

Exploring the impact of bilingual education in the Foundation Phase in South Africa

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This paper explores the efficacy of implementing bilingual education in the Foundation Phase in South Africa. Doctrinal analysis was used as a data collection tool wherein English and Xitsonga were both used as mediums of instruction in the Foundation Phase. To acquire empirical evidence used to add doctrinal data, eight contact sessions were arranged with four selected schools. Four teachers were observed teaching English and thereafter, Xitsonga classes in one day, to evaluate how learners switch from one lesson to the other. Data shows that on some occasions learners were confused by learning one thing in two languages but in some cases, it aided in understanding the concepts better. Moreover, as learners at the Foundation Phase have little knowledge of English, teachers use translanguaging to anchor communication. Although the use of Xitsonga Home Language in an English First Additional Language class contradicts the departmental policy, teachers are compelled to help bilingual learners use the linguistic repertoires available to acquire information.

Introduction

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has been embroiled in serious controversy on the issue of implementing a mono- or bi-lingual policy from the Foundation Phase (FP) since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994. The South African linguistic ecology has not changed drastically because African languages are still marginalised, although the country is mainly controlled by Blacks (Webb, 2013; Brock-Utne, 2014). The challenge is caused by the majority of parents who prefer that their children be taught in English as the medium of instruction during FP (Broom, 2004).

The Foundation Phase in South Africa's education system comprises Grade R (reception level), Grade 1 (entry level), Grade 2 (second level) and Grade 3 (exit level). According to the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill, grade R is compulsory and it is expected to admit all learners who are 4 years old and will be turning five by June of the following year. In addition, Grade 1 must admit learners who are 5 years and will be turning 6 years old by June the following year. This means that learners are expected to exit FP aged 8 years. To improve the current state of FP education, there must be a thorough reflection on how teachers of English as a second language are trained, that will help the DBE to evaluate if there is any progress when a new policy is implemented (Nel and Müller, 2010). Currently, most teachers in the system in South Africa have limited proficiency in English, which affects the way they are supposed to teach, and it seems the DBE is not doing enough to retrain the affected teachers. Goh, Loy, Wahad and Huran (2020) argued that most preschool teachers rarely use the English language to teach in class and they identify factors and strategies which can be used by preschool policymakers as a guide to improve language teaching.

The overarching aim of FP is to prepare learners from an early age to acquire fundamental information, which was not a priority during the apartheid era. It is envisaged that learners need to receive a firm grounding in languages (English and Xitsonga in this study), mathematics, and life skills, which are the primary skills all children are expected to acquire. Bertram et al. (2015) maintained that describing FP teachers' professional knowledge base is a complex process that should include all aspects related to teaching and learning. In rural environments FP teachers' functional skills to teach literacy in English are poor, which fails to produce competent learners (Lenyai, 2011). It is therefore important to lay a solid foundation at preschool level by encouraging teachers to plan their work thoroughly (Barnett & Botes, 2022). A well planned lesson can help learners acquire a second language better.

Additionally, Schaffer, Nel and Booysen (2021) proposed that FP teachers are not adequately trained to provide phonological awareness to learners, which is a major flaw in providing a solid foundation. Nomlomo, Stofile and Sivasubramaniam (2018) further argued that some FP teachers lack confidence in teaching literacy as they lack sufficient disciplinary knowledge of FP literacy, but they have been employed to teach FP because it was the only teaching position available and there was no teacher available to occupy the position. Charamba and Zano (2019) described literacy as the ability to read and write, hence teachers need to have sufficient knowledge on how to impart such skills. FP is a specialised field and the DBE need to ensure that all teachers employed to teach FP are fully equipped with specialised knowledge and the appropriate skills.

