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Ethnic pluralism and the challenge of thematic curriculum implementation in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Uganda has been developing and revising its curricula since the time of British colonial rule. The latest revision of the primary education curriculum led to the introduction of the Thematic Curriculum in 2007. This curriculum requires the use of pupils' mother tongues as languages of instruction from Primary One to Three and then English from Primary Five to Seven. Primary Four is a transitional year. Several studies have indicated that the Thematic Curriculum has been a failure. Although various reasons have been advanced for the challenges of the Thematic Curriculum, the greatest setback seems to be ethnic pluralism. Using in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, education officials and pupils, I investigated how ethnic pluralism impeded the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum in Uganda. I found that most districts in Uganda are multi-ethnic and therefore multi-lingual making it difficult to choose the dominant mother tongue to use as a language of instruction. Even when the dominant language is identified, the pupils and teachers are in most cases from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. This study recommends the introduction of a national language to be used as medium of instruction at the lower levels of education in Uganda.

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Introduction

Uganda has been developing and revising its curricula since the colonial days of missionary education (Muyanda-Mutebi 1996). The changes have depended largely on changing national interests. The most recently developed is the Thematic Curriculum that requires the use of pupils' mother tongues as languages of instruction from Primary One to Three and then English from Primary Five to Seven. Primary Four is a transitional year (Kamugisha 2017). This preference for mother tongue as medium of instruction in school is seen in some circles as a form of African renaissance (Neville 2003) Uganda is by no means the first country to use mother tongue as medium of instruction in lower primary. It has been used in many countries of Europe, America and Asia (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Benson 2005). The challenge in Uganda is ethnic plurality where districts like Butaleja, Kiryandongo, Kyenjonjo and Omoro, among others, have several languages used as mother tongues in different families living in close affinity to one another. This challenge is, however, not confined to Uganda; Language debates are highly contested and vigorous today in Australia, South Africa, India, USA and many other countries (Lo Bianco 1997; Gupta 1997; Heugh 2006, 2013).

The Constitution of Uganda under article 6 (1) provides for English as the official language of Uganda. In section 6 (2) it states, 'Any other language may be used as a medium of instruction in schools or other educational institutions or for legislative, administrative or judicial purposes as may be prescribed by law'. It is this provision of the constitution that was invoked to introduce

the Thematic Curriculum in 2007. Many studies have, however, revealed that mother-tongue education is the best (Skutnabb-Kangas 1994; Heugh 2005, 2006). In Uganda, the Kajubi Education Review Commission of 1987 recommended the use of mother tongues in lower primary school level. The introduction of Thematic Curriculum is thus grounded on research findings.

Uganda has 56 ethnic groups as per Article 10 (a) of the 1995 Constitution. This also means 56 different languages although some are related. Linguistically, the total population of Uganda can be categorised into three namely Nilotics, Bantu and Central Sudanic. These three have sub-divisions as well. The Nilotics are divided into Plain Nilotics of the Karamojong, Teso and Sabiny, among others, and the River-Lake Nilotics such as the Acholi, Alur, Chope and Jopadhola. The Bantu have the Gganda-Soga group of languages different from Runyoro-Rutoro-Rukiga languages. This ethno-linguistic plurality has made the Thematic Curriculum difficult to implement.

When the Thematic Curriculum was introduced in 2007, expectations were high on the grounds that teaching and learning would become easy and primary school children would have more interest in the learning process since the language used at home would be applied at school as well. But research conducted by Uwezo (2011), Kamugisha (2017) and Rwothungeyo (2016) have proved otherwise. Instead of the mother tongue, Ugandans prefer English to be used at all levels in school (Muyanda 1996). This is a challenge to Thematic Curriculum implementers in Uganda.

The effectiveness of any curriculum is determined by the performance of its products, using the curriculum aims and the national goals and expectations as indicators (Muyanda 1996). The experience in Uganda is that some Primary Seven candidates who are products of the Thematic Curriculum are unable to write their English names properly. Denis is spelled 'Denish' Sarah becomes 'Salah' and Grace is 'Grass' (Personal communication with Aldo Oteka). The spelling and comprehension abilities of Thematic Curriculum pupils are so alarming that Uwezo (2011) asks: 'Are our children learning?' It's hard though to blame the pupils for this since the mentioned names are foreign to them. Since the children can spell their surnames, it means they are learning albeit at a slow rate.

