



Creating cycles of writing and reading in a resource-poor school community in Kenya: Could one literacy event lead to ongoing literacy practices?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Literacy
Mother tongue literacy
Capability approach
Poverty
Parental involvement
Kenya

ABSTRACT

Strong correlations between high levels of poverty and low education outcomes have prompted interventions aimed at raising literacy levels in communities characterised by poverty within Kenya, as in other countries. However, interventions aimed at improving literacy only in the languages of instruction (LOI) may not be the best option for students who speak mother tongues (MT) different from the school's LOI. The Capability Approach framework is used to examine the potential of parent-produced MT materials to be low-cost entry points into early-grade literacy for one resource-poor Kenyan school. It demonstrates that factors related to poverty strongly impact that potential.

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1. Introduction

The percentage of people considered literate in a particular country or region and the speed, or lack thereof, at which children learn to read and write is a perennial area of interest for researchers and non-government organisations (NGOs) working in education. This is so whether the population in question is characterised by high instances of poverty, as in Kenya's case, or not. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which evaluate and rank reading levels in a number of participating countries (not yet including Kenya) attest to the interest in measuring and comparing literacy levels. However, it is in relation to low-income countries that the rates of literacy among adults and young people, and the pace at which children acquire literacy in school, give rise to particular concerns. Statistics suggesting strong correlations between high levels of poverty and low literacy rates (UNESCO, 2010) and between low levels of literacy and poor education outcomes (World Bank, 2011) have led to interventions aimed at raising literacy levels in low income countries. Kenya is among the low income countries which themselves have endorsed the United Nations Education for All (EFA) goals aimed at increasing access to education and improving literacy, essential components of quality education (World Education Forum, 2000). The establishment of the Global Partnership for Education (formerly EFA Fast Track Initiative) which assists qualifying countries with financial and technical

support to achieve EFA and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (Crouch, 2011) is an acknowledgement that costs associated with meeting these goals might lay beyond the financial means of low income countries.

In Kenya, as in other Africa countries, progress towards goals related to access has been noted due to marked increase in school enrolment rates (UNDP, 2011). However, increased enrolment has not brought about a commensurate increase in the quality of education; education outcomes have remained low (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011; World Bank, 2011). Greater attention is consequently being given to the assessment and teaching of reading and mathematics in the early grades of primary school, considered foundational to continuing education (Abadzi, 2011; Wagner, 2011). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) strategy (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011) and the University of Sussex Teacher Preparation and Continuing Professional Development in Africa (TPA) research study (Bunyi et al., 2011) are two recent international initiatives in which Kenya has participated. EGRA assessments found that in some countries children at the end of grade 2 were not able to read a single word in a simple paragraph in the language in which they were being taught (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011). TPA focused on the impact of teacher education on the teaching of reading but also reported on evidence of low levels of reading found in previous studies, corroborating EGRA's findings (Bunyi et al., 2011). Among the studies referred to were two conducted in Kenya. One reported that a third of the children in Standard 2 were unable to read one word, while only a third could read a grade 2 level paragraph (UWEZO, 2010). The other noted that reading achievement at grade 3 fell below the set standardised mean (Wasanga et al., 2010). While education

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assessment is usually accompanied by a degree of controversy and debate about what is being measured and the measures used (c.f. Hoffman, 2012), the need to address early grade literacy is clear. It must also be acknowledged that literacy interventions cannot be divorced from a critical consideration of the language(s) associated with literacy (Ngwaru, 2011; Ouane and Glanz, 2010, 2011; Pinnock, 2009).

This paper argues that while there are many causes of early grade reading failure, an important underlying factor in many low-income countries is the fact that initial literacy is often approached through a second (L2) or third language (L3) rather than the first language (L1) or mother tongue (MT) of students. Interventions attempting to raise early-grade reading levels that do not include students' first spoken language as a bridge to literacy continue to work against students who do not speak the school language when they begin school (Glewwe et al., 2007). The research described below is based on the belief that the introduction to literacy is best approached through the learner's most familiar language, preferably the L1 or MT, and that increasing amounts of interesting, age and language appropriate reading materials are required to encourage and sustain literacy (Krashen, 2007).

