

## **“Straight for English”: Using school language policy to resist multilingualism**

KERRY DIXON

*School of Education, University of Witwatersrand*

KATHLEEN PEAKE

*Grayston Preparatory School*

*ABSTRACT: Despite critical literacy being identified as a desired outcome of South Africa’s new curriculum statement, in reality this does not seem to be occurring (DoE 2002, pp. 5, 11). Critical literacy is one way in which spaces of contestation and resistance can be opened up. In order to do so it is necessary to provide students with basic literacy skills. Currently in South Africa, this does not seem to be the case as many children are not reading at a minimal level. One of the reasons for this is that children have little access to mother tongue education. This article explores one of many challenges that inhibit the construction of language classes as spaces of resistance: the institutional constraints that arise from of South Africa’s National Language Policy and schools’ individual language policies. It considers the failure of the National Language in Education Policy in its calls for mother tongue instruction and a multilingual approach. Using a critical approach, the article analyses the language policy and research instrument from one desegregated Johannesburg school. The analysis shows that the status quo of previous policies remains. The hegemony of English is entrenched at the expense of other languages and a multilingual constituency. This is expressed in a discourse of deficit. The construction of a survey to elicit parent views merely gives the illusion of choice revealing the disempowerment of parents. We argue that such an analysis is crucial in understanding views on language and language teaching that are entrenched in schools. It is also important that schools are supported in the construction of policies. If schools are unable to be critical of their own language practices, then it is unlikely that classrooms will be spaces of critical contestation*

*KEYWORDS: Language policy, school language policy, English hegemony, mother tongue education, multilingualism.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Internationally concerns are being raised about the decline or crisis in literacy which has resulted in a number of reforms (Doecke & Delandshere, 2007). Whilst the research that underpins reform needs to be looked at critically, the results from a range of national and international literacy assessments of South Africa are alarming. Some recent examples demonstrate this aptly: the 1999 Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) was a cross-national study assessing Grade 4s. In the literacy component, South African children scored 48.1% (Fleisch, 2008). The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study results for 2006 reveal that out of 45 other education systems South African Grade 4s and 5s achieved the lowest score, below

the international average of 500 (Howie *et al.*, 2007). The Southern Africa Consortium for Measuring Educational Quality’s (SAMEQ II) findings for Grade 6s reveal that, in the words of Moloï and Strauss, “more than half the children in South Africa’s primary schools are not even reading at a minimal level to allow them to survive” (Fleish, 2008, p. 19).

These results have not necessarily culminated in wide-ranging reform or the introduction of close government surveillance through standardised testing as in the United States evident in the “No Child Left Behind” policy (US Department of Education, 2001). Rather, relatively speaking, South Africa still finds itself in the early stages of massive curriculum reform and implementation. 2008 will be the first year that Grade 12s write their final examinations after twelve years of schooling in an outcomes based education system. The ambitious National Curriculum opens space for a range of skills that were absent in the apartheid curricula, one of which is a recognition of the importance of critical thinking. Its third outcome, “Reading and Viewing”, requires that students “respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts” (DoE, 2002, p. 11). In acknowledging the centrality of language and its power to shape identity and knowledge, the Curriculum calls for an ability to be critical so that the relationships between “language, power and identity” are understood, and challenged “where necessary”, that culture is viewed as dynamic; and that students can resist “persuasion and positioning” in texts (DoE, 2002, p. 5).

In writing this paper we have a sense of unease about the success of the “critical” within the complex spectrum of South African education. On the one hand we finally have a curriculum that allows for critical questioning and contestation. This is already part of many teachers’ practice. They employ innovative techniques challenging their students to take on critical stances; they confront issues of social justice head on, and are sensitive to the complexities around change and diversity in a new democracy. On the other hand the results of the literacy assessments indicate and confirm what many teachers know to be true: a huge percentage of children are unable to comprehend what they are reading. If we cannot teach all South African children to read with understanding then it seems unlikely that any critical spaces will be opened in language classrooms, and where they are, they are unlikely to be used in meaningful ways. It also raises questions about the effectiveness of a social justice agenda.

We are not arguing that spaces of contestation and resistance are not used productively in South African classrooms. Neither are we implying that students need to be “fully” literate to be critical as Kamler’s (1999) and Vasquez’s (2004) work with young children shows. What we are arguing is that if we are failing to teach children to comprehend what they are reading, and reading instruction remains at the level of decoding, then critical work is unlikely to be part of the pedagogical practices of many teachers. There are several possible reasons. For teachers who have been teaching for many years this move from an acritical pedagogy to a critical pedagogy requires a major paradigm shift. The second has to do with language, more specifically the language of learning and teaching, and teachers’ abilities to communicate and teach in this language. The third has to do with the institutional culture of schools and how change is often superficial because of the presence of older practices that may be at odds with newer ways of thinking.

