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Translanguaging as a strategy for navigating multilingualism in peri-urban preschool classrooms

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Background: Language discussions have historically focused on the power dynamics between dominant and indigenous languages. This has generated discontent and contention on which language should rule the educational sector. The national language policy of South Africa mandates the use of all languages in the educational system. Even though there are 12 recognised languages, English is preferred in education circles. This ignores the research that demonstrates the advantages of speaking one's native language, especially in the early years of schooling.

Aim: This study was conducted to determine how preschool practitioners assist the language development of learners in multilingual classrooms.

Setting: Six early childhood education (ECE) practitioners from three preschools in Mamelodi township, South Africa were selected, based on choosing English as the language of communication, in multilingual classrooms in peri-urban areas.

Methods: A qualitative approach and a case study research design were employed. It focused on purposive sampling of practitioners from three preschools in Mamelodi where the medium of communication was English. Interviews, observations, casual conversations and document and visual data analysis were data collection tools. A questionnaire was used to gather the geographical information of the participants. A fusion of the Bakhtinian philosophy of dialogism and social justice theory underpinned the study.

Results: The results showed that despite English in their schools as a medium of instruction, practitioners used predominating home languages to assure understanding. This translanguaging approach was commonly used in every school. Learning in a single language was challenging because of diverse languages, hence the use of English First Additional Language.

Conclusion: To promote language acquisition in multilingual preschools, translanguaging ought to be promoted.

Contribution: This study proposes that early childhood teacher preparation programs ought to promote multilingualism by employing translanguaging strategies as a study unit.

Keywords: translanguaging; practitioner; support; language development; multilingualism.

Introduction

Literature lauds the strong relationship that exists between language mastery and academic achievement (Bergbauer 2015; Habók & Magyar 2018). If children are afforded a strong foundation in language in the early years, they will excel in all aspects of their lives, including learning. Young children attending preschool are at a critical stage of language development, and practitioners have a significant role to play in the development of children's linguistic competence in early childhood education (Helot & Fialais 2014; Williford et.al. 2013). Competency in the language of teaching and learning promises a successful schooling career (Awopetu 2016).

Furthermore, children come to preschool already speaking and knowing a variety of home languages that they were exposed to from birth and, therefore, know how those languages' structures are constructed (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2015). Research has proven that children learn best when they are taught in a familiar language, meaning a home language or mother tongue (Awopetu 2016; Heugh 2017). Moreover, research has shown that the use of English as a medium of instruction in most South African schools has contributed significantly to

the high failure rate and number of dropouts among black students (Heugh 2017). This has certain implications for early childhood education practitioners as their proficiency in a language of communication at a centre is one of the most important factors in early childhood language development. According to the DBE (2015), practitioners need to be trained and well-versed in skills like storytelling, use of rhymes, and singing of songs to be able to support the cognitive and first language development of children. It is often not easy to use one medium of language in the classroom, as schools are increasingly becoming multilingual, hence the use of translanguaging for effective communication and understanding.

Translanguaging is a purposeful pedagogical alternation of languages in spoken and written, receptive, and productive modes (Hornberger & Link 2012). It is the mixed and alternate use of languages, valorising speakers' complex linguistic repertoires that embed and interweave languages into one another (Makalela 2015). According to Charamba (2020), there has been extensive scope of research conducted by several researchers with regard to translanguaging and all have proven it to be an effective pedagogical tool that can be used in the process of teaching multilingual students universally. Furthermore, the author posits that the studies showed translanguaging can be used to break the common conviction of 'monolingual bias to eradicate the disadvantages it inflicts on multilingual students' (Charamba 2020:1).

This study sought to explore how practitioners supported language development while navigating the multiple languages of children in their care. This was part of a more prominent study that looked into the experiences of practitioners' support of language development in peri-urban preschools where English is used as a medium of communication amid various languages being used in the children's homes. This article sought to answer the following question:

• How do practitioners use translanguaging as a strategy to navigate multilingualism in peri-urban preschool classrooms?

