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Mother Tongue Instruction

Learners are often referred for psycho-educational assessments as a reactive measure because their scholastic progress is poor. They seem to be experiencing language barriers in spite of being instructed in their mother tongue; and worse, their academic self-esteem is at its lowest because of their awareness that they are struggling to cope. The purpose of the assessment then becomes multi-fold, but more importantly is in determining whether mother tongue development goes beyond the learner's conversational skills. It is about determining whether the learner can use mother tongue for cognitive development as an academic language i.e. for teaching and learning purposes. Drawing from case notes in private practice, I argue that choosing mother tongue instruction is not as straightforward as it might seem. I also hope to demonstrate that it can be contested whether it is in fact in the best interests of the child to pursue mother tongue instruction within the foundation phase for black learners who come from bi- and multilingual familial contexts. It is against this background that I write this paper where, in determining which mother tongue should form the language of instruction and therefore learning support and placement options for a learner, we need to determine the quality or the cognitive development level of their mother-tongue language(s).

'Wen my mother's tangs is meni'

For learners who experience barriers to learning as a result of poor language development, mother tongue instruction, particularly within the foundation phase is supposed to be a respite for them. In line with current South African legislation, these learners have the right to attend a school where the language of instruction is similar to their mother tongue. According to the 2003 UNESCO position paper "The term 'mother tongue', though widely used, may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements: the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language(s) one uses most. 'Mother tongue' may also be referred to as a 'primary' or 'first language'"¹.

As is often the case with such learners, and in fact in many South African families, these learners often come from a bi- or multilingual family environment. This makes the decision to choose which home language should be used as a medium of instruction difficult. The pressure for this decision mounts especially when the initial language chosen presents as a barrier and the learner's scholastic progress is

poor. These learners struggle to decode words, their awareness of sounds is poor [phonemic awareness and analysis]; they struggle to distinguish between similar sounds [auditory discrimination]; they struggle to associate the sound of letters with their written format [auditory visual association]; they struggle to remember sight words when reading and spelling, they struggle to spell; the sequencing of words when reading and writing is poor; and they struggle to order their thoughts and give coherent answers while speaking and discussing. They confuse the phonology from one language system to another when spelling, for instance spelling 'cat' as 'khet' because the 'kh' sound in Sepedi sounds similar to the 'c-' sound in 'cat'. The difficulties often present as attention difficulties, incomplete work, untidy work, disruptive behaviour, low motivation for learning, poor participation in group and/or class activities. At this stage the parents and teachers may refer the child for assessment.

The challenge for the Black educational psychologist is to determine the nature and cause of these difficulties through a psycho-educational assessment. This is a challenge because the history of developing psychological assessments in South Africa particularly for black people has its limitations. This is due to most psychological tests currently administered in the African languages being adapted from English tests, which are in turn adapted from western tests. While this is acknowledged and it raises questions regarding the applicability, reliability and validity of such tests, this still does not detract from the fact that decisions regarding placement and inclusion for such learners are still based on assessments of this nature, and fortunately not all the tests have this limitation. Such an assessment would entail a battery of assessment tools administered in mother tongue² including amongst others an intelligence test, an aptitude test, a visual perceptual test, a reading, spelling and writing test as well as a maths proficiency test. This discussion however is not on psychological tests, but on illustrating the complex process of isolating language barriers.

The other challenge is to determine which language is better developed in order to decide the language of instruction, determine placement and learning support interventions. The complexity of the assessment battery attests to the fact that first language on its own is not [and should not be] the only determining factor in making such decisions especially when there is more than one first language. What enables a learner to learn efficiently, even in mother tongue, also depends on their perceptual, motor, attention, emotional, social and cognitive development amongst others. The reality is that we cannot afford to assume that choosing between languages in a bi- or multi-lingual familial environment is simple and straight forward. The challenge of regaining the confidence, motivation and will after experiencing failure in the 'wrong' language is immense and cannot be overstated, in spite of how resilient children are.

The third challenge is that within South Africa's urban areas the fact that the language spoken is often a (poorer) variant of a language spoken in the rural areas, this sets the learner up for failure. Furthermore the scientific development of the African languages in South Africa remains relatively poor, their standard written forms remain in many ways archaic, limited and context-bound, and out of touch with the modern scientific world³. As further noted by Foley⁴ the official African languages are certainly able to function as media of communication at such levels as interpersonal conversation, narrative and cultural practice. As they currently exist however, the standard written forms of the languages have not yet been

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developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and therefore function as full-fledged languages of learning and teaching, even at the Foundation Phase. This weakness undermines the opportunity to develop a strong foundation in mother tongue; which in turn sets a poor foundation for developing English as a second language by grade 4 when learners switch to English as the language of instruction.