In questioning how spaces of resistance can be opened up, we want to take a step back from the classroom and focus on one aspect, that of school language policy, which we believe has a major impact on how children learn. Obviously this article cannot cover all the historical, political, social, and economic reasons for the situation South African education currently finds itself in, nor can it explore their interconnectedness. What it does do is to consider how languages are constructed in schools and questions how this construction and implementation has an impact on the quality of learning children receive. The National Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997) encourages mother tongue instruction, especially in the early years. The reality is that this is not necessarily happening. Many children are taught in their second, third or fourth language, English, by teachers who are not necessarily proficient in English themselves (Mda, 2004), or by mother-tongue English speakers who do “not know how to make explicit...their English (first) language competence” (May and Janks, 2004, p. 1). Schools, in conjunction with parents, are required to construct their own school language policies that are in line with the National Policy and the language and learning needs of the children who attend the school.

As will be discussed later in the article, work has been done that focuses on general reasons for the failure of National Language Policy (Heugh, 2008; Mda, 2004). There is little work examining the construction and implementation of school policies. McKay and Chick (2001) looked at National Policy in Durban schools, but did not closely examine the construction of individual school policies; De Klerk and Gough (2001) have looked at institutional language policy, but in the context of a prison in the Eastern Cape. Views about language are entrenched in policies and played out in particular ways in practice. The focus here is on a particular sector of schooling that is perceived by many black parents as a gateway to success: the ex-Model C schools. During apartheid, Model C schools were “white schools” that were well resourced and subsidised by government. When schools became desegregated, these suburban schools were perceived as providing a better quality education than township schools, and access to English. There has been a noted move of children from township schools to Model C schools (Mda, 2004; Kamwangamalu, 2003; McKinney, 2007). What has emerged in many of these schools is a socially, culturally, linguistically diverse student population which is taught and managed by a less racially diverse staff.

An ex-Model C school situated in Johannesburg is used as our case-study example. The school, which we refer to as East Primary School, constructed its language policy in 2006 after being required to do so by government. A critical analysis was done of the research instrument, a survey, the school used to construct its language policy, as well as the language policy itself. Although compliant in following government’s directive, the language policy works against multilingual education. Bourdieu’s (1991) contention that the practices of the dominant culture are reinvented and perpetuated through education can be clearly seen in the way in which the hegemony of English is entrenched in the language policy, and how Afrikaans and African languages are positioned.

In order to discuss East Primary’s language policy it is necessary to set up some of the work done on school language policies as well as the requirements of and impediments to the National Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997). We begin with a short discussion on our theoretical orientation

## **USING CRITICAL THEORY FOR LANGUAGE POLICY RESEARCH**

Tollefson (2006) notes that critical language policy is a growing area of critical applied linguistics, which includes critical literacy and critical discourse analysis. It draws on a number of theorists positing a range of theories and approaches. Although these are not necessarily aligned, the central aspect of critical theory is its focus on the ways in which social inequality is produced and perpetuated and how these inequalities can be reduced to bring about social justice.

Work within critical literacy asserts that language maintains and reproduces unequal power relations (Fairclough, 1989; Janks, 1994; Gee, 1996). Texts are not neutral but ideological and when readers accept the meanings contained in texts, these meanings become naturalised. In this way hegemonic practices are further legitimated and entrenched. Thus from Bourdieu’s (1991) perspective, the cultural and linguistic capital of dominant groups is embedded in social institutions which reproduces inequality.

In order to analyse East Primary’s language policy the work of Fairclough (1989) is drawn on. He uses the term “discourse” to refer to the “whole process of social interaction of which the text is a part” (p. 24). This consists of the text, which is a product, in this case the texts are East Primary’s survey and language policy. The text is a product of the “process of production” that the school underwent and, for us, it is the product for the “process of interpretation”. The survey especially contains very strong “traces” as to how the policy was constructed (p. 24). These processes of production and interpretation need to be read in light of the wider social conditions in which they are embedded. In other words texts are “socially generated” and “dependant on the social relations and struggles” they emerge from (p. 24). Part of these wider social conditions would be the implementation of a new curriculum and language policy in line with a new democracy with a social justice agenda. We attempt to read the language policy texts in light of their social processes of production and the conditions in which they were constructed looking for traces of these moments that reveal the ideological position of East Primary.

After a short discussion on work into school language policy, the context in which the National Language Policy (DoE, 1997) was formulated and currently exists will be discussed.

## **RESEARCH ON SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICY**

David Corson is acknowledged to be one of the initiators of research into school language policies, particularly in the context of New Zealand. He is interested in the role such policies play, how they meet the needs of diverse students, and the professional development that often accompanies policy construction. For Corson (1999), a language policy is compiled by staff, with possible input from others in the school community. All staff members assent and commit to it. In the document the “scope of operation[s]” is set out with a programme of identified “language problems” (p. 1). The policy explains the approach the school will take and builds in

provision for follow-up and revision. Policy is viewed as dynamic and something that needs to be revised as changes occur within the school context.

Corson (1999) makes an important point about the power of the policy in relation to its construction that is worth quoting:

A language policy can be a powerful discursive text that works directly in the school’s interest....[I]t can give the school legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public, it is a firm and powerful statement to outside powers detailing the school’s various commitments and its intended actions.

Nevertheless for these positive things to happen, a language policy needs to be rooted in the discourses of the school itself. It has to begin with the problems that all of those with a stake in the school and its context have identified; it has to gather information, from all relevant sources, on the nature of these problems; and it has to provide solutions – as its policy guidelines – that are negotiated with the widest community of people who have interests in the school (p. 25).