Background

South Africa has a history of overt racial and ethnic segregation based on perceived language differences (Nkadimeng & Makalela 2015). The same history resulted in the country's grappling with language matters and language in education becoming a thorny subject (Heugh 2017; Atmore 2013). In their book, *The Social and Political History of Southern Africa's Languages*, Kamusella and Ndhlovu (2018:3) posit that in South Africa, the apartheid regime created 'Bantustans' or black homelands where non-white people would be concentrated based on the language they happen to speak. These apartheid policies negated migrations, and instead promoted development of languages within one's own cultural groups – it was therefore easy to teach in the mother tongue. However, the policies were not welcomed because they were exclusive, divisive, segregative in nature, and rooted in bigotry and racism (Wills 2011:17). The democratic

era saw the reversal of the policies, with migrant laws being abolished, thus allowing people to settle where they wanted to.

Alongside English and Afrikaans, the country has nine indigenous languages, that is isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, siSwati, Xitsonga, as well as Sign language. The 12 languages are recognised as official by the *South African Constitution* (Tshotsho 2013). According to the *South African Schools Act*, which is a Chapter in the *South African Constitution* (1996), learners have the right to receive education in the language of their parents' choice (Ball 2014). The legislation and policy are aligned with the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for children from birth to 4 years old, which states that all children need to hear and learn to speak in their mother tongue (DBE 2015). The NCF further posits that if children have a solid foundation in their mother tongue, they will find it easier to learn another language, as they will have already found out how language is constructed and how to communicate with others.

Labour migration from neighbouring countries and migration from one province to the other have shaped the current state of multilingualism in South Africa. This makes it difficult to elevate one African language over another, given that children are coming from different language backgrounds. Data pertaining to foreign-born respondents' countries of birth show that almost half of lifetime migrants were born in Zimbabwe (22.6%) and Europe (22.6%). One-third of respondents were born in countries that are part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Other areas featured were South America, North America, the rest of Africa (outside the SADC region), and Asia (Statistics SA Report 2020). Although policies that elevate African languages to official languages are in place, there is resistance and reluctance on the part of schools to embrace these languages (Kaschula & Kretzer 2019), as can be seen in the opening of former Model C schools to all population groups, where affluent black parents send their children. Furthermore, with English already established as the language of the economy and politics, parents are supporting the idea of having their children taught in that language (Makalela 2014; Msila 2014). The social response has been to adopt English as a neutral language, meaning, society associates success with English. This is the case where the current study was conducted. However, the South African school system itself is more complex in terms of language politics (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour 2019). In a multilingual classroom, the reality is that there is no common first language among the children.

The multilinguistic nature of communities complexified teaching using English in a predominantly African context, where both practitioners and children come from non-English backgrounds. This complexity has led to the use of translanguaging to explain difficult concepts and ensure that children are part of the classroom discussions. However, this requires a major shift in the norms of interaction between

practitioners, learners and text materials, as what seems to persist is an authoritarian structure that disallows children's active participation in the classroom.

Problem statement

Literature supports the strong relationship between mastering the language for learning and academic achievement (Habók & Magyar 2018). The argument of this article is that, if a child is given a strong foundation in any language in the early years, their success in subsequent schooling will be ensured. Early childhood and education (ECE) centres in peri-urban areas find themselves needing to cater for children from multiple language backgrounds. These children speak a host of local indigenous languages and foreign languages from mostly SADC countries (Modise 2019). In trying to navigate their multilingual contexts, these ECE centres then compromised and settled for English as the language of communication. This choice; however, becomes a challenge to practitioners who are not English language speakers themselves, and also creates learning barriers to children of diverse language backgrounds (Evans & Cleghorn 2012; Saneka & De Witt 2019).

Charlesworth (2016) posits that there has almost been no disputing the fact that language is acquired under the direct influence of the learner's environment, as all children learn just the language they hear. According to research, children need to hear and learn to speak in their mother tongue (Awopetu 2016; Heugh 2017). Supposing they have a solid foundation in their mother tongue, they will find it easier to learn another language as they will have already found out how language is structured and how to communicate with others (Cummins 2001). This will help them if they are cared for in a place where more than one language is spoken (DBE 2015). At the preschools in this study, children come to school already equipped in their multiple home languages; therefore, they have endless opportunities of picking up on other languages, including English. However, English is a second language to both practitioners and children, thus compounding the communication and understanding difficulties faced by both in using this medium.

