

Indigenous Language Rights in the Education of First-Graders of the Limpopo Province in South Africa.

Nelson Mbulaheni Musehane, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa

Introduction

Many scholars have given several definitions of the term 'rights'. In general these definitions are not the same. One of the definitions provided by Robert Phillipson (2000: 1) defines 'rights' as follows:

The major language right we possess is the right to learn and use our own language, but this right is often forgotten not only by speakers of other languages but also by the very speakers of minority languages, whichever they might be.

The above definition is supported by Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Charter) which give:

Parents belonging to an official language minority the 'right' to have their children educated in that language. Language Rights (2005-2006:01).

This Charter guarantees the right to minority language educational facilities and the right to manage and control those facilities. Provinces and territories are responsible for the implementation of minority language education rights.

The significance of implementing this right serves to protect and preserve both the official language and the cultures associated with them throughout Canada.

In South Africa, everyone has the right to indigenous language education for the following reasons:

Society's expectations on the children

Every parent wishes to see that his/her child is taught social values in the home language or mother-tongue, which the child understands best. The parents teach the child what is expected of him/her and the child internalizes what the parent teaches him/her. The aim of the parents in teaching the child societal a value is to pass these societal values from one generation to another. If the child understands what his/her parents teach him/her, he/she will be gratified, encouraging the child to learn even more.

Language as a form of communication

In order for two or more people to understand one another, they must use language as a form of communication (verbal or sign). If there were no 'languages', understanding one another would be difficult, if not impossible. It is through language that people understand one another. If one says 'goat', it is only in the English language that this word refers to small stock, smaller than a beast, with two horns, a hide and four legs. In one's mind one knows that it is an animal. That conception is termed "denotative meaning" in English. When this word is uttered to a speaker of Tshivenda, one would not know the meaning if one does not know the English language and the context in which the two people speak. Secondly, one would not arrive at an exact understanding, that is, whether the two people refer to exactly the same thing at the time the utterance is made.

Language transfers culture from one generation to generation

It is through language that one transfers culture from one generation to another. Therefore, children taught in a foreign language are deprived the free flow of cultural values. If Tshivenda-speaking children are taught in a foreign language, the problem of transferring cultural values would be hampered or compromised. The Vhavenda teach their children through proverbs, riddles and folktales. Even now, the Vhavenda still communicate verbally within their families. They use language to transfer cultural values

in Tshivenda from one generation to another. Language is an important vehicle for performing that function.

Language gives person's identity

Language also helps that one know one's identity and that of other persons. When one speaks of a Muvenda, it is through language that we establish his/her identity. An English man's identity is known through the language he/she speaks. Teaching children in a foreign language therefore makes them lose their identity. Where language is not properly used or where the child is taught in a foreign language, one loses one's identity.

Expression of oneself

Language is used to express oneself. One is known by what one speaks and how one says it. In a drama book, a character or player is known by what he/she says and how he/she utters his/her statements in that text. A character who does not talk much is less known. It is through language/words that we can establish the character of a person. Therefore, if one is taught through a foreign language, and not a home language, one would find it difficult to express oneself.

Constitutional rights afforded to learners

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) stipulates that first-graders and other learners in the country have the right to learn in the official language of their choice. Section 29(2) of the Constitution advocates the right to anyone to receive education in the official language of their choice. The Act says:

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. (Act No.108 of 1996: 14)

Section 30 of the said Constitution reiterates the significance of using one's language when it says:

Everyone has the right to use the language and participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no-one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any of the provisions of the Bill of Rights (Act No.108 of 1996: 15).

The South African Schools Act. No.84 of 1996 as assented to on 6 November 1996 in Norms and Standards for Language Policy in Public Schools reiterates the rights mentioned above that:

All learners shall offer at least one approved language as a subject in grade R to 2. All language subjects shall receive equitable time and resources allocation (Act No. 84 1996: B-32).

From the preceding sections of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the South African Schools Act, it is clear that first-graders' rights to learn in a home language are protected by legislation. They should be offered education through the home language. This will help them benefit more from the lessons.

The South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996) gives parents of first-graders the power to protect their individual language rights. According to this Act:

The parent exercises the minor learner's language rights on behalf of the minor Learner [...] the governing body must stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching, and/or by offering additional language as fully-fledged subject, and /or applying special immersion or language maintenance programme, or through other means approved by the head of the provincial education department. (Act No 84 of 1996, B.33)

The provisions of the Acts mentioned above give parents the right to participate in the education of their children. No learner is supposed to receive education from a school without the knowledge of his/her parents. Parents have a role to play in the education of their children. The issue of language choice, which enables learners to receive education in their home language, cannot be excluded. It is imperative for the parents to participate in the choosing of the language of instruction through a parents' body called School Governing Bodies, which every school is supposed to have.

