoken language outside the household, following isiZulu, with isiXhosa being the third-most common (Statistics South Africa’s 2017 General Household Survey).

Within our schooling system, English holds a leading position as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT).

Out of approximately 23,719 public schools in South Africa, only 2,484 schools use Afrikaans as the language of instruction in single, dual, or parallel mediums (News24, 2018-01-18).

Therefore, developing English language proficiency becomes crucial in elevating overall standards of teaching and learning.

As we navigate the complexities of our multilingual landscape, we must recognise the dual significance of promoting African languages while maintaining and enhancing English language proficiency.

Through this balanced approach, we can prepare our learners to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

Let us continue to foster a love for languages and an appreciation for our rich linguistic heritage as we equip our learners with the tools they need to succeed locally and globally.

I call upon all stakeholders – communities, businesses, the publishing industry, government departments, traditional leaders, educators, and learners– to join hands in this endeavour.

Together, we can revitalise our African languages, ensure their preservation, and position South Africa as a leader in decolonising education on the African continent.

As we engage in fruitful discussions during this conference, let us remember the wise words of our beloved former President, Nelson Mandela: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

In conclusion, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all involved in organising this conference.

I commend the National Education Collaboration Trust and the Old Mutual Foundation for their collaboration and support.

Let us seize this opportunity to embrace multilingualism as an asset, not an obstacle, and pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive, and prosperous future for all our learners.

Thank you, and I wish you all an enlightening and productive conference.