This research investigated the peculiar hurdles associated with the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum in Uganda due to ethnic plurality. Using in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, education officials and pupils, I investigated how ethnic pluralism impeded the implementation of the thematic curriculum in Uganda. I conducted interview in Omoro District of the former greater Gulu, Butaleja and Kiryandongo Districts to represent, Northern region, Eastern Region and Western region respectively. The Central region was left out because its cosmopolitanity. The Thematic Curriculum allows cosmopolitan regions to use English as medium of instruction even in Lower Primary.

The data for this research was gathered through key informants' interviews with six head teachers, twenty-four primary school teachers, three Local Council V Secretary for Education and nine parents. I also observed twelve primary school lessons for Primary One, Two and Three. All these were done in the three districts of research as mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The lesson observation focused on the method of teaching used, the language of instruction, the teaching aids and the level of participation of the learners.

Uganda's ethnic panorama

Although the three major ethno-linguistic groups of Uganda namely the Bantu, Nilotics and Central Sudanic are scattered in many parts of the country, the Nilotics are confined to the northern region with the exception of the Jopadhola who are in Eastern Uganda and the Chope in the Western region of Bunyoro. Some Chope are also found in Omoro District. The Bantu live in the southern, western and central regions while the Central Sudanic peoples are in northern Uganda. The Bantu is the largest group in Uganda followed by the Nilotics and the Central Sudanic peoples.

The cradle of the Bantu is the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's Katanga Province. Other scholars place it at the foot of Mountain Cameroun. Which source is more accurate is not my concern here. The fact is, Bantu peoples such as the Baganda, Banyole, Batoro, Banyankole and Banyoro came

from the direction of western Uganda and settled where they are found today. The Bantu peoples of Uganda can be sub-divided into eastern interlacustrine Bantu and the Western Interlacustrine Bantu. The 'interlacustrine' here refers to the major lakes namely Tanganyika, Victoria, Albert, Kyoga, George and Edward. The Eastern Interlacustrine are the Baganda, Basoga, Banyole and Bagisu among others. They occupy central and eastern Uganda. The Western Interlacustrine Bantu are the Banyankole, Banyoro, Batoro and Bakiga among others who live in southern and western Uganda.

The River and Lake Nilotics migrated from Barh-el-ghazel region of present day Republic of South Sudan, entering Uganda from the northern direction following the Nile River southwards until they dispersed at Pakwach. Their descendants today are the Acholi, Alur, Chope and Jophadola. The Plain Nilotics, however, hailed from The Horn of Africa. They entered Uganda from the direction of Northern Kenya and North Eastern Uganda. Today they are represented by the Karamojong, Teso, Kuman and the Langi. The Kuman and Langi have since adopted Lwo language as their Lingua although they kept the other aspects of the Plain Nilotic's culture.

Little is known about the migratory rout of the Central Sudanic peoples like the Madi, Kuku, Lugbara and the Menning. Like the River-Lake Nilotics, the Central Sudanic people originated from what is now Southern Sudan. They left many of the kins there like the Madi of Nimule and the Kuku of Kajokeji in Southern Sudan. The Central Sudanic peoples arrived in what is now Uganda much earlier than the Nilotics. Acholiland was originally occupied by the Madi who were gradually displaced by the Acholi to their present location. According to Atkinson (1994) the Madi language was initially the dominant language in northern Uganda until the arrival of the Lwo and the imposition of their culture on the people of the region.

The 2014 Uganda National population and Housing Census placed Baganda at 16.5% of the national population followed by the Banyankole at 9.6% and the Basoga at 8.8% all three are Bantu people. Among the Nilotics, the Iteso are 7%, the Langi 6.3 while the Acholi constitute 4.4%. The Lugbara who are Central Sudanic people are 3.3% followed by the Madi, Aringa and the Kuku. As can be seen, the three largest ethnic groups are of Bantu stock. Most of Uganda is therefore occupied by Bantu ethnic groups.

There is little difference between the Nilotic peoples and the Central Sudanic ones. They are largely dark-skinned, tall people with athletic build-up. Both have a mixed economy but depend more on cropping than animal husbandry with the exception of the Karamojong who are renowned nomadic pastoralists. The Nilotics and the Central Sudanic people grow similar crops namely millet, cassava and simsim among others. They both rare zebu type of cattle with short horns and large humps. The similarity in morphology, culture and economic activities has made it pretty difficult to distinguish between the Nilotics and Central Sudanic people. To people from outside the region, they are simply 'northerners'.