The literature is clear on the discord that exists between parental influence, the child's immediate environment (home and community), and the Language of Teaching and Learning (LoLT) in ECE centres (Alexander 2009). In this article, such discord arises when parents take responsibility for their children's home language development, and leave the responsibility for English to the practitioners, making it clear that they did not want their children to learn in other home languages but to preserve their own. As a result, the ECE centres opted for English as a neutral language of teaching. However, the problem remains that both practitioners and learners are not English first-language speakers, making it difficult to explain some English concepts to the ECE children, hence translanguaging becomes a significant strategy. Moreover, language hierarchisation is a contentious matter, for which solutions need to be found. One of the solutions would be for government to match policies with action by ensuring that the curriculum for early childhood teacher education programmes includes the following: a course on language development in a multilingual environment; instruction on how to teach English to English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) learners so that they can use the language fluently in preschool multilingual environments; and instruction on translanguaging strategies and how language specialists can use them in their classrooms. Within this context, this article intended to find out how practitioners use translanguaging strategies to navigate language learning in multilingual ECE centres in peri-urban areas.

Literature review

The review of the literature focused on the ECE practitioners' experiences of using translanguaging strategies to support language development in young children, aged from birth to 4 years in multilingual peri-urban settings, where English was chosen as a language of communication and instruction. According to Varun (2015), in the first few years of life, children master the rudiments of their native language. This remarkable achievement appears to require little conscious effort and occurs in various contexts. Most children's early experiences with language take place with an adult, usually the mother or caregiver, who is considered the helpful and knowledgeable speaker that can scaffold the child's linguistic skills (Bruner 1978; Gleason 2015).

Ely and Berko-Gleason (1995) argue that, as children mature and enter the larger world, they are more likely to find themselves in the company of other children and adults, where they must fend for themselves. It is at this point that children's language skills play an important role in their social and cognitive development (Vygotsky 1987). Alexander (2009) asserts that, in early childhood, effective teaching begins with, and builds on what children already know and can do, which presumably is the child's home language. However, there are obstacles to implementing home language instruction in some preschools in South Africa. As was the case in this study, some preschools choose to teach in English, with the justification that the children come from multiple African languages backgrounds. This is possible because, as it were at the time the research was conducted, preschools were independent of the government and have a right to choose a language, which is not in line with government's language policies. However, this situation is in the process of changing, as early childhood development (ECD) recently transferred from the Department of Social Development (DoSD) to the DBE.

Practitioners had to come up with creative ways of teaching and communicating, as a means of accommodating children from multilingual backgrounds. As stated previously, this is done by foregrounding English as the universal language. According to Daries (2017), in instances where children attend English classes and come from multilingual backgrounds, research has shown that practitioners will accommodate children's home languages by switching

between two or more languages. This is referred to as 'code-switching' (Clegg & Afitska 2011; Kaschula & Kretzer 2019). Practitioners have been known to use code-switching and translanguaging strategies in their practices. According to Hornberger and Link (2012), translanguaging can be defined as a purposeful pedagogical process of utilising more than one language within a classroom lesson, a manner in which multilingual people use their linguistic resources to make sense of and interact with the world around them. 'In the context of multilingual education, translanguaging has been put forward as a means of including several languages in education' (Duarte 2020:1). Translanguaging as a strategy to navigate multilingualism in peri-urban preschools is thus at the centre of this article.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework within which the study was conducted is a fusion of the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism (Bakhtin, Holquist & Emerson 1981) and the Social Justice theory (Ayala et al. 2011) (see Figure 1).

The Bakhtinian theory refers to a philosophy of language and a social theory that recognises the multiplicity of perspectives and voices. Bakhtin believed that dialogic teaching holds the greatest cognitive potential for learners – and demands the most of practitioners (Lyle 2008). According to the author, any debate of dialogic approaches to learning and teaching owes a debt to Vygotsky (1987), who emphasised social and cultural influences on childhood development, and especially recognised language as the driving force behind cognitive development.

In an excerpt from Vygotsky's translated *Thought and Language*, Kozulin (1986) asserts that even though Vygotsky was primarily interested in the development of language in its relation to thought, a study of concept formation in educational settings led him to another insight, namely, the dialogical character of learning. According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), life is dialogic, a shared event and living generally is participating in dialogue. A dialogue, in its simplest definition, is a verbal interaction or exchange between people (Teo 2019). The science of dialogic teaching and learning has especially increased over the last four decades across age-groups, cultures, and contexts (García-Carrión et.al. 2020). A wide array of studies has examined

FIGURE 1: An integrated framework underpinning the article.

the uniqueness of dialogue as a powerful tool to lead effective instructional practices, transform socio-cultural contexts and people's mindsets, among many others (Alexander 2018; Teo 2019).

