Conference Report

Imagining a Thriving Multilingual World
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Leketi Makalela
University of the Witwatersrand
Leketi.makalela@wits.ac.za

Whereas it has exponentially become impossible to ignore the prevalence of many languages and their coexistence as a key phenomenon in the world of increased mobility within and between nation states, very few scholars have imagined a true official status of multilingualism both in the future and outside of the monolingual frame of thinking. The Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies (HuMEL) is a thought leader that hosts annual conferences to highlight the importance of multilingual education and the value of multilingualism in the 21st century. In line with the Hub's strategic concentration on two pillars of education, epistemic and ontological access, the annual conferences question the validity of language boundaries and global North conceptual frames such as *mother tongue*, *first language* and *second languages*, and *interlanguage*, and places multilingualism and its discursive resources at the centre of contemporary classroom practices. In what is described as *disruption of the orthodoxy* in education systems, the Hub's conferences have always agitated for increased epistemic access, and affirmation of identity positions, of multilingual learners (the majority in the world) without which, education becomes imitative and marginalising. Prompting delegates to think forward about an ideal multilingual world, the theme for the fourth international conference was "Imagining a Thriving Multilingual World" featuring subthemes that included:

- Translanguaging and multilanguaging

- Reading and writing literacies

- Multilingual assessments

- Multilingual materials

- Alternative and critical pedagogies for multilingual education

- Language policy, planning, and management in education

- Multiliteracies

Taken together, these themes pointed at the danger of monolingual bias as an invention of the Enlightenment period, and colonial consequences of suppressing local languages in favour of the exogenous languages—which are still regarded as the only means for guaranteeing civilization or success. These themes were debated through 60 presentations from delegates representing 20 countries and more than 40 postgraduate students from the Southern African Development Community countries. In addition to the regular delegates to conferences, the uniqueness of this conference was that it also brought representative primary schools and members of the South African Literacy Teachers Association—a body that was founded by HuMEL—into one space of dialogue and sharing. Five teachers from primary schools presented lessons that demonstrated innovative applications of multilingual instruction in their classrooms. The conference also celebrated the first school in the world to recognise translanguaging as its official policy—Doornspruit Primary School in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The point was made during the gala dinner that translanguaging is a legitimate policy option for schools as entrenched in the Language in Education Policy of 1997 (Department of Education), and that many schools and officials have read this policy document through monolingual lenses of additive bilingualism and subtractive mediums of learning and teaching. That is, one language at a time and sequential introduction of languages, which are all indicators of monolingual orientation. More schools were encouraged to follow Doornspruit Primary School as a prime example of multilingual education imagined, and to seek support of HuMEL's advocacy and community engagement programmes.

The second highlight of the conference was the intellectual rigor, which showed the global South taking more strides to own theories of multilingualism that critique both monolingual and epistemic biases often transferred from theories developed from the global North geopolitical context. It is envisaged that engaging with these new theories will lead to public awareness and policy reforms that are based on multilingualism as a norm to be cultivated rather than a problem to be solved. It was noted that this direction begins with valorising the cultural competence and constructs from the global South as the premise for theory development. In this connection, translanguaging and multilanguaging, among others, are global South relevant while at the same time having a universal appeal.

The keynote speakers from Kenya, Mauritius, and the USA delivered on-point and relevant considerations for multilingual education imagined for the 21st century, and extended opportunities for collaborative projects that raise awareness of the value of multilingualism in the first quarter of the century. Martin Nyoroge from Kenya, Pascal Nadal from Mauritius, and Maria Coady from the USA presented on the need for paradigmatic shifts towards complex plurality of contemporary classrooms, and gave specific examples from their own contexts to make a case for multilingual education. The conference proceedings will be published into a book by that will be disseminated globally to encourage more transformation in orthodox classrooms that still hold on to the ancient belief that using more than one language creates mental confusion.

Overall, the conference allowed academics, teachers, and communities to engage in dialogues that were specific enough to bring about deep reflections and uptake from the delegates. Yet, it was also general enough to cater for different interest groups that included primary schools. Departing from routines of other conferences between academics, the Hub's view is that connections between universities and communities is a key transformative process in knowledge dissemination in a country that has historically created an ivory tower curtain, which shielded university academics from the communities they should serve. This conference was a prime example to illustrate that an imagined multilingual world is inclusive, transformative, and community based. In brief, this conference succeeded in having the delegates tell the multilingual story of the future.

References

Department of Education. (1997). *Language in education policy*. Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/GET/LanguageEducationPolicy1997.pdf?ver=2007-08-22-083918-000