Literature review

The *Curriculum and Policy Statement* (CAPS) for FP is grounded on the concept of additive bilingualism (Department of Basic Education, 2011). It focuses on building a strong literacy foundation in the learners' home language and then using it to scaffold learning of *English first additional language* (EFAL). Learners use their home language as the *language of learning and teaching* (LoLT), where they are expected to build a strong foundation before they switch to English as the medium. Makgabo and Modise (2000) argued that switching to English as the language of learning and teaching in Grade 4 creates problems because English is a foreign language to learners, especially in rural areas. Yesil-Dagli (2011) studied the development of English language learners' oral reading fluency and vocabulary development and concluded that both English and the home languages of learners are important in helping learners acquire language skills.

More than twenty years after the adoption of the Language in Education Policy document, South Africa still experiences serious challenges in the implementation of the language policy. Several questions need to be answered on which medium of instruction is likely to help learners acquire knowledge from the FP level. Therefore, the DBE adopted a bilingual approach where, in most schools, English and the learner's first language are taught from Grade R to Grade 3. DBE ignores the fact that teaching English in the early years of schooling has a detrimental effect on the learners as they do not use it for social interaction, which results in poor educational achievement (Prinsloo & Heugh, 2013).

Language policy expectations are driven by the misconception that English proficiency serves as a passport for a learner to acquire a lucrative job (Casale & Posel, 2011). Although English is regarded as the language of social upward mobility, some learners find it confusing to learn in two languages and can be labelled as underachievers.

Moreover, language heterogeneity in the South African landscape plays a pivotal role in helping teachers plan how to impart knowledge in both home language and EFAL. Heugh (2009) opined that although proficiency in English accords a person a higher social status nationally and internationally, it is imperative to evaluate how to include and validate learners' linguistic repertoires alongside English. Parents, therefore, need to understand the complementary role of first language in helping learners gain proficiency in English (du Plessis & Louw, 2015) as they insist that their children need to learn in English from the first day of schooling, which can open doors to a better future. In most cases, parents or caregivers only expect their children to improve their English proficiency level, without investigating other challenges that impede immediate acquisition of a second language.

Mother tongue education in the Foundation Phase

The implantation of the Language in Education policy in 1997 influenced the DBE to introduce the FP to cater for learners between the ages of 4 to 8 years. The initial purpose was to prepare learners in their mother tongue before they actually began schooling at the age of 7 years and switch to English as the medium of teaching and learning. Heugh (2009) supported the idea of mother tongue education, citing that by the time learners switch to English they are expected to have a solid foundation in reading and writing in their home language. Due to mounting pressure from parents the DBE revised its mother tongue policy at FP and introduced English to be taught together with the learners' first language. DBE ignored the fact that foundation education has its roots in the constructivist theories of learning where children acquire knowledge through playing and singing.

An abrupt switch from African indigenous languages to English has a negative impact on the literacy levels of learners. Cilliers and Bloch (2018) pointed out that the literacy level of Grade 4 learners in the Eastern Cape province is low and cited that switching from home language to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4 is a major challenge. Saile, Moletsane and Munuka (2020) investigated the challenges experienced by isiXhosa-speaking FP learners in a disadvantaged English-medium school in the Western Cape province. The results indicated that learners had switched the medium of instruction before they acquired firm knowledge in isiXhosa, which is their home language. Hojeij, Dillion, Perkin and Grey (2019) pointed out issues in using bilingual literature to help second language learners improve their literacy levels. It is important that teachers understand learners' individual differences and find ways how to support these learners (Ngema, 2021) and come up with strategies to improve teaching and learning.

It is a common practice in most African countries where English is the medium of instruction, that teachers and learners find it difficult to communicate. Clegg and Afitska

(2010) contended that it is a tedious exercise to expect learners to start schooling using a European language, which they rarely use during social engagements. Shinga and Pillay (2021) concurred by highlighting that teachers are compelled to code-switch in situations where learners do not understand the content presented. Studies conducted in Uganda found that learners at primary school struggle to read and write although they use their mother tongue as medium of instruction (Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2016; Dubeck, Stern & Nabacwa, 2021). They recommended that teachers need to use more instructional material, carry out continuous assessments in small groups and design learning activities that promote children's interaction and participation (Akello et al., 2015, 252). Teachers must go the extra mile to help learners understand the contents presented in a language that they use only in the presence of the teacher.