Dialogic teaching moves away from the traditional teacher–student question and answer pattern to a dialogue propelled by practitioners seeking to improve students' learning and understanding (Alexander 2018; Wegerif 2019); thus, in this way of teaching and learning, both practitioners and children are compelled to engage with one another, and in the process, ECD practitioners can therefore scaffold the multiple languages of the children. In a preschool classroom, most teaching and learning takes place by way of verbal or oral interactions, as preschoolers are not at the reading and writing stage, and practitioners in this study navigated, alongside English, the multilingual nature of their classrooms through dialogic teaching by responding to, and asking questions, and guiding the learners where they struggled.

Ayala et al. (2011:2796) define social justice as the fair and 'equitable distribution of power, resources, and obligations in society to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability status, sexual orientation', and religious or spiritual background. According to Hurst (2016), in terms of social justice, it is becoming clear that, in the South African education context, teaching and assessment strategies are not fair for those students who do not speak English as their first language. Furthermore, the children and practitioners in this study found themselves faced with this same dilemma. Therefore, the use of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms was one small step in the right direction of upholding social justice for children in multilingual preschool classrooms.

A study by Hurst and Mona (2017), in an introductory course on the implementation of translanguaging pedagogies offered by the University of Cape Town, found that it is possible to apply translanguaging techniques with relatively little additional resources, given a creative and flexible staff. As this study was successfully conducted in an institution of higher education, the implication is that there are even greater possibilities of success in preschools situated in multilingual settings, as research has proven that certain aspects of learning, like language learning, can only be acquired effectively during the first 7 years of life (Obiweluozo & Malefe 2014). Furthermore, young children attending preschool are at a crucial stage of language acquisition, and teachers have a significant role to play in the development of the linguistic competence of children in early childhood education (Helot & Fialais 2014).

In essence, Bakhtin's dialogic conception of language learning aligns with principles of social justice theory of inclusion and equity; therefore, practitioners were mindful that the dialogic engagements occurred in equally shared power relational contexts (see Figure 1).
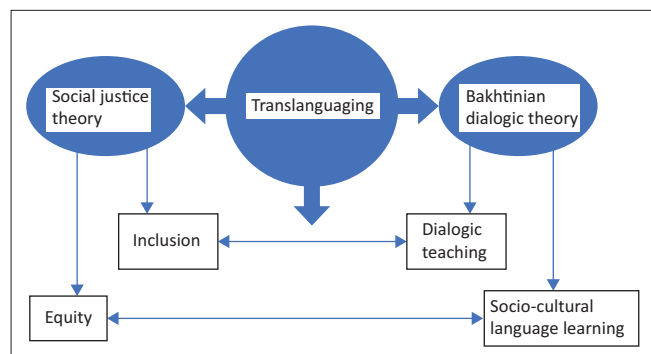
Research methods and design

This article is based on a larger qualitative study, which was conducted using the social constructivism paradigm, 'relying as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied' in order to learn how practitioners see the support for language development in their classes (Creswell 2014:38). The study included six practitioners from three multilingual preschools in peri-urban areas, that is, Mamelodi township in South Africa, which are predominantly black people and economically disadvantaged. Purposeful sampling was used.

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al. 2015). The justification for choosing the sites is that they cater to children coming from homes where multiple indigenous South African and African languages are spoken. I sampled purposefully because I wanted preschools that taught in English, despite the fact that none of the practitioners and children were from an English background. An investigation of how the practitioners navigate their support of the development of the language of choice, which is not necessarily every preschooler's home language, was conducted.