Meanwhile the Bantu people are also similar in many ways. The major Bantu groupings practice mixed economy but the staple food is cooking bananas known locally as *matooke*. Other crops are yams and pumpkin among others. They keep long-horned humpless cattle as opposed to the short horned zebu type of the Nilotics. The Bantu are lighter skinned than the Nilotics. In the pre-colonial days most of the Bantu were organised into larger centralised societies or were governed by neighbouring centralised states. The largest were Buganda, Bunyoro and Toro Kingdoms. To a casual observer, Uganda may simply be divided ethnically into Southerners meaning the Bantu, and northerners, implying the Nilotics.

The North-South divide in Uganda has prominently featured in politics and service delivery as in speech. The Bantu languages are closely related while the Nilotics are not. For instance a Muganda (someone from Buganda) can understand a Munyoro (from Bunyoro) but an Acholi cannot get a word from the Iteso although both are Nilotics. So the southern half of Uganda, inhabited by the Bantu, is linguistically more united than the northern half dominated by Nilotics.

Before the introduction of the Thematic Curriculum, the schools in Uganda used English as medium of instruction because it's being the official language. The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) which is the examination body for Uganda also uses English to set exams right from

primary to tertiary level. It's reasoned that by the time the candidates register for Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), they have mastered the English language to a level that enables them to comprehend examinations set in English.

The teaching of young people in English has however been criticised not only for being colonial but for denying children to learn in the language they understand best (Lo Bianco 1997; Gupta 1997; Heugh 2006). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) calls teaching people in a language they don't understand 'submersion' because it is analogous to 'holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim'. For the case of Uganda, English is not only elitist but it's also foreign. This compounds the problem of learning because as Benson (2005) has said 'submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher'.

The three districts that constitute our geographic scope are among the ethnically plural districts. In Omoro, the majority are Acholi but it's also occupied by the Langi, Nubians and Chope. The Chope in Omoro District also call themselves Jopalwo. Their parish, located in Bobi Sub-county, is also called 'Palwo'. Luckily, the Nubians are only found in the urban areas where the Thematic Curriculum does not apply. The challenge in Omoro District is the dialectical difference between the Acholi version of Lwo and the Lango version of it.

In terms of ethno-linguistic differences, Kiryandong District is the worst affected of our three districts with over forty ethnic groups including the Banyoro, Acholi, Alur, Chope, Banyarwanda and Batoro. In Butaleja District, there are Banyole, Bagisu, Bagwere, Basoga and Iteso. The Thematic Curriculum has been introduced in all the three districts but with varying degree of success. In all three districts, it has been difficult to implement the Thematic Curriculum which makes one to question why and how the curriculum was introduced.

Background to the thematic curriculum

Curriculum development in Uganda began with the introduction of formal education. In pre-colonial days each ethnic group or even clan of Uganda had its own education system. This indigenous education never had a curriculum and there was no need for it since every member of society was involved and knew what to do with the young. There were no formal classrooms as well neither were there designated teachers or instructors. In this system, all adults were teachers and all children were pupils. The aim of this education was the promotion of harmony and continuity in society.

Indigenous education was very effective in promoting culture including the language of each ethnic group in Uganda but its products were largely orate. When European Christian Missionaries arrived in Uganda, they undertook to solve the problem of illiteracy. The first Christian Missionaries arrived in Uganda in 1877 and from that time to 1900 many other Christian groups came to Uganda. These missionaries were the first to introduce formal education in the country.

The weakness of missionary education was that it emphasised reading, writing, arithmetic and religion only. Missionary education also divided Ugandans into Catholics and Protestants depending on which school one graduated from. As a policy, Catholic schools only admitted the children of Catholics and Protestant schools admitted children of Protestants only. Pupils had to be converted and confirmed into the respective Christian religions in whose schools they were admitted. Teachers and all staff of such schools also had to belong to the respective religious organisations.

This weakness of the missionary education prompted the colonial government to establish several commissions to probe the education system of Uganda. Among the commissions were The Phelps – Stokes Commission of 1924, The Earl de la Warr Committee of 1935, The Thomas Education Committee of 1940, The Dee Bunsen Commission of 1952 and The Binns Study Group of 1957. The Phelps – Stokes Commission alone was conserved directly with the curriculum of primary education in Uganda. It recommended that 'All people have an inherent right to their languages as a means of giving full expression to their own personality, however primitive they may be'. It can therefore be argued that the introduction of mother-tongue education or the Thematic Curriculum is traceable to

the 1924 Phelps – Stokes Commission although the Kajubi Commission that came fifty-five years later gave more advocacy for mother-tongue education.