The debate on mother tongue education is a contentious issue that is influenced by the political climate that prevails at the moment. Mother tongue education helps young learners to learn and think creatively, communicate effectively, and acquire an intuitive understanding of grammar (Butzkamm, 2003), which cannot be practically achieved when learning through a second language. Learners unconsciously switch from one language to another while playing or during group discussion in class and this helps teachers to identify gifted learners who have limited proficiency in English (Hughes, Shaunessy, Brice, Ratcliff & McHatton, 2006). Even in the USA where English is used in most spheres of life, children who speak Spanish as a first language commonly switch languages during conversation which helps them improve their communication skills (Reyes, 2004). Ryan (2021) added the issue of home literacy is important in helping bilingual children improve development in both languages.

It suffices to indicate that there is no harmful effects if bilingual education is implemented effectively. Bialystok (2018) argued that for a country to have effective bilingual education, there must be thorough planning and adequate physical and human resources. A shortage of bilingual teachers is a challenge that most countries experience (Szwed & González-Carriedo, 2019). The challenge is rife in African countries due to the shortage of resources to train bilingual teachers. English, therefore, became the most preferred medium of instruction because of its tremendous power and prestige (Tibategeza, 2010). Some schools even cautiously disregard departmental pronouncements on language policy by giving English more time at the expense of African languages.

Challenges of implementing early bilingual education

The DBE's endorsement of using both the home language and EFAL in the FP came with several challenges that were not anticipated. The time allocated for home language and EFAL is different as learners are expected to spend most of their time using home language. Firstly, FP learners find it confusing to learn the same thing in two languages as they are still too young to understand the significance of content presented in a second language. Thus, bilingual children need to have ample time to develop linguistic competency in their home language before they switch to EFAL, which is the language of teaching and learning. Cummins (2001:17) argued that children who start schooling with a

solid foundation in their mother tongue which they use for social conversation, “develop stronger literacy ability in the school language”. Cummins’ (2001) contention is ignored in most countries because of pressure from parents who are guided by misconceptions that their children easily acquire proficiency in a second language when they use it from an early age.

The challenge is that English is introduced very early before learners have a solid foundation in speaking their mother tongue. The majority of learners who speak African languages are supposed to start learning EFAL in Grade 1 for only 2 to 3 hours a week where the focus is on three paired skills: listening and speaking, reading and phonics, and writing and handwriting (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Lenyai (2011) argued that teachers’ methods which FP teachers use to teach EFAL are inapt to help learners develop comprehension and communication skills. Lack of proper teacher method can be one of the reasons why learners lack comprehension and communication skills in EFAL by the time they exit FP.

Secondly, teachers find it challenging to use English with learners who do not have adequate knowledge of English. Sanfo (2022) argued that children learn to read more easily in their mother tongue, which is ignored in South Africa. O’Hallaron, Palincsar and Schleppegrell (2015) maintained that teachers are responsible for helping learners acquire critical language awareness while learners are expected to understand the text as active participants. Being active participants who are in dialogue with the author of the text can only happen if students have basic knowledge of the language used, which is not the case in the South African context. In some cases, particularly in rural areas, teachers themselves lack proficiency in English because they were not trained to teach English as a second language (Nel & Müller, 2010). Teachers’ lack of proficiency in English has a negative impact on helping learners improve their proficiency level in English, even if it is introduced at the FP. Some teachers resort to interpreting English subject matter in the learners’ first language citing that learners are not coping when they use English.