Expectations of the learners when entering the classroom situation

Having been granted language rights by the legislation of the country, learners should be taught or learn through their home language. Learning through their home language, according to Section C of this Act, would help enormously to enable learners to conceptualize the subject matter in the learning process as well as the following aspects in general:

a) to promote full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education;

b) to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners and hence establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education;

(c) to promote and develop all the official languages;

(d) to support the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa including language used for religious purposes, language which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language as well as Alternative and Augmentative Communication,

(e) to counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages of learning and teaching,

(f) to develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages (Act 84 of 1996: B-32)

Theoretically, therefore, first-graders are protected. However, when these learners go into the classrooms, they are taught by educators the same way they were raised at home. In most schools, male educators do not teach first-graders. It is mostly female educators who teach these learners because female educators are believed to have the passion to teach young learners, as they do with their own children. Women are therefore believed to be good at teaching learners the home languages.

Actual findings in public schools

This researcher interviewed educators who teach first-graders. The following was found to be prevalent in the schools of the Limpopo Province and South Africa as a whole.

Educating and learning

Thirty percent (30 %) of the educators of the first three grades, i.e. Grades R to Grade 2 in schools in the Limpopo Province said that they educate the first-graders in Tshivenda as one of the indigenous languages of South Africa. Seventy percent (70%) said that they teach the above-mentioned grades in English. Those who reported that they teach such grades in Tshivenda use learning material written in English.

Knowledge of Education Policy

All the educators are in possession of a file entitled ELRC: Education Labour Relations Council, which is a Policy Handbook for Educators commissioned by the

Education Labour Relations Council. In this document the following sections controlling education are included:

Section 1: National Education Policy Act,

Section 2: South African Schools Act,

Section 3: Employment of Education Act,

Section 4: Further Education and Training Act,

Section 5: South African Council of Educators Act,

Section 6: Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC),

Section 7: General Legislation,

Section 8: General Documents.

Although the above-mentioned material indicate what should be done as far as educating and learning from the first grade up to tertiary level, educators do not seem to be responding positively to the documents as required. It is spelt out clearly that learners should get education through their home language. However, the educators are not following that directive. Upon enquiring from them why they educate the learners in a foreign language, while legislation clearly stipulates that they should not, the educators were reluctant to give clear explanations for fear that the researcher would report them to the authorities who would fire them. Some educators said that they took the practice from their predecessors who were teaching such grades in a foreign language. They said they took it for granted that it would not matter if one teaches in a foreign language. They therefore continued to teach in a foreign language.

Some of the educators said they are aware of the language policy of the country. They also said they know that they should not teach their learners in a foreign language. Those who said they know the legislation and language policies of the country, claimed to be educating their first-graders in Tshivenda. The researcher obtained the information about mother-tongue instruction in African languages through interviews and not through actual visits to the schools.

School governing bodies participation.

Although some schools have SGB (School Governing Bodies), some of the members of those institutions are not conversant with the language policy of their schools, as laid down in the legislation. Others do not participate in the deliberations of their school's language policy as a matter of fact. Most of the schools in the area teach Literacy, Life Skills and Numeracy in English, although the Constitution and the South African Schools Act clearly stipulate the requirements of teaching and learning through the home language. Members of the SGB who were contacted to hear their feelings about first-graders taught in a foreign language like English, feel proud when children are taught in English while they are still young. To them, proficiency in English enhances chances of children's employability when they reach an economically-active stage. Secondly, proficiency in English gives them a higher status in the community.

Reading/Learning material

The researcher found that educators use foreign language materials for reading. No reading or learning materials for Grade R to Grade 2 in Tshivenda as the home language is used. Some educators, however, teach Tshivenda language using old readers, which were published during the 1940-1960s' such as *Ndededzi* by Shwellnus Brothers. Although these books are very old, the teachers feel that they can be used to teach learners Tshivenda as a home language.

Upon enquiry about reading skills that are needed for first-graders, some of the educators indicated that it is problematic for them and the learners. When learners are taught to read Tshivenda, they pronounce the words differently, as Tshivenda words are pronounced differently from English. This confuses the learners a great deal. Reading for the first-graders was difficult as learners were confused in the pronunciation of the following words:

English

Tshivenda

(a) *man* is pronounced as [mæn] while *ma* is pronounced as [m] as in *mafhi* ‘milk’

(b) *bird* is pronounced as [bɜ:d] while *bi* is pronounced as [bi] in *bibi* ‘pipe’

(c) *take* is pronounced as [teik] while *ta* and *ke* are pronounced as [t'a] as in *t'ama* ‘wish’ and *ke* is pronounced as [k'] as in [k'élə] ‘draw liquid such as water or beer’

Educators find it difficult to educate first-graders because they confuse Tshivenda with English pronunciation. Words, which appear the same in Tshivenda and English, are pronounced differently. Learners, who are taught in a foreign language, would find it difficult to learn to read and write in Tshivenda.