Although The Phelps – Stokes Commission recommended the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction, it was not implemented basically because the colonial government did not control education. The schools were owned and controlled by different Christian Missionary groups that also formulated and managed the school curricula.

The picture remained unclear even after independence. The independent government did not control pre-primary education as is the case even today. In fact Pre-primary education in Uganda is not compulsory (Ejuu, 2012). The parent has to decide whether to enrol the child to pre-primary school at three years or wait until they turn seven to start primary one. This elective nature of pre-school education has made the process of introducing children to reading rather complex.

The children entering primary one after three years of pre-primary education are far better in writing, reading and English Language skill than those that never went to pre-primary school. To make matters worse, Government schools in rural areas do not have pre-primary classes while all private schools do (Ssentanda 2014). Products of private schools perform better in Primary Leaving Examinations than those of government school.

One remedy was to introduce the Thematic Curriculum so that children can learn easily in the language they understand best. This was the recommendation of The Government White Paper on Education of 1992 written by the 1987 Kajubi Commission. This is the basis for official policy which provides linchpin for education programmes in the Country. It is the supreme guiding document for the overall policy framework and main thrust of the Education and Sports Sector.

Although the Education Review Commission, on whose report the 1992 White Paper on education was based, had recommended that the medium of instruction in the first four years of primary schooling should be the mother tongue, the government changed this to ‘the relevant local language’ (Tembe and Norton 2011). The relevant local language refers to the language widely spoken in the region. For the case of Kiryandongo District, the term ‘relevant’ may be misleading because although the land belongs to the indigenous Banyoro, Lunyoro is used by the minority. The majority in Byeyale Town, for instance, speak Lwo.

Hence the introduction of the Thematic Curriculum in 2007 was based on the recommendation of the Government White Paper of Education of 1992. The White Paper also recommended that besides using the mother tongue as medium of instruction from Primary one to Primary Three, indigenous languages like Luganda, Lwo, Runyakitara, Ateso and Lugbara should be taught as school subjects.

The Thematic Curriculum is believed to contribute to such processes by improving education quality, and more specifically by increasing the achievement levels of students in literacy, numeracy and life skills (Altinyelken 2010). Had Uganda been a mono-ethnic country like Somalia, the Thematic Curriculum would have been very successful because its intentions are quite good. However, after ten years of its implementation, the Thematic Curriculum has not lived to the expectations of all stake-holders of education including parents, teachers, pupils and development partners. Although many factors have been attributed to its dismal performance, my central argument in this paper is that the implementation of this curriculum is an uphill task due to the challenge of ethnic plurality in Uganda.

Multiple ethnicity and thematic curriculum

In 2014, Ssentanda (2014) wrote that ‘There is a problem with the teaching of reading in Uganda. It also appears that the situation is not getting better, even after introducing Mother Tongue (MT) education’. I sought to find out why. Although Omoro, Butaleja and Kiryandongo Districts are distant away from each other, their challenges of learning at the primary level are the same. The problem of Thematic Curriculum began right from the conceptual level. The curriculum was premised on the belief that rural Uganda villages are ethnically and therefore linguistically homogenous.

Several reasons have been advanced for the challenges of implementing the Thematic Curriculum; from a lack of textbooks and other learning materials, to poorly trained teachers, all the way to poor

attitude from parents (Kamugisha 2017). The lack of attitude from parents is persistent in Omoro, Kiryandongo and Butaleja Districts and is observed even among the teachers and students. Speaking in English is associated with high class and both parents and primary school teachers regard fluency in the English language with intelligence. This points to some degree of English language imperialism in Uganda and indeed all over Anglo-phone Africa (Neville 2003; Phillipson 2009; Holliday 2005).

A person whether young or old who speaks good English is taken to be more intelligent than the other who has difficulties in it. But attitudes towards languages, perceptions of their vitality and relative social status and dominance are transmitted through early multilingual socialisation (Mohanty 2017). The people with low attitude towards mother tongues may not have had opportunity to interact with the social groups using those languages during their early days. Inability to speak English however is not the problem of Thematic Curriculum implementation in any of the three districts.