Thirdly, the DBE made urgent curriculum reform without checking if it had an adequate number of FP teachers to implement the proposed changes. To date, most schools are struggling to recruit well-qualified teachers who are trained specifically to teach FP, therefore unemployed teachers suffice to fill up the positions. To improve the situation, the majority of EFAL teachers in the FP need extensive and ongoing in-service training and learners must be taught to read aloud to improve their proficiency in English (Fezi & Mncube). FP teachers are mainly affected as they are expected to provide literacy in both English and the learners’ first language. The DBE is doing little to ensure that teachers are continually trained on the recent developments in teaching bilingual learners, which is a major drawback in the South African education system. Blease and Condy (2014) concluded that multi-grade FP teachers experience numerous challenges when teaching writing to learners in rural areas. They indicated that the language of teaching and learning is one of the factors that derail effective teaching of writing skills. Teaching writing in a second language is a strenuous exercise, particularly for a teacher who is not trained to teach FP.

The last challenge is that both teachers and learners resort to code-switching or translanguaging to prevent a breakdown in communication. Wunseh (2023) averred that translanguaging refers to the natural way which bilingual/multilingual students use in their daily lives. The language policy indicates that teachers must strictly use English during an English class, which is practically impossible as learners sometimes miss the crux of the subject matter presented. Ramothwala, Mandende and Cekiso (2022) argued that the DBE must review the language policy to allow FP learners to benefit. Lack of proficiency in the second language influences learners to resort to code-switching during peer interaction as a means to promote communicative competence (Reyes, 2004), as well as to demonstrate that they clearly understand the subject matter. As FP education uses a play-based approach, learners also code-switch while playing, as they do not have time to think of the correct word from either their first or second language.

Research method

The research method adopted for this study is a doctrinal analysis of policy documents, DBE workbooks for Grade 3, classroom observation, and interviews. Doctrinal analysis is pre-eminent in helping researchers scrutinise what is contained in particular documents vis-à-vis the actual outcomes that learners achieve before they complete FP. Subject policy documents for English and Xitsonga were obtained from the circuit office and they were compared to check the language aspects that teachers are expected to cover. Also, they were compared to check the stated areas of learning, expected learning outcomes, pedagogical implications, and the actual outcomes achieved. Moreover, the assessment criteria used in both languages were evaluated to verify if teachers are able to achieve the outcomes stated in the policy documents. The researcher also evaluated the workbooks for both English and Xitsonga to compare if there are similarities in the contents contained in them.

To supplement data obtained from policy documents and workbooks, nine FP teachers were chosen from four schools in one circuit in Limpopo province, Vhembe District in Malamulele cluster. Three teachers were chosen from school 1 which had a high enrolment and two teachers were chosen from each of the remaining three schools, using purposive sampling. The nine participants selected were female because all the FP teachers in the chosen circuit were female. The data collection procedure was explained to participants before classroom observation commenced to remind them to conduct their classes as they normally do. Participants were further informed that classroom observations were conducted for research purposes and there would be no remuneration for their participation. All nine sampled teachers agreed to participate willingly as they regarded the study as a learning opportunity to help them improve their performance. Pseudonyms were used instead of their real names.

After classroom participants were requested to participate in a semi-structured interview at a convenient time which the researcher and the participant agreed upon. The interview was conducted during the first quarter in March 2023 and all questions were prepared in English, however the researcher engaged in translanguaging to make participants

comfortable. All participants agreed to sign a consent form as well as giving the researcher permission to record all responses before the interview commenced. After the interviews, data were carefully transcribed and participants were given an opportunity to verify their responses. Thereafter, different types of data were collated and discussed in line with the research topic.

