

## Multilingual Education in South Africa

*Multilingual Education in South Africa*

Edited by Kathleen Heugh, Amanda Siegrühn and Peter Plüddemann

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This book, written for the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa and the National Language Project, sets out to persuade its readers that multilingual education works. For most South Africans, multilingualism is accepted at home, at the work place and in the streets, and we accept that the demoscopic distribution in school classes will be multicultural and multilingual. To imagine truly multilingual teaching procedures may, however, be a novel concept and, for many teachers, a daunting challenge. As is summarised on the cover of the book, educators have, in recent years, increasingly

sought new ways in which to approach the language question in the classroom. On a policy level, the debate has broken new ground with the enshrining of multilingualism in the constitution, although details have yet to be spelled out.

The publication offers not only theoretical orientation, but, for the practitioner in the school, interesting models, practical guidance and helpful suggestions. It sets out to

give content to the debate about multilingual education by providing both a conceptual framework and examples of successful practice in bi/multilingual classrooms. Based on the firm belief in the maintenance and development of first-language medium of instruction throughout schooling, and on the need to learn at least a second language, the book argues strongly in favour of a policy of additive bi/multilingualism for formal schooling (text on the cover of the publication).

As far as the contents are concerned, the editors establish a fine balance by dividing the contributions into four different sections, each section focusing on multilingualism from a different angle. The first section, written primarily for teachers, examines the classroom practice, quoting interesting case studies. The second section has a more theoretical orientation and addresses the major issues of multilingualism on a broader and deeper level. The third one looks towards the future and explores a number of proposals and models, whereas the final section examines specific implications of implementation of multilingual policies, for instance from a publisher's point of view.

The use of mother-tongue instruction is central to the proposed policy of additive bi/multilingualism for formal schooling. This may remind one of models used in Bantu Education during the apartheid era. It is important, however, to distinguish between the subtractive bilingualism of the past and the additive bilingualism advocated in this book. Referring to UNESCO's report on 'The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education' (1953), in which the international support for the use of mother-tongue in education was reconfirmed, Heugh points out that

it was opportune for the National Party government that the publication of the UNESCO report coincided with the passing of the Bantu Education Act by parliament in 1953 (p. 42).

Clearly, the effect of the mother-tongue policy in Bantu Education was very different from that intended by UNESCO's recommendation. The main reasons are shown to have been the cognitively impoverished curricula that were used and the inflexible requirements of a sudden transition to an English medium of instruction for content subjects, in std. 6 at first, and later in std. 5 and, since 1979, in std. 3. In contrast to the dismal failure of the model of bilingualism as Bantu Education understood it, the additive bilingualism which this book proposes envisages a well-developed proficiency in (at least) two languages and positive cognitive outcomes. Thus it is important that 'our questions around bilingualism must be as complex, nuanced and comprehensive as possible', as De Klerk points out, in order to

implement, research and evaluate multilingual education scenarios that would empower children in scholastic performance as well as in social and emotional functioning (p. 61)

Generally speaking, the publication manages to create, through the ideas and models proposed, a sense of anticipation and excitement about opportunities presenting themselves in our new society. The notion that

'multilingualism should be seen not as a headache, but as an asset' (p. 1) sets a constructive tone which is maintained throughout the book. As a positive assertion of what is good in our 'rainbow nation' and as a strong message of hope and encouragement, the authors' idealistic approach to the complex realities of our schools is commendable, and the appearance of the publication is timely indeed, given the prevalent climate of worry and despair about the future of education in South Africa, amongst educational planners, teachers, parents and school children alike.

The editorial quality of the publication is superb. It is a relief, for instance, to find an explanatory list of all the acronyms used. A useful preview of each of the four main sections, a short note about the profession and fields of interest of every contributor, a glossary of terms, and a complete subject index are further examples of the careful attention to detail which makes the publication easily assessable and truly user-friendly.

As far as the theoretical basis underlying some of the proposals is concerned, there is, however, an intrinsic fallacy that needs to be addressed. While I agree with the notion proposed that fixed norms of standardised language rules and paradigms are often overemphasised in (language) teaching, and that their status should be reviewed continuously, I disagree with the assumption that they should simply be played down in order to get rid of the problems they are causing, as Agnihotri is suggesting in his (otherwise thoroughly readable) contribution: 'Multilingualism as a classroom resource'. In the new, sociologically-sensitive, multilingual language classroom he proposes,

accuracy and/or fluency in the target language or acquisition of specific skills to negotiate social (mainly business) encounters ceases to be the goal of language teaching (p. 6).