In Omoro District, Lwo has been chosen as the language of instruction at the Lower Primary level. The advantage in this district is that all the three major ethnic groups namely the Acholi, Langi and Chope are Nilotics. They all speak Lwo but of different dialects. These dialectical differences have made it a daunting task to use Lwo as medium of instruction at school. In an interview Mr Lameja, the Deputy Head teacher of Pa Minjaa Primary School in Omoro District, I gathered that the Langi and Acholi children in his school use different names for common things like the spoon. The Acholi call the spoon 'Malaga', the Langi refer to it as 'Ojiko' but both ethnic groups have Lwo as the mother tongue.

Meanwhile the Chope who settled in Bobi Sub-county of Omoro District are River-Lake Nilotic people whose culture including language has been heavily influenced by the Banyoro of the Bantu stock in whose land they originally settled. Following the dispersal of the Lwo at Pakwach, a section crossed the Nile River into Bunyoro. This group again split with the first group settling close to the River Nile while others proceeded up to the headquarters of the Chezi Dynasty. Those who settled near River Nile became the Chope people. After some time a section of the Chope crossed the Nile again and proceeded to Acholiland and settled in the land near present Bobi Sub-county of Omoro District. Many of them have been assimilated into the Acholi culture but a section is still stuck to the Chope tradition which is a mixer of Lwo and Banyoro culture.

I attended a Primary Two lesson at Kulu Otit Primary School in Bobi Sub-county. This school has Chope, Acholi and Langi children but the chosen language for Thematic Curriculum is Lwo, the language of the Acholi people. The Acholi and Langi children seemed to know the common words for body parts but the Chope have different names. The Nose is 'um' in Lwo and this is understood by Langi and Acholi people but the Chope call it 'Nyindu'. The same applied to crop names. Acholi and Langi children knew the crops by different names from those of the Chope.

The problem I discovered in Kulu Otit Primary School is not any different from what other researchers have unearthed. In one research in eastern Uganda, it was found that both teachers and pupils of Kifuyo Primary School in Namayingo District could not speak Lusoga, the chosen language of instruction under the Thematic Curriculum.

Lusoga has been designated as the local language in Namayingo District and yet many teachers cannot even construct a sentence in Lusoga. Many pupils in the district also do not understand the language. (Rwothungeyo 2016)

By the time of my research, Kulu Otit Primary School had teachers of the Acholi and Chope ethnic groups but none of them was a Lango. A lesson taught by the Chope teacher could disadvantage Acholi and Langi children and those delivered by the Acholi disfavoured the children of the other two ethnic groups.

The language problem also affected teachers and prefects of the school when on duty. The pupils of lower primary school can only take instructions in Lwo. Had there been a national language to which children were introduced right from Primary One, it would have been easy to instruct the pupils even though some could have difficulties with the language.

I gathered that there was a struggle over the choice of language for instruction in lower primary. In Butaleja District, the chosen mother tongue is Lunyole, but there are Bagwere, Iteso, Baganda and Samia children. The Iteso are Nilotics while the rest are Bantu people. Bantu languages are intelligible so the pupils are comfortable with Lunyole as medium of instruction. The problem is with schools at the border with Bugishu and Teso. Here, the majority is either Iteso or Bagishu. In Wangate Primary School, both the teacher and pupils prefer Lumasaba (the language of the Bagisu people) but the district has decided that Lunyole is used. This mishap is because Wangate Primary school is at the border between Bugisuland and Banyoleland.

The problem of choice of language has also been reported elsewhere in Uganda. According to Kamugisha (2017):

In some areas, there is confusion on the local language of instruction in which pupils should be taught. For example, in Buliisa District, over four languages – Lugungu, Alur, Runyoro and Kinyarwanda – are spoken. In Nakasongola, Luganda is spoken in some areas but it cannot be understood in certain areas where Luruuli is widely spoken.

In Omoro District Lwo has been chosen but as was mentioned earlier, there are Langi, Chope and Nubi children in some schools. In Idobo Primary School, the majority is Langi Children but the Lwo dialect of the Acholi is what is used to teach children. Likewise in Kiryandongo District, Lunyoro (The language of the Banyoro ethnic group) is used as language of instruction but the majority in Tecwaa Primary School is Acholi followed by the Alur.

The choice of language for instruction has turned out to be political. Matters are made worse by the district councils taking decision without consulting the affected schools. It appears the decisions are also taken without knowledge of the exact number of children in the respective schools and their ethnic background. It's difficult to establish the language of the majority in districts like Butaleja and Kiryandong. The majority varies from one sub-county to another or even on the basis of the parishes. Kachonga sub-county has more Iteso than the Banyole according to the 2014 population and Housing census yet the district belongs to the Banyole.