In light of points made by Bourdieu (1991) about dominant practices being perpetuated through education, and Fairclough’s (1989) contention that social context is crucial in understanding the production and reception of texts, we need to be critical of the kind of school discourses that a language policy is rooted in. Corson (1999, p. 25) is correct in calling language policies “powerful discursive texts” and in schools like ex-Model C schools, where particular apartheid discourses were entrenched, very often an authoritarian discourse that resists critical examination is still present (Dornbrack, 2008).

On a practical level, May’s (1997) research indicates that implementing school language policies is something that needs to be carefully thought through and managed. Successful implementation is complex and requires a commitment in relation to time, resources, staff buy-in and staff development. And, as Wright (2004) notes, nationally driven policies are not always implemented properly because perceptions about language are quite different from the reality. In many ways South Africa’s National Language Policy is an attempt to shift perceptions of language in national and educational contexts. But, with schools developing their own policies to meet government demands, the lessons from May’s research may not have been fully heeded, or in fact understood – thus resulting in a reality different from the policy’s vision.

## **SOUTH AFRICA’S LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY**

The seemingly progressive Language in Education Policy was published in 1997 and underpinned by the new Constitution of the previous year. In it, the global norm of multilingualism is recognised, and seen as a characteristic of all South Africans. The development of all 11 official languages was felt to foster respect and work to build a “non-racial nation” (DoE, 1997, p. 1). The additive approach to multilingualism allowed for schools to take different approaches as long as the “underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s)” (DoE, 1997, p. 1). This choice was vested with

the individual (that is, parents) but needed to be within the confines of the policy and what schools could provide.

After the 1999 elections meaningful implementation was impeded and its integration into the new curriculum was watered down. The notion of additive bilingual education became narrowed to mean an early-exit transitional model. Heugh (2008) comments that an integrated approach to multilingualism was “scuppered” under the “guise of language rights” which viewed the approach as an apartheid form of linguistic separate development, thus “[p]arallel and equal development of eleven languages, including English and Afrikaans, separately, was not only a fruitless exercise; it facilitated a default to English, whenever in doubt option” (p. 361)

In addition to what Mda (2004) refers to as a “lack of political will” on the part of government, there are a number of other factors that have impeded a real commitment to multilingual education. Some of these have to do with teacher education and training where pedagogical practices are outdated; the theoretical knowledge of language acquisition teachers have is unsound; teachers themselves are not proficient enough in the languages they teach; the issue of limited resources and materials in classrooms has not been dealt with, particularly in relation to resource sharing in large classes (Mda, 2004; Heugh, 2008). Given these huge constraints, it seems unlikely that classroom spaces will become spaces for contestation and reconstruction.

The default position of English becomes further entrenched when parents’ voices are considered. Allowing space for parents to have a say in the construction of school language policies without allowing any information to be disseminated about the cognitive benefits of learning in the mother tongue is counter-productive. Parents actively choose English as the medium of instruction for their children in the belief that the earlier children learn the language, the more proficient they will be (De Klerk, 2002). The cultural and economic power (Phillipson, 1992) of English is believed to provide social mobility and employment (De Klerk, 2002). McKinney’s (2007) work with youth in Johannesburg and Rudwick’s (2004) with Zulu youth in Umlazi indicate the ambivalences young people feel about English and African languages. For many, being seen to choose English over their mother tongue, or the loss of the mother tongue, results in exclusion from a range of social networks. This choice is made harder when the discourses of schooling which privilege English competence mark children as successful or unsuccessful from early primary school onwards (Makoe, 2007).

## **EAST PRIMARY SCHOOL**

East Primary school is an ex-Model C school located to the east of the Johannesburg city centre. Its relative proximity to the city centre attracts children from the inner city, as well as surrounding suburbs and outlying townships. This central location has meant that there are a number of immigrant children from neighbouring African countries (for example, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo) who attend the school. Currently there are few white children who attend the school. Many of the children from the suburbs are the children of domestic workers. Although the school staff is racially mixed, a disproportionate number of white staff who have taught at the school before desegregation, remain.

Although this article only examines language policy documents obtained from the school, additional data was collected as part of a research project that looked at multilingual classrooms in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3).

### **EAST PRIMARY’S LANGUAGE SURVEY AND POLICY**

If, as Corson (1999) points out, a school language policy has to include problems identified that have been gathered and negotiated by the widest community with an interest in the school, then the construction of East Primary’s policy appears to have been a consultative process. The language policy opens with a description of the procedures undergone to construct the policy: they began by referring to a previous language policy and classroom practice, which was followed by a workshop for parents and two further meetings with this group, a survey of parents and a later survey with students was conducted and finally two report-back meetings were held with the School Governing Body. The policy was constructed over a six-month period in 2006 – with the workshop beginning in February, the surveys conducted in May and June and the document completed in August of 2006.

The notion of such a document needing to be seen as dynamic and open to change (Corson, 1999) is reflected in the final section, which acknowledges that successful implementation will take time and the document will be reviewed annually. It remains to be seen whether the school is committed to long-term implementation and change, which in May’s (1997) experience is a three-year process. The policy does refer to resources and staff development. Resources mentioned for teachers are housed in a resource centre. The policy states that these materials will be updated in keeping with trends and developments as well as government guidelines. Resources for learners take the form of books in the library, which the policy states will be stocked with English, Afrikaans and Zulu books. Resources permitting, books of other languages identified in the survey will be stocked. Teachers will also be encouraged to attend courses and conferences.