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Mother Tongue Instruction Or Not?

The answer is complicated because language develops sequentially through five stages; listening, speaking, reading, writing and finally the advanced use of language. This suggests that it is insufficient to simply choose mother tongue instruction only on the basis of the fact that a learner is able to listen and speak in mother tongue only. Yet this is how choices for placement at the inception year are often made. Even at the foundation level, learners are expected to demonstrate high-order cognitive functioning, and failure to operate at this level manifest in the learning difficulties outlined above.

This is evident in the increasing number of foundation phase referrals for scholastic assessments to black educational psychologists. Within the foundation phase, learners who experience language barriers demonstrate a combination of cognitive, emotional, visual perceptual, auditory perceptual, motor and attention difficulties as well. The cognitive difficulties appear to be localised to school only, to the extent that accusations of racism, witchcraft and discrimination are heaped at the teachers because reports from parents, grandparents and care givers attest to how 'clever' and 'smart' the child is at home.

Take the case of Karabo⁵, an 8 year old boy, currently repeating grade 1 because he struggles to read, write or spell in Sepedi – his language of instruction. At home they speak Sepedi and Setswana, while his mother's first language is Xitsonga. He lives with his paternal grandmother, younger sister and cousin in Mamelodi. They live with her because she is more able to provide for them in terms of emotional care and financial security. His grandmother reported that Karabo lived with his mother and siblings in abject poverty until she took them under her care. Although Karabo had never missed a day of school unnecessarily, he reportedly struggles with the cognitive demands of his subjects. His cousin, Anna, who is in a higher grade, usually assists him with homework, however Karabo seems to experience difficulty retaining what he has learnt because his performance at home is always better than at school. This is in spite of Karabo repeating grade 1, being taught in his mother tongue, and having a teacher who is also a first language speaker of Sepedi, and being in an A-class.

The cognitive component is essential because on the surface learners like Karabo may have attained a certain level of basic interpersonal communicative competence in their mother tongue, hence the feedback from home that they are 'smart' and 'clever'. This also implies that if their assessment at school remains largely concrete, simplified and oral, these learners appear to cope with learning in their mother tongue. However, difficulties arise when they progress to the higher grades, or when they are challenged to use their mother tongue to read, write, spell, discuss, explain etc. This is because they lack what Cummins⁶ termed cognitive academic language proficiency, and thus they are under-prepared to cope with the higher-order cognitive demands even if presented in their mother tongue.

Bloom's taxonomy indicates that higher-order thinking skills require application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It requires being able to order one's thinking, make inferences to understand the underlying meaning entailed in words, and being able to understand the humor and absurdity; make generalisations; give critiques and form counter-arguments as well as draw sound conclusions. What I am arguing is that even in mother tongue we find that the higher-order thinking skills are poorly developed because performance in the spoken aspects of the language are over-emphasised at school and at home.

During the assessment, I learnt that Karabo stutters, as a result he presented as a shy and quiet little boy. This implies that in a learning environment he would be less inclined to engage in discussions, possibly for fear of being ridiculed and victimised. His test taking behaviour was largely impulsive, he was restless and he tended to fidget a lot. This raises questions regarding his ability to exercise selective, focused and sustained attention. His problem solving strategies relied on trial and error, and was overly concrete, suggesting difficulties with abstract reasoning. He would give up when tasks became difficult and he would say that he cannot complete the task, suggesting fear of failure, low academic self-esteem and confidence.

He responded positively to encouragement and positive reinforcement; however he relied on continuous support and feedback. In response to mediation, he would only perform as far as the help he was given would take him and no further, suggesting that he required intensive support and individual attention from the teacher, which raises questions regarding whether he is likely to cope in a mainstream classroom environment. Karabo's results indicated difficulties in thinking abstractly, analysing, reasoning and generalising using higher-order thinking skills. He also indicated auditory and visual perceptual problems. The findings from the assessment confirmed that he requires language enrichment, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

However in determining whether to retain him in the current school or move him to a school that would address his learning support needs, the decision rested on whether there was a school that would have the capacity, resources and learning support practitioners that he required. His current school, though they have an A-class, could not address his needs holistically, and given that he was repeating grade 1, his performance was definitely not improving. Within Mamelodi the only other school in his home language was poorly resourced. The granny's final decision was to go against mother tongue instruction, she chose a special school in Eersterus – an English-Afrikaans bilingual school. However his admission would depend on his cognitive capacity to cope with learning in a third language.