The affected ethnic communities feel that the chosen language for Thematic Curriculum was imposed on them by the district councils because the councillors are of different ethnic groups. Such concerns should be avoided because in multilingual settings the maintenance of social cohesiveness may be of more importance than the benefit of mother-tongue education (Gupta 1997). The decision for medium of instruction should be owned by both parents and teachers of the school and this should be in the interest of the vulnerable pupils.

In the opinion of Mr H. Phenicas, the Headteacher of Wangate Primary School, Lumasaba should have been used in his school because the majority of teachers is Bagisu many of which speak Lunyole with difficulties and others not at all. The same applies to pupils. Had consideration been made about the parish where the school is located other than the district Lumasaba would have been preferred over Lunyole. This was not done and the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum has proven very difficult in Wangate Primary school.

New entrants in the different schools are the most affected. According to the Head teacher of Kyakakugulu Primary School in Kiryandongo District, the new entrants are children of working class people like teachers, police men and women, and staff of Kigumba Municipality. Many of them are not Banyoro. Such children suffer especially in the first two months of joining the new school. The Head teacher said children learn very fast to the extent that although Kiryandongo District has Alur, Acholi, Chope and other ethnic groups, all the children who grew there can speak Lunyoro fluently. Hence the problem of language of instruction is only for newly enrolled children.

The issue of new entrants underscores the problem of urbanisation, multiple ethnicities and the thematic curriculum. This curriculum is not applied in urban areas. But what is traditional known as rural is becoming urbanised. For instance remote sub-county headquarters now have teachers, police personnel, sub-county staff, etc. These are of different ethnic backgrounds. There are secondary

schools in all sub-counties of Uganda. Police out-posts are currently being established in all sub-counties. Odek sub-county in Omoro District is one of the remotest sub-counties in the district but it has Baganda, Bagisu, Langi, Madi and members of other ethnic groups in Uganda serving at various levels in the sub-county. Their children are registered in nearby primary schools like Odek Primary school where the Thematic Curriculum is implemented. Their children are taught in Lwo.

Another problem identified in all the three districts of Butaleja, Kiryandongo and Omoro is inter-marriage. Inter-marriage brings another challenge as children are unable to comprehend the language of one of their parents. Onen is a teacher in Awali Primary School. His wife is a Madi. His two children speak Madi language but the family lives in Omoro District where Lwo is the language for Thematic Curriculum. Mr Onen is an Acholi but children learn more from their mothers so they speak Madi, the language of their mother.

Even if both parents are of the same ethnic group, there is a growing phenomenon of housemaids in Uganda. Where both parents are working class, there is a maid or maids to manage the home. Children learn from housemaids more than the parents because they spend more time with them. Many parents choose maids of different ethnic groups distant from their own. The reason is that they are more reliable and can force their children to speak English. If a maid is picked from among the local ethnic group they have high propensity to connive with locals to steal property and run back home easily. Those from distant ethnic groups cannot easily do this hence they are preferred by most parents. But the use of English even at home undermines the development of mother tongues and down plays its role in promoting cultural diversity (Lo Bianco 2010).

A family living in Omoro District prefers a Karimojong maid and those resident in Butaleja choose Alur maids. It's difficult and unexpected of an Alur girl to conspire with Banyole people in Butaleja to speak property or to run back home when in disagreement with their employers. Over reliance on housemaid by working class parent makes children to learn the language of the maids other than the parents. If the parent are lucky their children will learn and speak English or Kiswahili spoken by the maid instead of their parents' mother tongue otherwise they will speak the vernacular of the maid instead of their mother tongue.

The Thematic Curriculum is proving difficult to implement in all three districts due to the inability of some of the teachers to communicate in the chosen language of communication. There are Iteso living in Butaleja as indigenous communities but are unable to communicate, leave alone teach in Lunyole, the chosen language for Thematic Curriculum implementation. The same problem has been reported in Nakasongola District:

When Luruuli had not yet been approved as a language in Nakasongola, we went and tried to teach the children in Luganda. When I went to a school near the lake in Zengebe, I stood to teach and the children could not understand me. (Rwothungeyo 2016)

The above challenge is felt nationwide because Uganda's districts are largely multi-ethnic. When the British Colonial authorities designated ethnic districts like Acholi District, Teso District and Karamoja District, it was done in error because the districts actually had other ethnic communities as well. Teso District has the Kumam who are dialectically different from the Iteso. The Acholi District had Nubians, Madi, Alur and Langi as well. The current leaders of this country should have seen this problem and avoided it.