Although this presents a picture of the school as committed to its policy in the long term, the school does not acknowledge how these resources, courses and conferences will be funded. Schools like this no longer receive the same “rich” subsidies from the government as they did during apartheid, and the children who attend the school are no longer middle-class children whose parents can make substantial financial contributions to school, fundraising initiatives. Unlike other countries, it is not a norm for teachers to attend conferences; neither are there strong professional organisations. This is not to say that teachers do not attend courses and conferences, or that organisations are not supported, but their impact on reviewing the policy’s implementation remains questionable

The language policy also commits the school to providing feedback to the provincial and national education departments, sharing experiences with local primary schools in the area and teacher training institutions. This commitment to “providing regular feedback” to government seems strange in light of government’s questionable commitment to its National Policy. Statements like this position the school as proactive and committed to dealing with the challenges of language in education, and

thus as buying-in to a social justice agenda. The willingness to provide regular feedback is powerful and works to legitimate the policy of the school and "works in the schools best interest" (Corson, 1999, p. 25). It also repeats, or we would argue, *mimics*, this discourse of tolerance and diversity in the National Policy through statements like:

East Primary values the diversity of language, and recognises the challenges it presents. A positive response is critical to building an ethos of mutual respect, as well as breaking down stereotypes and prejudices. All learners must feel that they and their home language are important and accepted.

In essence the use of words and phrases like "positive", "ethos of mutual respect", "breaking down stereotypes and prejudices", "important", and "accepted" are part of a politically correct discourse in post-apartheid South Africa that is attempting to move away from the divisiveness of apartheid discourses. While we are not arguing that discursive shifts in education are not needed, the school is probably highly aware that the likelihood of providing any feedback, or engaging in any dialogue on language is small. In reality, this means that the other discourses embedded in the policy that work against diversity and a multilingual position are unlikely to be challenged. These other discourses are evident in the sections outlining the choice of medium of instruction and additional languages. More interestingly the survey questions and the school's interpretation of these results set forth in the language policy cast the commitment to valuing the "diversity of language" and acceptance of home languages in doubt.

### **READING THE SILENCES: WHO WAS SURVEYED?**

In reading the documents carefully what was striking was what was *not* said. The first silence is that of the children's voices. Attached to the language policy documents is the survey sent to parents with its results. The children's survey and its results are absent. We are not claiming that this survey was not conducted but it seems that there are two absences here. One is a text that does not accompany the language policy as the parent survey does. The second is an absence in the language policy itself. There are a number of references in the policy to the parent survey, but the children's survey is not mentioned. It seems that this absence indicates the view that whilst the opinions from the adults were considered important, the children's were not.

Despite the foregrounding of parent views, the voices of the parents are not as unanimous as the policy proclaims. The survey of five questions was handed to parents who had ten days to respond. One survey response was to be returned from each family and space was allocated in the questions for parents who had more than one child in the school. East Primary received 376 responses, which constitutes a 52% response rate.

Although 52% allows a majority with which to work, the fact that 48% of parents did not return the survey is significant. It is even more significant in light of the student demographic. Sending the survey out in *English* assumes that parents can read and write, and can read and write in English. Firstly, adult illiteracy is a major problem in South Africa, and the assumption cannot be made that parents have the functional



literacy to decode a survey. Secondly, if there are growing numbers of children who come from other African countries (like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique) the literacy of these parents may not be in English. Also it is quite likely that, in the same ways that government put a policy in place without the necessary prestige planning and provision of information for schools and parents to make an informed decision, East Primary did not give parents information about language learning and the importance of this policy before asking them to complete the survey. Communication with the wider community requires substantial time, social networking and community acceptance to gather information about language practices (May, 1997). A commonsense but important distinction needs to be made – sending a document into communities is not the same as physically going into them. The survey questions and language policy need to be read in relation to these absences.

### **“CHOOSING” ENGLISH**

The choice of the language of learning and teaching in the school is English. The language policy indicates that this was the status quo and remains so, justifying it with the results from the parent survey:

The language of learning and teaching will *continue* to be English as a result of a survey indicating the preference of a majority of parents/guardians (our emphasis).

Using the “researched” evidence from the survey gives the impression of buy-in from parents whose views were taken into consideration. The construction of the sentence implies that it is on the basis of this evidence that the choice for English was made. Thus the school is positioned as taking the majority decision into account and operating in a democratic way. An analysis of the first question of the survey upon which the choice of English is based reveals a different picture.

The first question parents were asked was: “In what language or languages do you and your family communicate with your children at home?” At first glance the opening question allows for multilingual homes by giving parents the space to fill in more than one language of the home. What is striking is that the results show that the overwhelming proportion of parents (302) list English as a language of communication in the home (see Table 1 below). This answer could be interpreted to mean that English is the home language of the majority of children. This would be inconsistent with the national average where English, spoken as a home language, is in fact a minority language spoken by 8.2% of the population<sup>1</sup>. But, this perception in fact seems to be the case. In the section entitled “Resources for learners” the policy states “the library will also keep a stock of books in a range of the additional languages identified as home languages in the survey of the parents/guardians. The “traces” (Fairclough, 1989) in this sentence of how language is constructed is clear. English is the invisibly hegemonic language and all other languages are additional – to be taught and thought of in addition to English.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.southafrica.info/>.