Historical and sociolinguistic factors underlie language-in-education policies which exclude MTs from schools. Additionally, the cost of providing books in a variety of languages, especially where publishers are not prepared to produce materials in a wide range of languages, is often presented as a major prohibitive factor (Edwards and Ngwaru, 2010; Ouane and Glanz, 2011). Recognising that high levels of finance are usually required to produce reading materials and that resource-poor communities are not themselves in a position to meet the cost of professionally produced books in their language, low-cost strategies for producing reading materials must also be sought. The strategy described below involves harnessing parental knowledge of children's oral literature and their willingness to write these for children in the early grades during a specially convened literacy event in one school in the Tana Delta region of Kenya. The strategy was based on the belief that parents desire to be supportive of their children's education whenever it is within their means to do so (UWEZO, 2011).

The study aimed to explore parents' capacity to write stories and songs in their MT and to share the resulting materials with a group of children. It also sought to examine the potential and constraints to similar literacy events being included in the literacy practices associated with the school and provide for ongoing cost-effective development of MT materials. In addition, the event served the purpose of providing a space where parents could engage in MT literacy activities and reflect on issues pertaining to literacy, and in particular, to MT literacy. A social justice dimension was therefore also included as the study sought to play a part in countering the marginalisation of local languages within education.

This paper provides an ethnographic account of the two-hour literacy event and a consideration of how the event may, or may not, be followed up in the light of existing factors affecting the community in which the school is located. The paper seeks to contribute to the debate about ways of improving early-grade reading in developing countries from the perspective of a local school-based initiative. Its main thesis is that early-grade reading cannot be divorced from the language children normally speak and that parents, with support, are well placed to become active agents in the provision of MT texts where few such texts currently exist. However, the paper also demonstrates that factors arising from the realities of living in contexts of poverty impact the potential of such literacy events to become a regular part of school life from which the sustainability of MT material provision might be enhanced.

2. Conceptual frameworks

2.1. Literacy as practice

The 'literacy as practice' model of literacy espoused by Street (1984) and adherents of the New Literacy Studies movement, e.g. Gee (2008) provides one of the contextual frameworks underlying the research. 'Literacy as practice' proposes not one, but many forms of literacy, each intrinsically linked to the social practice within which it is enacted. School-based literacy is one among many with which people interact as they engage with meaning-making in their daily lives. However, it is the one regarded as essential to achieving education success and the one required to be displayed during examinations or literacy evaluations. It is also viewed as an important step towards economic and other development for families and nations (Commeyras and Inyega, 2007; Muthwii, 2004a). Most parents who send their children to school are therefore eager that they make good progress in achieving high levels of reading and writing as judged by tests and examination results (Muthwii, 2004a; UWEZO, 2011). However, in resource-poor schools practices associated with the teaching of literacy do not rely on the availability of a good supply of reading materials since it is the scarcity of materials that characterises such schools. According to Smith (1978) and Krashen (2007), the availability of more MT reading material would provide greater opportunities for students to read in a language they understand well, facilitating a culture of reading and greater reading proficiency. Aspects of these reading skills can then be transferred to learning to read other languages (Cummins, 2000).

2.2. Mother tongue based multilingual education

A further underlying principle of the research relates to mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). MTB-MLE posits that education which ignores students' MTs maintains, rather than critiques and transforms, existing relations of power pertaining to language use in education contexts (Alexander, 2007; Djite, 2008). The language used for literacy is frequently the language of groups with more socio-economic power and the financial resources to produce books and other reading materials in those languages. For students who do not speak these languages, attempts to acquire initial literacy through them limit the vital supports which knowledge of the syntax, vocabulary, nuances of meaning and idioms of their language provide (Gee, 2004; Goodman, 1986; Kuker, 2009; Smith, 1978). Furthermore the contexts presented in materials students are required to read in new languages may be quite different from their own contexts, further reducing the support needed for meaningful reading.

Despite negative attitudes to the use of MT in education settings on the part of a range of education stakeholders, a growing number of MTB-MLE advocates have argued for the inclusion of MTs in education, at least in the early grades, but preferably continuing to higher levels of schooling (Cummins, 2000; Ouane and Glanz, 2010; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Grin (2005) and Heugh (2011) have countered arguments that increased education costs militate against the viability of MTB-MLE. They suggest that any related costs must be balanced with the current cost of wastage in education systems where students do not achieve their learning potential due to being taught exclusively in languages in which they are not proficient. There is no doubt however that professional book production is an expensive exercise, irrespective of the language used. Where speakers of languages belong to the poorer sectors of society, finances to support publication in their languages are less likely to be forthcoming. Low-cost ways to supplement the production of MT material therefore need to be explored.

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