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International Journal of Educational Development 25 (2005) 237–251

International Journal of
EDUCATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

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Language choice, education and community identity

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the pedagogical and cultural impact of the PROPELCA (Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Cameroonian Languages) mother-tongue education program being implemented in the Bafut, Kom and Nso' language communities of the Northwest Province of Cameroon. Using research carried out in 2002–2003, the author compares the instructional quality and cultural relevance of the PROPELCA program with those of the standard English-medium primary classroom as found in those communities. The author argues that mother-tongue education can play a vital role in broader movements aimed at minority language development and improved educational effectiveness.

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Keywords: Mother-tongue education; PROPELCA; Language development; African education; Educational quality

1. Introduction

As is the case in most of sub-Saharan Africa, formal education is highly valued among the minority ethnic groups of Cameroon's Northwest Province. A former British colony, with more than 50 national languages¹ currently in use, this province of Cameroon exhibits both commitment to indigenous culture and active interest in participating in the 'modern world'. Formal

education is prized for its transmission of valued knowledge and skills: literacy, numeracy, knowledge of the English and French languages, and an array of scientific and cultural information valued by the North.

Certainly the role of English-language education in the Northwest Province is undeniable. For those who can afford the tuition fees, public and private schools alike produce well-educated individuals who go on to make their mark in the national and international scene. However, for most of the population of the province, living in small towns and villages, formal education delivered in English fails to give their children a thorough grounding in literacy, English skills or critical thinking. In such circumstances the effectiveness of primary

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¹The term 'national languages' as used in this paper refers to the local or minority languages of the nation—as opposed to the two official languages, French and English. Even the largest minority language populations in Northwest Cameroon constitute no more than 2% of the total population of the country.

education, not to mention higher education, is questionable.

Not only so, but the English-mediated curriculum also fails to give minority-language young people the needed grounding in their identity and history as members of vital minority cultures. To the contrary:

The modern school doesn't teach [children] the way their own community is living. When the school and community worlds are separate, returning to the community means going 'back' to a foreign world.²

Such schooling fails the student, the community, and ultimately the nation.

However, in 11 minority-language communities of the Northwest Province, a mother-tongue primary education program³ is providing an alternative: an educational experience that is firmly located within the community and which demonstrates substantial pedagogical and cultural relevance to local realities (NACALCO, 2001). This paper constitutes an examination of the pedagogical and cultural impact of this program in the three largest ethnolinguistic groups of Northwest Cameroon—the Nso', the Kom and the Bafut—in terms of the instructional quality and cultural relevance which characterize this educational alternative.

The research on which the paper is based was carried out as part of a postgraduate study program in the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh. The research took place over 11 months in 2002–2003. Research methods included direct observation of primary school classrooms, mother-tongue teacher training events and language committee meetings; analysis of the

extant body of publications in the three languages; and approximately 130 interviews (both semi-structured and open-ended) of individuals and groups. The interviewees' mother tongue and English were used as appropriate in the interviews.

2. The cultural and linguistic context

Northwest Cameroonian cultures, and the Nso', Bafut and Kom in particular, are characterized by a high degree of social structure and a hierarchical leadership which is still very prominent today. These societies trace the lineage of their kings through many generations, spanning hundreds of years (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967; Nkwi and Warnier, 1982). These three ethnic groups are the largest in the province, with populations of approximately 80,000 (Bafut) to 150,000 (Kom and Nso') people⁴ living in the homelands of Bafut, Kom and Bansa', respectively⁵; these areas each measure up to perhaps 100 km in diameter and consist of series of villages and towns. People of these ethnic groups also migrate to other parts of the country, and can be found in the larger cities throughout Cameroon.⁶

These ethnic communities are also known for the widespread use of their mother tongue. In the homelands, which range from 30 to 200 km away from the provincial capital of Bamenda, monolingualism is the norm among children and is not uncommon among women. Among the multilingual population, the mother tongue is the language of preference between its speakers no matter where they are in the country. Within these

⁴Since government population figures are calculated by division, not by ethnic group, no official numbers exist; these population figures reflect data from 1987 as well as more recent estimates of linguists who have been working in the areas for 10–20 years.

⁵The Nso' people speak the Lamnso' language; their home area in Northwest Province is Bansa'. The language and geographical home areas of the Bafut and Kom people are called by the same name as the peoples themselves. The term 'homelands' is used here as a generic term for these linguistically and geographically defined entities.

⁶NGO language development specialists in Bafut and Bansa' estimate that up to half of the total populations of these ethnic groups live outside the homeland area.

²Dr. Gabriel Mba, University of Yaoundé, Cameroon; PROPELCA program director, NACALCO.

³In the Cameroonian context, 'mother-tongue education' refers to any education program which formally includes use of the students' mother tongue as a language of instruction. The term does not refer to the exclusive use of the mother tongue in the classroom, however, and the program could actually be legitimately termed 'bilingual education' (see discussion below). This paper uses the former term in accordance with the terminology of those who have conceived and now carry out the program in Northwest Cameroon.

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