What this question does not ask is how much time is spent speaking English and who speaks English. It also does not question whether parents have made a conscious choice to change the language of the home to English as a means of supporting their children academically. This question may also have been interpreted differently by parents. The question does not directly ask what families’ mother tongue(s) is (are). If literacy is an issue for parents then a more directly worded question may have elicited different results. Parents may have felt obliged to put English down as a way of showing that they are helping their children learn English if it is not their first language. This is not an unlikely assumption to make when teachers tell parents that in order to support their children they need to speak English at home. Speaking English also makes children’s acceptance into the culture of the school easier. This raises the issue of surveillance and the power of the school to control the linguistic practices of the home.

	GR R	GR 1	GR 2	GR 3	GR 4	GR 5	GR 6	GR 7	TOTAL
English	11	33	17	37	42	69	37	56	302
Zulu	6		9	7	11	19	6	3	61
SeSotho	2		5	10	3	10	2	4	36
SeTswana	2	3	1	2	2	5	4	6	25
Afrikaans	1	2	1	2	1	9	2	5	23
Xhosa		6		3	3	3		3	18
Portuguese		3		3		3	1	3	13
Tsonga			3	1		3			7
French						4	2		6
SePedi		2				2		1	5
Chinese			1	3				1	5
Urdu			1	1			1		3
Ndebele				2					2
Pedi/Venda				1				1	2
Swahili					1	1			2
Gujerati						2			2
Swedish						1			1
Italian								1	1
German								1	1
	22	49	38	72	63	131	55	85	

**Table 1: Results for question on languages spoken in the home**

The second question is a leading question whose answer is obvious (see Table 2). “Are you happy that English is the main language of learning and teaching at East Primary School? (Yes/No)” Such a question does not solicit real opinions but merely seeks to confirm the position of English. If parents answered that they were not happy with English they would have to answer the unspoken question, “Then why did you send your child/ren here?” Underlying all this is an assumption to do with geographical location and with it a class judgement. Most of the children who attend the school do not come from the surrounding suburbs; many of them travel into the school from townships and the inner city. If parents are unhappy, then the alternative is to go back to the township schools with their stigma of inferior education and the discomfort of explaining their return. This second question plays into the choices that parents have made and the economic burden of sending children to schools that

potentially offer a better quality education and access to a language of power. Saying no, is saying no to more than language.

	GR R	GR 1	GR 2	GR 3	GR 4	GR 5	GR 6	GR 7	TOTAL
Yes	14	31	27	50	54	94	40	65	375
No	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	15	31	27	50	54	94	40	65	376
Out of	21	81	89	91	104	123	103	106	718
	71%	38%	30%	55%	52%	76%	39%	61%	

**Table 2: Results for Question 2 on parents' happiness with English as LOLT**

If Question 2 is considered in relation to Question 1, another answer to the oddly weighted English results from Table 1 emerges. Parents may have felt that they were not in a position to answer in any other way than to express satisfaction with English. If they felt compelled to document that English was being spoken in their homes, then to express dissatisfaction with this language being used at school raises questions about why they would use a language they are unhappy with at home.

The presence of Question 3, "If you answered No to question 2, what language would you prefer?" is also completely nullified. The only parent who answered "no" had a child in Grade R and wanted Zulu. We wonder if this response would change, the longer the child attends the school. This seems to be a voice in the wilderness. Although the National Language Policy attempts to protect individual rights, if such a request were made to the school very little would happen. It is not the school's responsibility to accommodate one child. This is the responsibility of the provincial department who would recommend a school in the area where Zulu is the LOLT (DoE, 1997).

## **MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO: AFRIKAANS AND ZULU**

In assessing the construction of language in this school policy and its impact on the quality of schooling children receive, the dominant position of English is clear. The presence of English as the medium of instruction provides children with access to a language of power. Since National Policy requires the teaching of additional languages in a multilingual country it would make sense that home languages be supported as far as possible, and, in the case of East Primary, in turn support the acquisition of English. If we return to the results in Table 1 again and consider other "home languages", the following is revealed: Afrikaans is spoken in 23 homes as opposed to Zulu in 61 homes. There are more SeSotho (36) and SeTswana (25) speaking families than Afrikaans ones. Based on this, one may assume that Zulu and SeSotho would be additional languages catering to the largest linguistic groups and the two major language families, Nguni and Sotho. In East Primary's language policy Afrikaans and Zulu are additional languages.