Table 1: Profiles of participating teachers

Pseudonym	School	Grade	Experience (years)	Educational level
Tintswalo	S1	1	23	JPTD, BEd (Hons)
Mikateko	S1	2	11	BA, PGCE
Masingita	S1	3	21	JPTD, PGCE
Tinyiko	S2	R	08	BA, PGCE
Nkhesani	S2	2	27	JPTD
Maureen	S3	3	22	SPTD
Vusiwana	S3	1	15	PGCE, BEd (Hons)
Mary	S4	R	09	BA, PGCE
Ester	S4	3	18	BA, PGCE
<i>Notes on abbreviations</i>	Grade R: reception level; Grade 1: entry level; Grade 2: second level; Grade 3: exit level. BA: Bachelor of Arts; BEd (Hons): Bachelor of Education (Honours). JPTD: Junior Primary Teachers Diploma SPTD: Senior Primary Teachers Diploma PGCE Post Graduate Certificate in Education			

Findings

Data collected from the two policy documents and two workbooks provided by DBE furnished the researcher with valuable information for the study. It was supplemented by data collected through interviews and classroom observations conducted with the eight selected participants. The findings were discussed to explore the impact of bilingual education in Foundation Phase in South Africa.

Language policy documents

Xitsonga home language (XHL) and English first additional language (EFAL) policy documents were used as authentic documents that highlight how learners at FP are taught. The documents prescribe that more time be given to XHL, as learners are expected to transfer the skills acquired in their home language to EFAL when they switch to English as the LoLT in Grade 4.

In the FP, XHL is used as the LoLT while EFAL is taught based on the skills that learners have acquired in their XHL to build a foundation to switch to English as the LoLT in Grade 4. Instructional time in the FP is well documented in the policy document and is to be implemented in class (Table 2).

Table 2: Instructional time in the Foundation Phase

Subject	Grade R (hrs)	Grade 1-2 (hrs)	Grade 3 (hrs)
Home language	10	8/7	8/7
English first additional language	-	2/3	3/4
Mathematics	7	7	7
Life sciences	6	6	7
- Beginning knowledge	(1)	(1)	(1)
- Creative arts	(2)	(2)	(2)
- Physical education	(2)	(2)	(2)
- Personal and social well-being	(1)	(1)	(1)
Total	23	23	25

Language planners have applied the additive bilingualism policy from FP by allocating more learning time to home language with the hope that learners will transfer the skill acquired in their home language when learning EFAL. Moreover, learners are expected to have acquired “a high level of competency in English by the end of Grade 3, and they need to be able to read and write well in English” (CAPS: 8). The political demographics of South Africa make it challenging for schools in rural areas to produce learners who can read and write well in English. Some struggle to reach a high level of competence through the Senior Phase and they are only get promoted by using the age cohort policy.

Policy documents prescribed that learners are expected to read and write in both home language and EFAL by the time they finish Grade 3, which is not the case in most rural primary schools. The challenge is compounded by the fact that both policy documents merely outline skills, abilities, and competencies that learners are expected to achieve while using different textbooks and learning methods. Furthermore, most rural schools do not have sufficient textbooks, which makes it challenging for teachers to help learners acquire the expected skills and abilities for a grade in one calendar year. Hence, the transition from home language to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4, is done to meet the governmental policy requirement although in practice learners can barely read or write in English. This is in line with Heugh’s (2013) argument that there is a disjuncture between the South African government’s constitutional pronouncements on multilingualism and the multilingual reality displayed by learners.

The findings reveal that FP teachers experience numerous challenges in teaching the four language skills that learners are expected to acquire from an early age. They are compelled to follow the formal syllabus as outlined in policy documents even if they realise that learners enjoy learning through singing and playing.

Classroom observation

During classroom observation, it was evident that learners speak very little during English class, compared to their participation during Xitsonga class. In some cases, they just keep quiet when the teacher asks them questions because they do not understand the subject matter presented. Data from classroom observation clearly indicate that learners are still

struggling to develop the foundation in English, although they are expected to use it in class. This results in serious frustration for teachers, as some of them do not have specialised literacy skills required to teach FP.

The excerpt below illustrates Grade 1 learners' lack of knowledge about the names of animals in English, whereas they were able to give the names of the same animals in Xitsonga, which is their home language. This excerpt is from Tintswalo's class. The lesson aimed at assessing whether learners know the names of animals in both English and Xitsonga.

