

Reflections on researching the use of isiXhosa as a Language of Instruction for improving scientific literacy at a Western Cape Primary School in South Africa

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This study has been motivated by the recognition that learning through mother-tongue instruction, at least in basic education can contribute meaningfully to the learner's understanding of Natural Science concepts. According to Young et al. (2005), concepts cannot be understood or used in isolation from the language in which they occur. When learners' discuss or argue, they will automatically be making claims and justifications of what they believe and know. Alexander (2002) argues that, whilst English is used in all spheres of our lives – education, industry government and trade, its pursuit without a good grounding in a prior language that serves to facilitate linguistic border crossing will result in the “chasing of air. This is the language that the learners map and navigate through their surroundings, the language of socialisation and ultimately, the language which is the custodian of their prior knowledge. Chasing after English and leaving the learners' indigenous languages behind will result in the diminishing of the learner's cognitive understanding of English high status domains, such as science and mathematics. Data is collected from interviews with research educators, learner's assessments and reviews of curriculum support material. This paper seeks to share the contextual experience of researching the use of isiXhosa as a language of instruction in the Natural Sciences classroom at Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6). One of the findings suggests investigative research into the nature of the relationship between the Indigenous Knowledge Systems movement and traditional Language of Instruction.