Question 4 in the survey deals with additional languages: East Primary offers Afrikaans and Zulu as additional languages. Out of the two, which one would you prefer? The results from the fourth question seem strange and at odds with the findings from the first question (see Table 3 and Table 1). Why would 216 parents

choose Afrikaans as an additional language when only 23 families use it as a language to communicate in at home?<sup>2</sup>

	GR R	GR 1	GR 2	GR 3	GR 4	GR 5	GR 6	GR 7	TOTAL
Afrikaans	8	33	11	34	20	52	22	36	216
Zulu	7	14	12	23	27	39	17	30	169
Both			3						3
	15	47	26	57	47	91	39	66	

**Table 3: Results for Question 4: Choice of additional language: Afrikaans or Zulu**

Firstly is the problematic phrasing of this question. Question 4 begins with a declarative statement: "East Primary offers Afrikaans and Zulu as additional languages". The presence of a sentence rather than a question is a subtle reminder of how language is positioned in this school and does not really open up space for conversation. This is demonstrated by the construction of the question "which one [language] would you prefer?" The either/or construction works to further narrow parents' options. As with Question 2 the survey is set up on the basis of the existing policy rather than assessing the needs of the linguistic communities who attend the school. It is clear that the three parents who responded that they preferred both languages to be taught are in fact not catered to.

Thus the status quo continues to be entrenched in the language policy, where it states that Afrikaans is the *first additional language* and Zulu is the *second additional language*. In fact this policy is the same one that would have been in place at East Primary during apartheid. Although it was optional for white schools to teach an African language, they were offered as additional languages. The choice of Afrikaans as *first additional language* in the language policy is justified because it reflects a preference on the part of 216 parents as opposed to 169 parents in favour of Zulu. Thus Afrikaans has the dubious distinction of being the *first additional language* and Zulu, *the second additional language*.

Another interesting justification emerges in the language policy for the Afrikaans as a *first additional language*. East Primary appears to give up any agency in creating a policy that works to serve the interests of its children by "shifting" some of this decision onto local high schools:

The fact that almost all the local high schools currently only offer Afrikaans as a first additional language is also taken into account.

The power relations between high schools and primary schools are evident here as well as the silencing of the children again. The linguistic profiles of the children will not shift in their move from primary school to high school. If primary schools change their language policies to seriously deal with the linguistic and literacy needs of their students, then high schools will be forced to shift their policies. The shift may be relatively small in accommodating another or a different additional language, because it is unlikely that English will be challenged by parents who have chosen to send their

<sup>2</sup> An anomaly is noted here. There are 388 responses to this question, which matches neither with the 376 families who responded or the 718 children who attend the school.

children to English-medium primary schools. The lack of conversation and openness to change is also stark. East Primary states its commitment to talk to other primary schools, but high schools are not mentioned. Local high schools form part of the wider community Corson (1999) and May (1997) refer to. Asserting the unchanging nature of high school language policy as a restraint on East Primary's policy creates a reason for them not to adjust the existing language without having to explicitly say so.

This argument could be extended to considerations of the language policies of tertiary institutions. The majority of institutions use English or Afrikaans as the language of teaching. Afrikaans universities have also begun to offer courses in English. Students, then, need to be proficient in these languages when they enter university. The perception often is that by teaching in English, schools prepare students for the language of the university. The reluctance of the "bottom" to make changes in deference to the "top" in itself is indicative of a resistance to policies which challenge the position of English as the dominant language across educational contexts.

What Question 4 does not deal with either is the distinction between first and second additional languages (Table 3). This choice in itself is highly problematic in terms of how languages as subjects are taught. Additional languages that are examined as subjects require that students obtain competence in a language. According to East Primary's language policy, students need to have "acquired the ability to communicate" in Afrikaans by Grade 7, whilst they only need to demonstrate "a *basic* ability to communicate in the language (Zulu)" (our emphasis). Setting up Zulu as a second additional language implies a particular pedagogical approach which is at odds with students who speak Zulu (and possibly other Nguni speakers) as a home language and are competent already. This perpetuates the situation in many ex-Model C second additional language classrooms, where language proficiency is varied. Mother-tongue speakers learn with children who have some language knowledge and others with no knowledge. The pedagogy is generally appropriate for the latter only. The language policy is also careful to point out that the curriculum time allocated for teaching both languages is the same as that specified by the provincial education department. Afrikaans is only introduced in Grade 3 and Zulu in Grade 4. There is a vast difference between learning a language for communicative purposes for one or two periods a week and learning in another language.

Judging from the numbers of children in the higher grades from the responses in Table 3, it would not be impossible to have two *first additional language* classes in which children chose Zulu or Afrikaans if, as the school states, this time is already factored into the timetable. It is also interesting that the Foundation Phase parents' choice mirrors the older grades in choosing Afrikaans over Zulu, although the children have not begun to learn these languages yet.

We return to the puzzling result we began this section with: the choice of Afrikaans as an additional language (216 parents) as opposed to Zulu (169 parents) when there are far more Zulu-speaking families (61) than Afrikaans families (23). It is more puzzling still when attitudes towards Afrikaans in post-apartheid South Africa are often negative, and the status of the language is on the decline. The answer to this may lie in thinking not about the language choice but about the institutional context. Bourdieu's (1991) contention that practices of the dominant culture are reinvented and perpetuated through education may hold sway. As East Primary positions itself as

compliant to government’s initiatives, parents may be doing the same. If the school is seen as a powerful institution that “knows better” with regards to educational choices, it may seem wise not to challenge the school. This school offers opportunities for learning that other schools do not, and the trade-off may be that in order to have access to English, children will learn Afrikaans as well. After being positioned by the survey as individuals who have little to offer other than in the way of compliance, parents are unlikely to read resistantly. For white children, very little has changed in relation to their language learning and there is no need to challenge dominant practices. As a still powerful group in this country, it is these children who have consistent and sustained access to education in their mother tongue. In setting up Afrikaans and Zulu as part of the “normal” offering and limiting the choice, the dominant practice of English as the language of learning and Afrikaans as *first additional language* is, in the worlds of Bourdieu (1991), reinvented and perpetuated.