Excerpt 1

- Tintswalo: Can you please name the following animal (*pointing at a lion*). What is this?
 Wisani: Nghala
 Tintswalo: Please! Say it in English.
 Class: (*burst in laughter*)
 Wisani: (*looked embarrassed and kept quiet*).
 Tintswalo: Anyone who knows the answer?
 Tsakani: Nghala is lion.
 Tintswalo: Nghala in English is a lion (*she repeated the word 'lion' slowly and then instructed the class to repeat the word several times*).

The above excerpt portrays that if the teacher uses English only there would be a breakdown in communication as learners do not know the English names of the animals displayed on the board. To remedy the situation, the teacher engages in translanguaging wherein she flexibly uses both XHL and EFAL to provide the names of the animals displayed and give a short description of each animal. This is in line with García and Lin's (2016) argument that translanguaging is commonly unavoidable in bilingual classes as it provides linguistic flexibility that learners can use to their own advantage.

Another important aspect during classroom observation was on reading and telling stories in XHL and EFAL. Reading interesting stories and thereafter requesting a learner to retell the story improves the narrative skills of bilingual learners (Otwinowska et al., 2020). During observation in Grade 2 English lesson, the teacher read a story about the lion as a dangerous animal. Learners listened attentively as the teacher dramatised how dangerous a lion is because it is a carnivore. Thereafter, she pasted a chart with different types of animals and divided learners into small groups to do the following task.

Excerpt 2

Choose one animal to talk about as a group. Share ideas focusing on questions like these. Use describing words to explain what you know about the animal you have chosen.

1. Is it dangerous?
2. What does it eat?
3. Where would you see it?
4. Are you scared of it?
5. Is it useful?
6. What would you do if you saw it?

Learners actively engaged one another using Xitsonga while trying to write short sentences or phrases in English. When they fail to write a complete sentence in English, they use Xitsonga words with the hope that the teacher will not penalise them. The teacher moved around ignoring that they were using Xitsonga instead of English to share ideas. She asked questions in English and enquired if they were making any progress while it was clear that most groups were struggling to write in English what they had discussed. In most groups, only one or two learners dominated while others showed support for whatever was suggested.

Another important aspect was that both XHL and EFAL workbooks for Grade 3 contained information about the months and seasons of the year. The lesson plan in the classrooms observed was on teaching the months of the year where learners were expected to know what happens in each month. During XHL lessons learners actively participated, indicating what normally happens in each month, but during the EFAL lesson, they just mentioned the months but failed to indicate what normally happens in each month. In most cases, the teacher tried to guide them by giving the first part of the short sentence but they failed to give even one word needed to complete the sentence. This confirms that learners have not yet mastered adequate vocabulary to enable them to construct sentences in English.

Classroom observation further revealed that some participants have limited proficiency in English and they continually engage in code-switching and translanguaging with the intention of anchoring communication and encouraging learners to read. It became clear during observation that some participants struggled to present their subject matter clearly in the EFAL class whereas they were able to present fluently during XHL lessons. Nel and Müller (2010) hinted that teachers' low proficiency in English in South African schools has a debilitating impact on the performance of learners. Equally important is the issue of overcrowding, which hinders teachers' efforts to pay individual attention to all learners. Participants normally interact with a few learners who actively participate and pay little attention to the majority of learners struggling to understand. Ignoring learners who struggle to comprehend the information presented has a serious bearing during summative evaluation. It is clear that DBE is doing very little to equip FP teachers to provide bilingual education, as some of the teachers were trained to teach Intermediate or Senior Phase.