Qualitative case study data-collection tools, namely observations-protocol, interviews-schedule, field notes, and documents-daily programme and progress reports were used to build a complex holistic picture, analyse words, and give detailed reports of the participants' views (Creswell & Poth 2018). According to Yin (2018), the essence of qualitative research is to view events through the perspective of the people who are being studied; the way they think, and their view of the world. Rule and John (2011) posit that a case study examines a bounded system or a case, over time, in depth and employs multiple sources of data found in the setting. A questionnaire, which may be considered a quantitative tool, was also used to gather the geographical information of the participants. The triangulation method was used to cross-validate the observations made, interviews conducted, as well as the visual and audio data sources collected. This was done by reporting on data collected through interviews and confirming this with data from observations, field notes, casual conversations as well as document review analysis.

The contact persons at the sites were furnished with a letter of approval from the university, as well as a written declaration, outlining how the rights of human subjects were upheld. The study was constrained by the fact that data were gathered during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown, and therefore conducted in three ECD centres in a similar peri-urban area, namely the Mamelodi township. Six participants – two practitioners from each site – were selected. This was a limited target population that did not represent all preschools in Mamelodi, the Gauteng province or the country.

The data were analysed through the qualitative content analysis method and were collected by means of different methods, that is, observations, interviews, field notes and documents, and other visual materials. According to Braun and Clark (2006) and Mayer (2015), this is a method of describing data, and it also involves interpretation in the process of selecting codes and constructing themes. As a researcher, I had to compress the data coming from the different collection methods when it became excessive. For this study, codes were generated from the transcribed data and categorised into themes and sub-themes.

Data analysis

The process of data analysis began with a discussion of each case and participant's background, giving a brief picture of each case and the profile of the participants. This is done so that I, as the researcher, could conscientise myself regarding the practitioners' context, so that I am more reflexive and aware, and that I avoid my 'knowledge' of translanguaging as a strategy for navigating multilingualism influencing my understanding of what informs the participants' classroom practices (Creswell & Poth 2018).

In accordance with Niewenhuis (2016), the data collected were organised and identified by fictitious names so it could be anonymised. It should also be noted that, just as the participants are given codes to protect their privacy and anonymity, no real names of the children who are quoted as part of the field notes obtained through casual conversations (CC) with the practitioners were used. A discussion of each site and participant's background is provided further in the text.

Preschool A is situated in a section of Mamelodi township consisting of informal settlements. The centre caters to children from isiZulu, Sepedi, Tshivenda, Setswana, siSwati, and Shona (a Zimbabwean language) language backgrounds. The participants included one practitioner (P1A) and the centre manager (P2A). The two practitioner participants were both from siSwati backgrounds. Participant 1A is a 39-year-old female practitioner with 3 years of experience in ECE. Her home language is siSwati. Her qualification is a Level 4 Certificate in Learning in the Early Years. She is responsible for the 4-year to 5-year-old group.

Participant 2A is a 23-year-old female who is also a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) student in the Foundation Phase at the University of South Africa and has just over 1 year of experience as a teacher at the centre. She speaks siSwati at home. She is responsible for the 3-year to 4-year-old group.

Preschool B is situated in what I would refer to as the original Mamelodi township. This centre has children who speak isiNdebele, isiZulu, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, and Sotho (a combination of Sepedi, Setswana, and Southern Sotho). The participants included two practitioners (P3B and P4B). The two practitioner participants are from an isiNdebele and isiZulu background respectively. Participant 3B is a 26-year-old female practitioner with 5 years of experience in teaching.

She holds a Grade 12 certificate as a qualification and is currently enrolled at a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college, studying towards a Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education. She is responsible for the 4-year to 5-year-old group. Her home language is isiNdebele. She uses isiZulu to communicate. Participant 4B is a 23-year-old female practitioner with 3 years of experience in teaching at a preschool. She has a Grade 12 certificate. She is responsible for the 2-year to 3-year-olds. She speaks isiZulu at home.

Preschool C is a preschool situated in the more affluent part of Mamelodi township, where newer houses have been built, instead of the standard four-roomed houses associated with township housing. This centre caters to isiZulu, Sepedi, Setswana, South Sotho, and isiNdebele. An interesting observation at Preschool C was that they speak a combination of Sepedi, Setswana, and South Sotho, which is popularly known as Pretoria Sotho or in the township lingo, S'Pitori. S'Pitori is a word coined by Mamelodi natives, drawing it from the word Pitori, which is what most black South Africans call Pretoria. Participant 5C is a 37-year-old female practitioner with 3 years of experience in teaching in a preschool. She holds a Grade 12 certificate, with another certificate for an NCF online course. She is responsible for the 3-year to 4-year-old group. Her home language is isiNdebele. She speaks English and Sepedi to the children. Participant 6C is a 43-year-old female with 19 years of preschool teaching experience. She has a Level 4 qualification. She is responsible for the 0-year to 5-year-old group, as her position is that of a floater teacher. Her home language is Setswana. She speaks English to the children.