### **THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE**

The results (see Table 4) of the final question of the survey are probably the most interesting: “If you could choose any other additional language for your child to learn, what language would you choose?” This question which appears to give parents a choice of other languages for their children to learn is placed last and phrased in such a way that it is never to be a reality. The closed nature of Question 4 which offers two options (Afrikaans and Zulu as additional languages) and its placement before this question negates the choice opened up here. The use of the weak modal “could” rather than “can” further works to suggest that this choice is not really a choice. This is strengthened by the if/then construction. The subtext of the question reveals how parents are in fact positioned as having little power in the decision-making process: if parents had a choice, which they do not, what would they choose?

This answer provides far more insight into the linguistic communities than the other four questions. French is the language that parents would like their children to learn followed by SeSotho, which is not a Nguni language<sup>3</sup>. If the findings of this survey were taken seriously, then it would mean that the teaching of French would need considerable attention. It would also mean engaging with the desire of the other 48% of parents who did not return the survey in a far more sustained and systematic manner. Moreover, it would signal a commitment to the ideal of supporting children as far as possible in providing some form of mother tongue instruction. And, it would also mean challenging the Education Department on what becomes a contradictory point in the policy: the provision of mother tongue education against the desire that indigenous South African languages are learnt.

Instead of dealing with this question seriously when formulating the language policy, this finding is referred to in East Primary’s policy under a section entitled “Opportunities for learning other languages”. This section acknowledges that there was a great deal of interest expressed in children learning other languages and refers to the results captured in Table 4: “Top of the list was French, followed by SeSotho/Setswana, Portuguese, Arabic and Xhosa.” The language policy does not

---

<sup>3</sup> The Nguni languages in South Africa comprise of isiZulu, IsiXhosa, SiSwati and isiNdebele. They are for the most part mutually intelligible.

reveal the disparity between French and the other languages that the survey does. The conflation of SeSotho and Setswana is also highly problematic. It reveals a lack of understanding of the difference between SeSotho and Setswana, as well as the complex regional varieties of both these languages, where issues of standardization have not been fully resolved.

	GR R	GR 1	GR 2	GR 3	GR 4	GR 5	GR 6	GR 7	TOTAL
French	4	12	9	19	18	37	18	28	145
SeSotho	2	2	1	3	3	6	4	7	28
Portuguese		3		1	2	10	2	1	19
Arabic				1	2	5	2	2	12
SeTswana	1	2	1	1		3	1	1	10
Xhosa				2	1	3		4	10
Spanish		1		1	1	3		3	9
Tamil						3	1	2	6
German		1	1	2		1			5
Hindi	1		1		1	2			5
Sign language						2			2
Tsonga						2			2
Chinese				1					2
Urdu			1	1					2
Swedish						1			1
Italian								1	1
Telegu						1			1
Mandarin							1		1
Greek							1		1
SePedi		1							1
Finnish								1	1

**Table 4: Results for Question 5: Parents’ choices of other additional languages**

The section concludes with the sentence “Options for extra mural learning of these languages will be explored.” It is quite clear that despite parents expressing a desire for languages other than English, Afrikaans and Zulu, there is no space for additional languages in curriculum time. This draws a distinction between the languages that get “school time” as opposed to “out of school time”. The use of the present tense “will be” indicates that this issue is not a current priority. With all the additional burdens teachers face unless there is pressure from parents, exploration of this option is likely to remain in the future tense.

## **IF ENGLISH IS NOT YOUR MOTHER TONGUE?**

It is clear that English is set up as the dominant and uncontested language and that home languages other than English are “additional”. The reality is that the majority of the children at East Primary are not mother-tongue speakers of English. They are learning in a new language; as such, these children will have difficulty in speaking, listening, understanding, reading and writing and require support. In examining the language policy we were interested to see how, if home languages are not really

valued in the policy, language support, both academic and in terms of acquisition, is expressed.

The answer lies in the section of the survey dealing with Admissions. In line with government exhortations, the language policy states that children will not to be excluded from East Primary on the basis of language. This supposed position embracing linguistic equality is undermined by the “solution” presented in the language policy for children who do not speak English as their mother tongue. It is phrased thus:

Remedial classes are provided on an extra-curricular basis (non paying) for learners experiencing difficulties with the language of teaching.

The choice of the word “remedial” reveals very clearly the misconceptions about language learning. The connotations of the word remedial often serve to construct children who need “remedial” attention in a negative light. Children who attend such classes are positioned as having learning difficulties or problems. Conflating a lack of fluency in a language with other learning difficulties reveals the presence of a deficit discourse. What emerges are negative constructions of children: children who do not speak English have learning problems; the inability to speak English is a problem; the children are a problem. Naming these classes as “remedial” also indicates that home languages are not valuable linguistic capital. Makoe’s (2007) argument holds true for this school where she argues that these children are socialised into believing that “English is the natural order” and proficiency allows children a higher status (p. 68). This proficiency as “socially unequally distributed linguistic capital, plays a critical role in the ‘gate-keeping’, (re)ordering, (ex)including and social stratification that takes place in primary school classrooms” (p. 68).

