Botswana

The impact of language policy and practice on children’s learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa 2017
2.2. Botswana

2.2.1. Background information
Botswana gained independence from Britain in 1966. English remains the official language of the country. Nyati-Ramahobo (2004) indicates the lack of a clear policy at the time of Botswana’s independence, although it was understood that English would be the medium of instruction. Because teachers in Botswana did not possess adequate English skills the use of Setswana,1 as the main language of Botswana, was accepted in the lower grades.

The use of languages other than English in school was banned at independence, although in some areas their informal use continued. Because some officials insisted that English was essential, more resources were directed toward building English language capacity (ibid., p. 43). Alluding to the reasons for rejecting language diversity, Nyati-Ramohobo, notes that “the language planning process in Botswana is influenced by an orientation which views language diversity as a problem, a reversal or negation of democratic gains, a threat to unity, social harmony and to development” (2004, p. 44). Furthermore, Nyati-Ramohobo argues that “the government prefers the use of English to any other language in the country … [even though] Setswana, according to some scholars is spoken by about 80 per cent of the population as a first language” (2004, p. 31).

Ethnologue lists 29 languages for Botswana.

2.2.2. Current language policy
Setswana is the medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 4, while English is taught as a subject in those grades. English then becomes the medium of instruction in Grade 5 and extends through the tertiary level, while Setswana is taught as a subject. This policy applies to all government schools. Private schools, however, use English as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 onward, but they have a flexible policy on the number of years they teach Setswana as a subject (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004, p. 45-46). The policy provides no recognition of other languages in the formal education system. However, Nyati-Ramahobo (2000, p. 274) contends that Botswana’s language policy is not actually written in one place, noting that “it is understood, inferred and observed.”

2.2.3. Education policy and practice
Two sets of language relationships play out in Botswana’s education system. The first is the historical tension between Setswana, spoken in eight ethnic Tswana communities and the languages of non-Tswana communities; this tension is evidenced by the choice of Setswana as a sanctioned language of schooling (Smieja, 2003). Smieja argues that “this has had serious negative impact on the education of non-Setswana speakers for many years and disadvantaged them for a long time” (p. 99). Tabulawa and Pansiri (2013) add that “ethnic minority [i.e. non-Tswana] groups have no linguistic rights” (p. 33).

Botswanan civil society has not been silent in contesting this Setswana/English policy. The Kamanakao Association, a civil society organization dedicated to the strengthening and legal recognition of the Bayeyi language community, has been active since 1995. The aims of the Kamanakao Association include language development and literacy in the Shiyei language2. The Balumbizdi be iKalanga (The Society for the Promotion of iKalanga Language, SPIL), has been active in celebrating and raising the profile of the language and culture of the Kalanga people. In both cases, influencing the national language policy to include Botswanan languages other than Setswana is a stated goal3.

The second set of language relationships is reflected in the increasingly visible role given to English in formal education compared to Setswana. Today, both the lower and upper primary and junior secondary curriculum include Setswana and English (Tabulawa and Pansiri, 2013).

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1. Many of the languages of Southern and Eastern Africa are members of the Bantu language family. These languages are characterized by the use of a prefix such as ki-, chi-, ci-, xi-, lu- and se-, which denotes that they are languages (e.g. Setswana is “the language of the Tswana people”). These prefixes are variably written; sometimes they as well as the actual language name are capitalized (Setswana), sometimes only the prefix is capitalized (Setswana). On occasion, and particularly in the Ethnologue where country languages are listed alphabetically, the prefix is omitted in favour of just the language name (Tswana). Spelling in this review reflects the spellings used in the sources.


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Describing the interaction between these two sets of language relationships, Kamwendo, Mooko and Moumakwa (2009, p. 221) note that “with English established as the official language, and Setswana as the national language, the exclusion of the other indigenous languages continues.” This is not all good news for Setswana, however; “although Setswana occupies a privileged position, this does not imply by any means that the language is safe from the domineering effects of English, which by all standards has asserted itself as the main global language.” Batibo takes this view even further, arguing that “as Batswana [people of Botswana] become active members of this [global] village and therefore become prey to the dictates of the key players, they will progressively lose their linguistic and cultural identity” (Batibo, 2004, p. 59).

2.2.4. Studies
Commeyras and Ketsitlile (2013) describe a review of literature on reading in Botswana that was carried out in 2007 with support from the International Reading Association. The authors first note that “it is important to keep in mind that English is the second or third language for most students, and Setswana is the second language for a significant minority of students” (pp. 214-5). They then describe two relevant research initiatives. One, by Nyati-Ramahobo (1987), found that students for whom Setswana was a second language consistently scored lower on primary leaving examinations than did those for whom Setswana was a first language. The other was a linguistic research project by Lekgoko and Winskel (2008), on the challenges faced by students in becoming biliterate in Setswana and English, given that the very different sound systems of the two languages map onto the same set of written symbols.

Analysing these findings, Commeyras and Ketsitlile conclude that “learning to read in English is different and more difficult than learning to read in Setswana” (p. 215). They also argue that “early interventions are needed to make sure that students coming to school with a first language that is not Setswana or English be given specialized instruction to keep them from falling behind in Grade one.” (p.219)

Brock-Utne and Alidou (2011, p.199) also mention a study in which Prophet and Dow (1994) found that students in the first year of secondary school (Form 1), when taught science concepts in Setswana, had a significantly better understanding of concepts than their peers who were taught in English.

2.2.5. Language education initiatives
Breakthrough to Setswana
In the early 1980s, the Breakthrough to Setswana programme for lower primary school children was developed in South Africa by the Molteno Project, at Rhodes University’s Institute for the Study of English in Africa. The programme was adapted from the British Breakthrough to Literacy program of the 1970s. Breakthrough to Setswana was begun in 1983 funded by the Ministry of Education.

In 1995 a programme evaluation was carried out, at the request of the Ministry of Education and with funding from the British Council. By this time, it had extended to more than 800 schools. The evaluation, documented by Peacock and Morakaladi (1995), was ambivalent about the impact of the programme, although it recognized that the sample of schools evaluated was small.

A 2007 study of how reading is taught in Botswanan schools (Biakolo, 2007) also mentioned the Breakthrough programme and was somewhat critical of the way the programme had been implemented. The study also suggested that reading should be taught as a subject of its own, rather than as part of the language curriculum.

Education initiatives in other languages of Botswana over the past years have included the development of Naro-language educational materials and literacy programs, and the development of reading materials work in Shiheyi by the Kamanakao Association.