This article used the qualitative content analysis to generate themes, enabling the researcher to uncover complex meanings and patterns in the data to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the content and context of the data analysed. Content analysis provides a space to make valid inferences from data to context, with a view of providing new insights (Elo & Kyngäs 2008; Niewenhuis 2016). Content analysis is analytic in nature, because it interprets the underlying meaning of the text (Niewenhuis 2016).

The themes were named according to the sorted and categorised responses of the participants, detailing their description of understanding of language development and support in multilingual ECE centres in peri-urban areas. The following themes, upon which this article is based, emerged:

1. English is not accommodative of multiple languages found in the classroom.
2. Practitioners' English language background was not proficient for easy communication with children.
3. Shifting discourses on language of teaching and learning were present.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg College of Education Ethics Review Committee (No. 2019/11/13/42689813/31/AM).

Results

According to Makalela (2014), although there has been a recent increase in the body of research on translanguaging, the bulk of these studies are focused on translanguaging successes in classrooms that are confined to only two languages. However, the primary goal of this research was to explore ECE practitioners' use of translanguaging strategies as a means of traversing the multilingual settings of peri-urban preschools, where the official language of communication or teaching was English.

English is not accommodative of multiple languages found in the classroom

The multilingual nature of classrooms had an effect on the choice of language of learning and teaching in the preschools where the study was conducted, despite the official language being English. Practitioners had to resort to using dominant African languages, such as Sepedi and isiZulu, to communicate with children. Multilingual contexts pose a challenge to the medium of communication and affect the language choice practitioners make to ensure that effective communication and learning take place among children (Makalela 2015). Practitioners dealt with the situation in the following manner.

The practitioner, (Practitioner 1A, 39 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati), described her method as involving the use of English and one of the dominant languages to explain concepts. The sentiment was expressed in the following manner:

> 'We teach children in medium English, and we also allow them to talk their home language.' (Practitioner 2A, 23 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati)

> 'We don't want the kids to be frustrated when they start with formal schooling because they are going to different primary schools and primary schools use the different home languages. That is why we also allow children to communicate with their home language.' (Practitioner 2A, 23 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati)

This strategy or approach was deemed useful as it was expressed:

> '[E]nsured that the children understood the instruction or content being taught.' (Practitioner 3B, 26 years old, Female, Home Language - isiNdebele)

On the issue of using dominant African languages such as Sepedi and isiZulu to communicate with children, stated that:

> 'It just so happens that our most talkative children are from isiZulu and Sepedi background.' (Practitioner 1A, 39 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati).

A practitioner corroborated by stating that:

> 'For the most part, we are able to understand and respond to the children in their different home languages, but we have a

problem with the not so common languages like Xitsonga.' (Practitioner 4B, 23 years old, Female, Home Language - isiZulu)

The following to contributed, with regards to parental demands:

'The parents asked us not to teach their kids in any of the other home languages spoken by the other children, just English. They say they want their kids to retain their own home languages that they speak to them at home.' (Practitioner 6C, 43 years old, Female, Home Language - Setswana)

Summary

The official language of communication, which is English, is not used as expected. This is because all children and the practitioners come from an English second-language background. Children's understanding of English is flimsy, and their practitioners too are not fluent in the language. This situation therefore pushes practitioners to use translanguaging from English to IsiZulu and Sepedi.

Practitioners' English language background not proficient for easy communication with children

Practitioners were at a disadvantage because of their poor proficiency of the English language. Practitioners lacked proper training, especially in teaching multilingual classrooms. English is a second language for practitioners, so their ability to teach in the medium of English is questionable. This became apparent during observations, when practitioners were overheard to be speaking to children in English and a variety of other African languages:

'In the vegetable garden there were insects like bees, ladybugs, flies and lizards. What's a bee in Sepedi? Ke nnosi and a fly is ntshi! There were also veggies like spinach, carrots and pumpkin, *Busi, what's a pumpkin in your language [*isiNdebele*]?' (Practitioner 5C, 37 years old, Female, Home Language - isiNdebele)

Moreover, the practitioners were overheard mispronouncing some of the words in English, which resulted in altered and incorrect meaning. During story time, the practitioner was reading from a book and saying:

'The three little beds were flying up in the sky' (Practitioner 2A, 23 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati)

when she meant to say 'birds'.