There is also the problem of minority ethnic groups in Uganda whose languages have not been standardised. I discovered that some languages in Uganda do not have standard orthographies. In Kiryandongo District one of the reasons for the use of Lunyoro for Thematic Curriculum is that it has standard orthography. Others such as Lendu, Chope and Bakungu languages don't. Without a standard orthography a language cannot be used for teaching but there are children using it even at school.

The non-orthographic languages also lack teaching materials that can be of help to both teachers and pupils. In fact, even the major languages like Lunyoro, Lwo and Ateso in my study areas lack core literature like dictionaries, phonetics, phonological books and grammar books. Without such teaching and learning materials, it's quite difficult even for a fully trained and motivated teacher

to deliver her lesson effectively. Many teachers prefer to use English even at the lower primary because mother tongues in Uganda are not furnished with enough materials as is the case with English and other, more dominant languages like French and German (Tembe and Norton 2008; Ssentanda 2014). But as Holliday (2005) has said ‘everything is political’ including the preference of foreign languages over the indigenous ones. Uganda’s educational stake-holders need to guard against English imperialism (Phillipson 2009) in the country.

Another complication is in training of teachers. Students of primary teacher colleges and the national teacher training colleges are of diverse ethnic backgrounds. It’s only the major languages like Luganda, Lunyoro, Lwo and Ateso that Ugandan teachers are trained in. Worse still the training is always too short to master all the languages of Uganda. For instance, upon the reintroduction of Mother Tongue Teaching in 2006/2007, teacher training was completed in two weeks (Altinyelken 2010). Hence it has been highlighted that teachers lack appropriate training which would equip them with the necessary skills to handle Mother Tongue Teaching (Ssentanda 2014; Altinyelken 2010; Rwothungeyo 2016).

The problem of lack of teaching/learning materials couple with inadequate training of the teachers has affected the quality of not only the teachers but also the graduates of Primary Teachers’ Colleges (PTCs) and National Teachers’ Colleges (NTCs) in Uganda thus it has been reported:

The quality of graduates has continually deteriorated. They are increasingly out of touch with the job market. Yet, demand for education in Uganda has never been greater with the population rapidly growing at 3.2% per annum and with approximately half of the population under the age of 18. (Tumushabe and Makaanu 2013)

It’s therefore a vicious cycle as ill-trained teachers produce poor graduates who will fail in the job market and the challenge reverberates in all sectors of the economy.

Teachers are required to draw Scheme of Work (SOW) and the Lesson Plan (LP) in the chosen mother tongue for Thematic Curriculum. This is practically impossible if the teacher is of a different ethnic background. Such teachers draw their SOW and PL in English in contravention of policy and with the danger of undermining the central role of mother tongue in education (Benson 2005). When the inspectors visit their schools, they are reprimanded leaving them disappointed and lacking interest in the school where they have been posted. Such teachers feel they are punished for what they are, not what they failed to accomplish. To circumvent such problems trained teachers have to be confined to where they were born and raised. In brief, the Thematic Curriculum restricts an Acholi to serve in Acholiland and Muganda to work in Buganda. The long term effect of this is loss of patriotism and nationalism. Both attributes are required of a primary school teacher.

The difficulties of implementing the Thematic Curriculum do not, however, negate its values in education. Pupils taught in mother tongue learn faster than those instructed in a foreign language (Heugh 2013; Lo-Bianco 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Rwothungeyo (2016) also opines that:

As measured by test scores and self-esteem, children who learn in their mother tongue when they are 6 to 8 years old perform better than those instructed in the official language earlier or exclusively. Once a child can read and write in his or her mother tongue, the skills are transferable to other languages.

The Thematic Curriculum can be relevant in a society that has remained traditional in the African ethnic and clan arrangements where there is little interaction with the outside world. Unfortunately this is not common in the Uganda population of today where multiple ethnicities occupy same geographic space.

Recommendations

In spite of the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) that created educational opportunity for millions of children in Uganda, equity and equality in education even at the primary level still remains elusive (Tumushabe and Makaanu 2013). This low quality has been attributed, among others, to the Thematic Curriculum whose implementation is arguably an uphill task in the districts of Omoro, Kiryandongo and Butaleja that host multiple ethnic communities. The same can be said of other ethnically plural districts in Uganda.