Brain research suggests that there are certain critical stages for learning. For example, children who learn a second language when they are very young, between ages of 3 and 7, learn to speak as mother-tongue speakers. However if an individual learns a second language as an adult, s/he will find it much more difficult to learn a second language and very hard to produce phonemes or sounds of the new language⁷. What is happening is that a learner like Karabo experiences his mother tongue at a low level, and therefore struggles to use it at a higher level. Numerous factors, such as his culture, dictate that he continues to use his language for low-order thinking skills only, because arguing, criticising,

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The first day of school.

questioning, judging etc (all those high order thinking skills) would at his age be deemed disrespectful, argumentative and difficult.

Children who are truly bilingual understand and use two languages well, their mother-tongue language and the second language. In fact, the research shows that true bilingual abilities are associated with higher levels of cognitive attainment⁸. Therefore if Karabo was truly bilingual, he would have been able to cope with higher-order thinking skills presented in his mother tongue. Bilingual acquisition involves the process that builds on an underlying base for both languages. The duality of language does not hamper overall language proficiency or cognitive development for bilingual children.

However, the problem for many linguistically diverse learners is that they have Limited English Proficiency. This means that they experience difficulty understanding and using English⁹. A learner's mother-tongue language provides the foundation upon which English language skills are built. If they learn to use their mother-tongue

language effectively, they are more likely to acquire and use English appropriately. However learners who are experiencing difficulties in their mother-tongue language also experience problems in English as a second language¹⁰. Additionally, research shows that a student may acquire conversational English in six months but not have the language proficiency to support the complex demands of academic development in English. Reaching that level may take up to two or more years¹¹.

Consider taking your child for school readiness assessment while they are still in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) phase, preferably while in grade R, a year before they begin grade 1.

For Karabo, it is evident that he would require placement not only determined by language, but also determined by his cognitive development. The option of going to an Afrikaans-English medium school in Eersterus appeared more attractive to the grandmother because Karabo would receive the quality of instruction necessary to cope with higher cognitive demands. He would receive the additional English language enrichment regularly. It was still early in his scholastic development to 'start afresh' in a school that had all the resources, support and learning support practitioners that would address his learning difficulties on-site. Furthermore, this would set him up for success in grade 4 when he would have to learn in English as a medium of instruction. For this grandmother, the decision was, No. She could afford it so why not? Karabo's story represents numerous children from similar backgrounds that face the same challenge and who end up making the same decision, even when the source of the finances is a child support grant.

So now what?

Here are a few ideas:

- Consider taking your child for school readiness assessment while they are still in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) phase, preferably while in grade R, a year before they begin grade 1. School readiness assessments are also conducted within the first six months of grade 1. This will enable parents and teachers to make

informed choices about which schools to choose for their children, rather than wait for them to fail or repeat a grade. This will also highlight any learning support needs your child may require.

- Read stories written in their vernacular and talk to them about the story. Make watching TV or a trip to the supermarket interactive by asking probing questions using the 6 W's: Who; What; When; Where; Why and how. These questions encourage discussion, critical thinking, reflective thinking and reasoning. When we encourage children to think before they talk, and to explain their actions after acting, we strengthen their reasoning capacity, their sequential and successive processing, attention to detail and we build their self-confidence. We also encourage them to be active, reflective learners, who have the confidence to not just follow instructions out of fear, but out of understanding and depth. Caution: when you challenge children to think, they will challenge you to think as well, which makes both of you lifelong learners!
- When cooking, get your child to fetch the vegetables and ingredients from the cupboard using the vernacular names; if you don't know some of them, make it a family project to find out.
- Encourage your child to write 'grocery lists'. By the third term in grade 1 children learn how to read and write. Encourage them to write lists of common words in mother tongue like 'mama'; 'papa'; 'sesi' etc. Also encourage them to write lists of food, games or toys that they like. Instead of picking out your grocery items from the supermarket rows or spaza shop, tell them to find the items. They may not be fluent readers, but functional literacy develops when you recognise familiar items like being able to tell the difference between 'Aquafresh' and 'Colgate' based solely on what they've seen is being used at home.
- Introduce them to nursery rhymes and songs, and write the lyrics together
- Encourage them to give you daily news, recounting what they did during the day.
- Use parables to demonstrate or emphasise a point, and then make them tell you what they think it means, and how it relates to what is happening
- Share jokes and absurd stories with them
- Most importantly challenge them to do all this in mother tongue – not street slang – and correct them appropriately using the correct language!

NOTES

- ¹ 2003:15
- ² Although it has to be noted that psychological tests in some of the African languages are not available, such as XiTsonga, XiVenda
- ³ Foley 2007
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ Names have been changed to protect the identity of the clients
- ⁶ 2000
- ⁷ Lerner, 2003:338
- ⁸ Cummings, 1989; Hakuta, 1990 in Lerner 2003: 370
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Krashen, 1992; Ortiz, 1997
- ¹¹ Cummings, 1989; Ortiz 1997 in Lerner 2003:370

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