However, practitioners also took advantage of translanguaging by speaking to the children in the languages that they knew the children spoke or understood. During casual conversations, a practitioner pointed out to a little girl and said the following:

'Her name is *Karabo, which is a Sotho name, her home language is Xitsonga but she speaks fluent SePedi. You see, some of our kids are from dual home language backgrounds, you find that maybe *Karabo's mom is Tsonga and her dad is Pedi, that is why she is fluent in both. I speak to her in isiZulu because she understands it too.' (Practitioner 4B, 23 years old, Female, Home Language - isiZulu)

Similarly, the practitioner asked the children a question using three different languages, namely Sepedi, Setswana, and English:

'Re berekisa di wet wipes for eng? [*what do we use wet wipes for?*].' (Practitioner 3B, 26 years old, Female Home Language - isiNdebele)

English language proficiency was one obstacle towards using the language with understanding. The lack of teaching in multilingual settings was evident in that practitioners did not use pictures even when it was obvious that the understanding among children was limited. Using translanguaging was the best option available to practitioners, so they could ensure that learning took place.

Shifting discourses on language of teaching and learning

The Language in Education Policy of 1997 recommended that mother tongue instruction should be used in the first few years of schooling. This policy is in alignment to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989 and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – two international policy frameworks which support the conclusion that educators should be familiar with the language to be used in the first few years of a child's education. However, the policies fall short of stipulating the type of action to be taken in the case of multilingual settings.

There seems to be a salient shift of discourses on language of learning and teaching. The policy states and recommends that a child's mother tongue should be used in the early years; however, the multilingual nature of children who attend the preschools makes such a policy difficult to implement, in view of the lack of teaching strategies for such contexts (Alexander 2009). This raises the question on how to teach African languages in multilingual contexts without resorting to English as a neutral language.

During the interviews, the participants were asked whether their centres had any policies in accordance with which they worked. A practitioner (Practitioner 1A, 39 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati), from Preschool A said that they understood how to run the preschool, even without any guidelines written down, and at Preschool B, the practitioner (Practitioner 3B, 26 years old, Female, Home Language - isiNdebele), who happened to be the manager, said they were using some parts of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document. A practitioner (Practitioner 1A, 39 years old, Female, Home Language - siSwati), from Preschool A stated that, even without any policy guidelines, she can help the children understand when her method of using English and one of the dominant languages to explain concepts was applied.

This strategy or approach was deemed useful as it was expressed from Preschool C:

'ensured that the children understood the instruction or content being taught.' (Practitioner 5C, 37 years old, Female, Home Language - isiNdebele)

In this study, the opposite is the case. Instead of using English as stated by the policy of the schools, in contravention to the Policy in language Education, schools use a combination of English, Sepedi, and isiZulu to ensure that learning takes place. This is called translanguaging, that is using one language within the dominant language.

Discussion

According to Makalela (2015:203), South African students who are from linguistically hybrid townships where at least four identifiable languages are spoken are prone to being educationally disadvantaged because they cannot be compartmentalised by schools who think monolingually. Furthermore, these students are seen to be 'defying traditional labels such as "mother tongue" as they are able to use languages flexibly across a wide range of language clusters'.

Daries (2017) posits that, in instances where children attend English classes and come from multilingual backgrounds, research has shown that practitioners will accommodate children's home language by switching between two or more languages, that is, by translanguaging. According to research (Charlesworth 2016), the way caretakers talk and the circumstances under which they talk influence language learning. This was the case in this study, as previously discussed in the findings. Across all sites, all the verbal interactions between the different children and practitioners took place in mainly three different languages, that is, isiZulu, Sepedi, and English. These interactions were happening both inside the classroom and during outside play.