It is difficult to understand how simply discarding old teaching goals without replacing them with substantial, viable alternatives could lead to real empowerment of previously disempowered people. His reflections on alternatives are almost exclusively on a moral and philosophical level, e.g. when he spells out the importance of tolerance and respect for each others' differences in culture and language or appeals for community involvement on decision making levels. These reflections are valid, but the author is rather vague about the way in which syllabi should be transformed and liberating norms established or what they should entail. As far as language teaching is concerned, the notion proposed that multilingual language awareness classes should replace 'traditional' language lessons remains unclear. On what levels should this happen? Should L1-tuition also be replaced by this model? How does that make sense in the light of the importance of

maintaining and developing the first language in additive bilingual programmes, if cognitive development and the acquisition of a second language are to be facilitated,

as De Klerk and most other contributors emphasise so rightly? (p. 36). It should be interesting to hear what parents would say if their children were, for argument's sake, not learning a form of 'standard' English in their English L1-classes (or, for that matter, at L2 or L3 levels), but some other form of the language, agreed on by the (rather vaguely defined) consensus-seeking procedure advocated:

given a set of sample multilingual materials, children, parents and teachers will collaborate in producing their own learning materials. Local languages, history, geography and culture will not appear on the margins of this enterprise, but will actually form the very essence of the educational process (p. 6)

I, for one, would object strongly, because it would obviously not be enough if the English (or whatever other subject) learnt in school were useful and valid to my children in the particular environment of the local community only. Clearly, one would expect the knowledge and abilities acquired at school to be as functional and acceptable in other parts of the world, precisely because they should enable the learners to participate as unique and dignified citizens, in local as well as international discourses of all kinds. Our schools have a responsibility to produce such citizens, empowered and emancipated to be who they are and who they want to be, rather than to be marginalised and crippled by a new set of superimposed and growth-impeding (regional) parameters.

In conclusion it has to be noted, therefore, that the crucial question of standards and norms has, to some extent, been sidelined<sup>4</sup>. This is unfortunate indeed, because it raises suspicions about the validity of many of the practical proposals and guidelines which the book has to offer. Unless there can be proof that the alternatives can really empower children and improve their chances of survival in the tough world 'out there', there will be little incentive for teachers or administrators to consider implementing the proposals on a more substantial level than simply to create a feeling of benevolence and to improve the general atmosphere in school classes. According to some of the other contributions, notably the accounts of actual

<sup>4</sup> This omission takes place by situating norms and standards either on a purely historical level, (by suggesting that the colonisers were only following a hidden agenda in setting norms and standards in an attempt to prove the 'superiority' of their language and culture) or on the level of an irritating detail easily eradicated (by suggesting that we could produce a new generation of happy, self-confident pupils simply by getting rid of the standards and the norms forced upon us in the past)

projects that have been successful, the models proposed do indeed warrant more serious consideration. Therefore I hope that this publication may encourage many readers, in all fields of education, to give the notions advocated a fair chance, to try out and to experiment with some of the ideas and as such to contribute to the on-going search for creative and humane but also functional and practical models for meaningful transformation in our educational institutions.

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## Breaking Barriers - and Methodological Rules

*Breaking Barriers. Stereotypes and the Changing Values  
in Afrikaans Writing 1875-1990*

by C.N. van der Merwe

Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994, 137 pp.

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A book such as C.N. van der Merwe's *Breaking Barriers. Stereotypes and the Changing of Values in Afrikaans Writing 1875 - 1990* brings with it a dilemma which periodically surfaces with regard to minority discourses such as Afrikaans literature. One is grateful when anything substantial is published in English on Afrikaans literature, seeing the dearth of such criticism. The problem comes with striking a balance between the two audiences which might benefit from such an undertaking, i.e. 'outsiders' with various degrees of familiarity with Afrikaans literature and the 'in-house' participants, sensitive to all the finer and variously obscure nuances of the discourse. Since the book attempts to address these two audiences, concentrating on one at the expense of the other in a review such as this one would be an injustice to the impulse behind Van der Merwe's study.

Van der Merwe explicitly states that he wrote the study in English to communicate with scholars in other South African literatures, aiming '... to start breaking down the barriers which have existed between students of the