Interviews

During the interviews, it became clear that there were numerous challenges when learners were introduced to bilingual education before they developed proficiency in Xitsonga, which is their home language. Teachers complained that learners do not have any idea of what the teacher is talking about when using English and they understand only when using their home language. Maureen indicated that:

Our learners have limited exposure to English as they only use it in the classroom and when watching television at home. The major part of the school day and during weekends they use Xitsonga, which is their home language. Hence, it is difficult for them

to communicate with their teachers in class and the teacher is bound by the situation to tell learners what she thinks is appropriate and learners are expected to suck everything like empty vessels because they can hardly communicate in English.

Maureen's view is common in bilingual classes globally as young children use their home languages most of the time and use English in class. In deep rural areas, some families do not have televisions which means learners only hear English in class.

Mary indicated that:

When I started teaching young learners, I thought I would use English only during English language teaching to help learners quickly adapt. Unfortunately, the situation is not conducive and I am compelled to resort to translanguaging in order to scaffold learners to follow what I teach.

Translanguaging in a bilingual or multilingual classroom is a common strategy that is used to scaffold learners by leveraging full linguistic repertoires to help them acquire knowledge better. Ambele (2022) attested to this view by indicating that both teachers and learners benefit from translanguaging by using their entire linguistic repertoire in class. Mikateko concurred with Maureen by indicating that she commonly uses code-switching or translanguaging to inspire learners to participate because they keep quiet if they do not understand what the teacher says in English. The English level of FP learners in rural areas is very low, which hinders interaction with teachers in class. Teachers are, therefore, compelled to use learners' home language as a tool to help them understand English, which they are unable to acquire automatically like their home language.

Masingita voiced her frustration by saying:

Every time when we attend workshops or departmental meetings, they blame us for not giving learners an opportunity to share ideas in class, whereas learners hardly speak when we talk to them in English or give them simple topics in groups or individually. The reason is probably that they have not yet developed linguistic knowledge in English which is an additional language.

There is a disparity between the outcomes that are expected from EFAL learners in the FP and how they behave during instruction in class. Policy guidelines indicate that learners are expected to share ideas or describe a picture using English, which is not practically applicable. When teachers try to use English only in class, they end up being frustrated and switch to the learners' first language to proceed with the lesson.

Tintswalo added the issue of dilapidated infrastructure and overcrowding as other major aspects which have negative impacts in improving the literacy levels of learners. She pointed out that "it is not easy to pay individual attention as I teach 61 learners in one dilapidated classroom which lacks proper furniture". It is challenging for a teacher to create a conducive classroom environment when teaching an overcrowded class. Also, the FP is essential for learner development and teachers are expected to identify reading and writing challenges that learners experience to provide remedial action. Under normal

circumstances, teachers are expected to pay individual attention to all learners and provide a solid foundation for reading and writing.

Discussion

Data garnered from the policy document clearly indicate that in the FP, more time is allocated to teaching XHL than allocated for EFAL. In Grade R, learners are taught through XHL and they start learning EFAL as a subject in Grade 1 for only two hours a week. It is an effective strategy aimed at helping learners develop a firm linguistic foundation in their mother tongue before they can switch to English. Additionally, the majority of FP learners only use English in class for short periods and use Xitsonga most of the time, both at school and at home. Policy documents spell out that learners are expected to demonstrate competency in reading and writing in English and Xitsonga. Results from the classroom observations and interviews paint a different picture. Very few learners in Grade 3, which is the final one in the FP, can read fluently and the majority can be classified as average. In contrast, learners' reading ability in English was far below what is expected in the policy document.

Classroom observation data sources revealed that FP teachers found it challenging to teach EFAL as learners are still grappling with learning phonics in their L1 and they have to shift and use a different tone when learning the same phonics in English. They often give examples of the L1 phonic sound when teaching English phonics to help learners notice the difference between the two languages. This is compounded by the fact that some of the teachers were not trained to teach FP and they were placed in a need-to-adapt circumstance because of a shortage of staff. This has a detrimental impact as emphasised by Rohde (2015:1), who pointed out that early literacy learning succeeds when learners "have a solid knowledge base of emergent literacy and child development". This can be achieved when all FP teachers are well-trained to teach young learners and understand their special needs.