## CONCLUSION

It seems clear that there are a number of factors working together in South Africa that result in English being the default language (Heugh, 2008). In saying this, the power of English cannot be underestimated, nor can its naturalised position as powerful be underrated in how teachers and parents are colonised by its power. It seems to be that teachers and parents do not have access to alternative discourses, with different bodies of knowledge about language learning, and ways of thinking and valuing languages other than English. If this is indeed the case then there is a need to provide schools with alternatives so that they, in consultation with parents can make real, informed critical choices. This also demands that children and the languages they speak are not constructed through deficit discourses.

It is also probably time to move beyond the lament of a failed national language policy and start to investigate what schools are in fact perpetuating. One way is to start to read the policies they have put in place critically. If we are going to deal with sound policy implementation then we need to look at the discourses that are “rooted” in the school (Corson, 1999) and be critical about how they position languages as superior or inferior and with this the messages that are sent to children. Accompanying this should be support for schools in constructing policies. If schools are required to write policies that require research, then they need to know how to



construct instruments in ways that do not reflect and construct bias, and reconfirm preconceived ideas.

If we do not deal with the question of language in education and mother-tongue instruction seriously and in an informed way, then the divide between the children who leave school fully literate and those who do not widens. It seems tragic that in a relatively new democracy an education that "cuts [people] off from critical consciousness of key elements within their physical or social environment" (Fairclough, 1992. p. 6) will perpetuate the legacy of limited participation in society. From the case study we have presented, it seems that if we are to open spaces of contestation and resistance for children, we need to make visible how institutional practices work to shut down these spaces.

## REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Oxford: Polity.
- Corson, D. (1999). *Language policy in school: A resource for teachers and administrators*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- de Klerk, V., & Barkhuizen, G. (2001). Language usage and attitudes in a South African prison: who calls the shots? *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 152, 97-115.
- de Klerk, V. (2002). Language issue in our schools: Whose voice counts? Part 1: The Parents Speak. *Perspectives in Education*, 20(1), 1-14.
- Department of Education. (2002). *National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Education. (1997). *Language in Education Policy*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Doecke, B., & Delandshere, G. (2007). Editorial: What counts as research in English literacy education? *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 6(3): 1-3.
- Dornbrack, J. (2008) Unpublished PhD thesis. *Reflection as a tool for managing difference in a post apartheid school*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Critical language awareness. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fleisch, B. (2008). *Primary education in crisis*. Cape Town: Juta & Co.
- Gee, J. (1993). Postmodernism and literacies. In C. Lankshear & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis and the postmodern* (pp. 271-296). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourse (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Heugh, K. (2008). Language policy and education in Southern Africa. In S. May & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education Volume 1: Language policy and political issues in education (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)* (pp. 355-367). New York: Springer.
- Howie, S., Venter, E., Van Staden, S., Zimmerman, L., Long, C., Scherman, V., & Archer, E. (2007). *PIRLS 2006 Summary Report South African Children's Reading Literacy Achievement*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. Retrieved Marh 1, 2008 from <http://www.southafrica.info/>

- Janks, H. (1994). Developing critical language awareness materials for a post apartheid South Africa. *English in Aotearoa*, 22, 46-55.
- Kamler, B. (1999). *Constructing gender and difference: Critical research perspectives on early childhood*. Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press.
- Kamwangamalu, N. (2003). Globalisation of English, and language maintenance and shift in South Africa. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 164, 65-81.
- Makoe, P. (2007). Language, discourses and identity construction in a multilingual South African primary school. *English Academy Review*, 24(2), 55-70.
- May, S., & Janks, H. (2004). Editorial: The challenge of teaching English in diverse contexts. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 3(1), 1-4.
- May, S. (1997). School language policies. In R. Wodak & S. Corson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education. Volume 1: Language policy and political issues in education* (pp. 229-240). New York: Springer.
- McKay, S., & Chick, K. (2001). Positioning learners in post-Apartheid South African schools: A case study of selected multicultural Durban schools. *Linguistics and Education*, 12(4), 393-408.
- McKinney, C. (2007). "If I speak English does it make me less black anyway?" "Race" and English in South African desegregated schools. *English Academy Review*, 24(3), 6-24.
- Mda, T. (2004). Multilingualism and education. In L. Chisholm (Ed.), *Changing class: Educational and social change in post apartheid South Africa* (pp. 177-194). Cape Town: SRC Press; London and New York: Zed Books.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rudwick, S. (2004). Zulu we need [it] for our culture: Umlazi adolescents in the post Apartheid state. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 22(3&4), 159-172.
- Tollefson, J. (2006). Critical theory in language policy. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *An introduction to language policy* (pp. 42-59). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- United States of America Department of Education. (2001). *No child left behind Policy in 2001*. Executive Summary. Retrieved March, 8, 2008 from <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/execsumm.html>
- Vasquez, V. (2004). *Negotiating critical literacy with young children*. Mahwah NJ: Laurence Erlbaum.
- Wright, S. (2004). *Language policy and language planning: From Nationalism to Globalisation*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Manuscript received: March 3, 2008

Revision received: May 2, 2008

Accepted: May 22, 2008