The scarcity of materials written in Tshivenda for learners exacerbates the problem of educating and learning in the home language. Educators find it difficult to emphasize spelling. Without it, there can be no success in reading and writing. In addition, emphasis on syllables in Tshivenda would be impossible, which may confuse learners.

The scarcity of material for reading and writing Tshivenda as an African Language brings about uncertainty in the writing and spelling of Tshivenda words. There is also a lack of materials that would assist learners to think spontaneously.

Through practice, learners could learn to identify difficult concepts. Also, pronunciation skills would be enhanced. In many South African school libraries, there are books written in foreign languages like English and Afrikaans but no material written in Tshivenda.

Problem of Pre-School

Educators claim that before children are accepted to Grade R, some of the learners attended pre-schools and early learning centres. After graduating at these institutions, they are admitted to the Grade-R. At the pre-schools, most of the learners are taught through the medium of English. Learners spend most of their time learning English

words. The principal of such institutions are happy when the learners articulate English words properly. They feel that learners are intelligent when they do that well. When learners from a pre-school are accepted at a public school, together with those who studied in Tshivenda, there will be conflict in the learners' minds, which the school would not be able to remedy.

Educators' problems concerning home language

There are schools that teach Grades R-2 through Tshivenda as a home language. However, educators are expected to prepare the teaching materials in English, although the teacher will teach in Tshivenda. Some teachers receive copies of the South African School Act (Act No.84 of 1996), policy documents, Curriculum Statements and work schedules in English. The syllabi are in English and there is no time for the Tshivenda language. The non-use of the Tshivenda language in the classroom deprives learners the opportunity to develop proficiency in the Tshivenda language.

The manuals that have been distributed to educators are in English. Sometimes educators even find it difficult to interpret the syllabi. The syllabus that was translated into Tshivenda and distributed to educators is difficult for some educators to understand. The language used is beyond their understanding. The lesson plans are also in English, as are the work schedule and learning programmes, i.e. curricula.

Violations of learners' rights

From the above discussion, it is clear that the first-graders of the Limpopo Province are being deprived of their language rights in their education. The deprivation of these rights is a gross violation of their constitutional rights.

The violations start with the rights that were guaranteed by society that wanted their children to learn in their own African language, such as Tshivenda, to transfer cultural values from generation to generation. The rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa are also violated. The provisions of the South African School Act (Act No 84 of 1996), as far as education and learning in the home language are

concerned, are violated. The educators violate learners' rights of learning through the official language of their choice, which is their home language. The SGB, which is part of society, does not protect the learners' language either.

Recommendations

The Department of Education of the Republic of South Africa is aware of the dilemma facing learners. The Department needs to conduct workshops in which principals and members of the SGBs are invited in order to solve this problem. As most learners are semi-literate, the educators interviewed believe that learners should be encouraged to learn to write words in Tshivenda. If this is not possible, they feel that they should be encouraged to bring the slate back to the classroom where learners could write. In addition, learners from the pre-schools should spend more time mastering Tshivenda speech sounds, which will enable them to pronounce Tshivenda words better. As far as teacher training workshops are concerned, all workshops for educators should be conducted in Tshivenda. It is felt that handwriting should be introduced again from the foundation phase to enable learners to write words in Tshivenda.

Foreign language educators deprive learners from acquiring cultural knowledge because it is not found in the foreign language material they are presently using, such as cultural names and symbols. The use of African languages such as Tshivenda, will assist the language to develop. Language develops through usage. A language that is not used in public would suffer the consequences of lying dormant, with minor development in terminology. The non-usage of Tshivenda in our education system denies learners an opportunity to develop their language.

To enable the government to solve the violation of language rights, it is imperative that vigorous changes should be made in the political will to implement language provisions in the legislations and policies. The Department of Education and other relevant departments should hold discussions with the Department of Arts and Culture, which has a Division of National Language Service, to ensure that the provisions of the Acts are implemented. The Government should not be blamed for the above failure. However, it should try to facilitate the removal of colonial and apartheid stereotypes of

forcing educators and learners to use English and Afrikaans as the only languages in education. The Government and the people should ensure that African languages are important assets for the indigenous African people.

REFERENCES

Musehane, N.M (2002). The Success and Flaws in Implementing Language Provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of South African. In Eduardo Morales Coll & Turi, J.G.. *Language of the People; Language of the State*. San Juan: Ateneo Puertorriqueno.

Phillipson, R. (ed) (2000) *Rights to Language: Equity, Power, and Education: Celebrating the 60th Birthday of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages 2005-2006 Language Rights. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No.108 of 1996)*

The South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996

Webb, Vic & Kebob, Sure (eds) (2000). *African Voices. An Introduction to the Languages and Linguistics of Africa*. Southern Africa: Oxford University Press.