Another serious drawback that retards the level of literacy learning in rural areas is poor organisation of classrooms. The poor class organisation came as a result of dilapidated buildings and overcrowding, which the DBE is struggling to deal with. The situation in three of the four schools selected was alarming, as newly built classes and well-furnished classes were reserved for intermediate and senior phase learners while FP learners were accommodated in old buildings. All the classes in the only school which does not experience overcrowding were new and well furnished. Overcrowding limits teachers' movement between the rows to check if all learners participate during group work and to offer remedial help when learners are undertaking writing tasks. Participants from the three affected schools raised serious concerns about overcrowding and indicated that they were unable to perform at their best to help learners acquire knowledge at FP level.

Data obtained from interviews demonstrate that learners, particularly in rural areas, have limited proficiency in English, yet they are expected to use it as a dual medium of instruction with Xitsonga which is their home language. Language planners ignored the

fact that using home language at FP is important in helping learners understand the curriculum content better as they start learning the language informally at home. A common thread in the frustrations that most teachers voiced is that learners have limited vocabulary in English as they hardly use it as a language for communication outside the classroom. Additionally, learners find it challenging to construct simple sentences in English which has a complex structure compared to Xitsonga which has simple subject-verb agreement and clear morphological structure. Introducing English at FP therefore, results in boredom and lack of attention which negatively impact the acquisition of knowledge and frustrate teachers' efforts to produce learners who are proficient in both home language and EFAL by the time they complete FP.

Conclusion

The data presented in this paper is important in helping the government evaluate the language proficiency level of learners in both home language and EFAL to assess the progress of learners from FP. The author believes that the ideas generated through critical analysis of the current bilingual education in South Africa will enlighten language policy planners to rethink the impact of the policy and find ways to improve the current standard of education. Cummins (2000) indicated that bilingual children usually find themselves in the crossfire if language policies are not thoroughly evaluated before implementation. For education to take place effectively, FP learners should first have a sound foundation on reading and writing in their home language before they can switch to EFAL. The language policy in South African schools needs to be reviewed because home language and EFAL are taught simultaneously, whereas learners need to acquire proficiency in their first language and then start learning a second language.

Moreover, the bilingual program is not effectively implemented as most teachers are not thoroughly trained on how to teach bilingual children. Data sources confirm that some teachers use the home language most of the time to give instruction, then switch to English to help learners read words and phrases. Although using code-switching is a transgression, teachers have no choice as learners struggle to understand. Importantly, FP teachers need to understand that reading is a complex cognitive process that requires pedagogic knowledge of the differences between XHL and EFAL. Teachers who are not trained to teach FP focused on content instruction where they dominate, disregarding the fact that children learn best when participating actively and through play. It is prudent to conclude that language planning at FP in South Africa is still a contentious issue that should be carefully investigated in further research. The learning assessment criteria which are currently used need to be re-evaluated, to ascertain whether they help learners acquire linguistic competence in both languages.

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Appendix: Semi-structured individual interview schedule

Date: March 2023

Questions

1. Briefly describe your interest in teaching in the Foundation Phase and which area do you prefer?
2. How long have you been teaching learners in the FP and what coping strategies do you use?
3. How many learners do you have in your class and how do you pay attention to each learner?
4. Do your learners understand the content presented in English First Additional Language (EFAL)? If not what do you do to ensure that learning takes place?
5. Do you apply either code-switching or translanguaging when teaching EFAL?
6. Do you think it is possible to teach all basic language skills to FP learners?
7. Do you specifically teach grammar? What strategy do you use?
8. How best do you provide comprehensible input to FP learners with low English proficiency?
9. Do you have additional teaching materials in both English and Xitsonga that learners can use to improve their understanding?
10. Provide a short critical reflection on the advantages of teaching EFAL at Foundation Phase?

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