Prior to the practitioners' participation in this study, they had various perceptions on the importance of supporting children's language development. These perceptions were expressed in the way the practitioners employed language development support in their classrooms. The practitioners considered teaching and speaking to the children in English and the various languages, thus, translanguaging, as supporting the development of language.

In this study, the children were already coming to preschool with multiple home languages. The practitioners used that opportunity to enhance the development of those languages through Bakhtin's dialogic teaching and, as a result, succeed in their attempts to support language development through translanguaging. As mentioned by Practitioners 1, 2, and 5, they also had children from dual home languages, and they (practitioners) took pride in being able to communicate in a combination of English and the children's home languages. This means that practitioners took the opportunity of developing more than one language through translanguaging. Moreover, as English was neither the practitioners' nor the children's first language, the translanguaging strategies applied by the practitioners addressed the social justice theory, in that it alleviated the marginalisation of the children by using more than one language in teaching, thereby accommodating everyone.

Across the three sites, even though the practitioners were delivering the lessons in English, there was translanguaging taking place. Practitioners relied on translanguaging between two or more African languages and English, which is the medium of instruction, to ensure that the children understood the instruction or content being taught.

Even though children will emerge with insignificant knowledge of each of the languages used, the aura of multilingualism has been awakened. Practitioners being insistent on teaching in English while falling back on the different languages when they are not confident in English, or when they want the children to understand better, made space for translanguaging. Also, the transmission of the dominant languages like isiZulu and Sepedi takes place freely during playtime and discussions in the classroom, thus creating fertile ground for the development of multilingualism through translanguaging.

Mashiya (2010:21) states that, 'for a child to communicate and become a fully functional being, the primary language of children should be well developed'. To this end, the findings across the sites indicated that practitioners are doing their best in supporting the development of the children's languages. Moreover, the practitioners had to contend with not just the development of English, which is their choice for communication, but also the multiple home languages that the children come to the preschools with. The implication being that the practitioners were multitasking because they had a number of languages to contend with. The results might not be what was expected, but practitioners were conscious of the fact that children's home languages are important and had to be developed. Instead of seeing this as an obstacle, practitioners saw the opportunity of developing more than one language, that is, see this as a gap to be filled through translanguaging.

Implications for policy and practice

Children acquire most of the language structures in the first 7 years of life, and practitioners should capitalise on this window of opportunity, as it might have lasting positive effects later in life (Helot & Fialais 2014).

Learning how language structures and conventions work in their own language can serve as a springboard for learning another language (Phatudi 2017). Considering the multilingual context of the study, I therefore opine that, instead of letting some languages dominate verbal interactions in their classrooms, the practitioners would be wise and use the opportunity to apply translanguaging strategies while the children are still at the prime stage for language learning. This they can do by encouraging all the children to speak in their own languages. In that way, there will be an opportunity to learn each other's languages in the process.

The implication for this study is that, as practitioners find themselves in these multilingual contexts, they need to

ensure that each language is given space in the classroom. This can be achieved by practitioners interacting with the children in as many of the children's languages that they speak. The practitioners saw as a solution, using English, a language not familiar to either themselves or the children, in order to bypass having to use all the different languages spoken by the children. The practitioners did this in order to accommodate all the different African languages of the children, by using a combination of languages that included English.

Another implication is that practitioners ought to be upskilled on how to adjust their management of bilingualism or multilingualism in the context of the effective use of translanguaging in order to bridge the gap between home language or mother tongue and LoLT (Clegg & Afitska 2011). Furthermore, practitioners should be equipped with skills to educate the parents on the benefits of exposing their children not only to English and the child's own language, but also to the rest of the home languages spoken by the rest of the children. This will not only equip the children with multi-vocal competencies but will also result in the liberation of languages that were historically excluded and affirm the fluid linguistic identities of multilingual speakers (Makalela 2014).

Conclusions

This study gave new insights into practitioners' use of translanguaging strategies in supporting language development of peri-urban preschool children from multilingual backgrounds. It also highlighted the fact that practitioners are already unknowingly applying translanguaging strategies in their classroom practices. Programmes for early childhood teacher education should include the following in their curriculum: a programme for language development in a multilingual setting, skills in teaching English to EFAL learners, so that they are capacitated to use the language proficiently in multilingual settings in preschools, and teaching translanguaging strategies and how language specialist practitioners can implement them in their classrooms.

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