It's recommended that the Uganda government rethinks the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum. The government cannot change the ethnic composition of the country but it can alter its school curriculum. The first approach should be to map out the parishes and sub-counties that are mono-ethnic and with rare chances of hosting working class people of different ethnic settings. It's only in such places that the Thematic Curriculum can work appropriately.

The second step should be to train teachers of all the ethnic groups in Uganda. This calls for affirmative action for the minority ethnic groups like the Ik, Batwa, Nyangia, Mvuba and Nubi among others. Such ethnic groups are underrepresented in all training and educational institutions. Coincidentally it's among these ethnic groups that the Thematic Curriculum can operate well. The government should offer bursaries for members of such ethnic groups to train at PTCs and NTCs. Without trained professional teachers for each of the ethno-linguistic groups in Uganda, it will remain a daunting task to implement the Thematic Curriculum.

The government of Uganda should train and recruit teachers of multiple language abilities for primary schools. A teacher should be required to communicate fluently in at least three indigenous languages. This is not easy because apart from the Bantu languages that have some degree of intelligibility, the Nilotic and Central Sudanic languages are completely different from each other. Training a teacher that can communicate in three indigenous languages besides English and Kiswahili will require a longer period of training than the current two years.

Parents and guardians should be sensitised about the importance of mother tongue in education (Mohanty and Saikia 2008). They also need to know that fluency in English may not be a measure of intelligence but evidence of European cultural and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2009; Holliday 2005) in the third World. The fact that private schools in Uganda where English is the medium of instruction perform better than the public schools using mother tongue at the lower levels does not negate the role of mother tongue in anyway. This is because:

Studies comparing children from English Medium schools with those from Mother Tongue medium schools in different parts of India show that, when the quality of schooling and the socio-economic status of the parents are controlled, mother tongue medium children perform better than their EM counterparts in measures of academic achievement, understanding of the science and maths concepts and skills in language use. (Mohanty 2017)

It follows therefore that other factors should be considered when comparing the performance at the primary school level between private and public schools. One factor is the socio-economic status of the parents and the availability of better learning facilities including television, internet, toys, study rooms and home libraries that children from affluent families enjoy.

A national language for Uganda would solve many of the problems discussed above. Currently Uganda has English as the official language but there is no designated national language. This means children learn and speak the mother tongue at home with the hope of learning English at school. With the Thematic Curriculum, they can only begin to learn English in Primary Five. The mother tongue is promoted in a country that lacks a national language. Attempts have been made to promote Kiswahili as the national language of Uganda in tandem with other members of the East African community such as Kenya and Tanzania. This attempt has largely failed due to opposition from traditionalists and cultural institution that regard the mother tongue as an indispensable cultural heritage that need to be promoted at home as at school.

Conclusion

The importance of education as a public good and the role of education in human, economic, and capital development behove government to perform the moral and economic responsibility to provide quality and equitable education (Tumushabe and Makaanu 2013). The introduction of Thematic Curriculum is one such effort to improve the quality of education in Uganda. In spite of this excellent objective the Thematic Curriculum has not lived to the expectations of stake-holders in education including the teachers who are charged with its implementation.

The purpose for which the Thematic Curriculum was introduced is quite good but its implementation is inhibited by the nature of Uganda's population. In a country like Rwanda, Burundi, Swaziland and Somalia where only one language is spoken, the Thematic Curriculum is the best recommended but for Uganda and other ethnically plural countries of the world, the Thematic Curriculum inhibits learning to a section of the population depending on where the children are learning and the type of family they are from. Thus, the challenge of Thematic Curriculum implementation in Uganda is rooted in the country's history. This includes the peopling of the country by three completely different groups of people with no affinity to each other such as the Central Sudanic peoples, the Nilotics and the Bantu groups as well as the forceful lumping of people of little ethno-linguistic connections by the British colonial authorities to form what became Uganda.

In this paper I have attempted to illustrate the role of multiple ethnicity in inhibiting the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum in Uganda. The importance of mother tongue in education cannot be underrated especially in a former colony like Uganda. The future of education lies in the development of one of the mother tongues in Uganda into a national language. Already languages like Luganda (language of the Baganda), Lwo (language of the Acholi) and Runyakitara (mother tongues of the Banyoro, Batoro and Bakiga) are commonly spoken in many urban centres of Uganda especially among the business community. When a national language develops, it will be easy for primary school children to learn in it since they will speak the language both at home and at school. The national language will also reduce the linguistic gap between urban and rural school children of Uganda. As of now the implementation of Thematic Curriculum remains an unnerving task all over Uganda.

Disclosure statement

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