

The Language of Instruction Debate: Teacher Perceptions on the Use of IsiXhosa as a Language of Instruction in School Mathematics and Science:

Authors: Dr Monde Mbekwa and Dr Vuyokazi Nomlomo

Faculty of Education

University of the Western Cape

P/B X17

Bellville

7530

South Africa

mmbekwa@uwc.ac.za

vnomlomo@uwc.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The choice of the language of teaching and learning is a difficult and controversial issue in many African countries due to the legacy of colonialism and apartheid education system, particularly in South Africa. For instance, the new South African Language-in-Education Policy (1997) encourages linguistic equity by according official status to the previously marginalised African languages but English remains the dominant language of teaching and learning from primary to tertiary education.

This paper discusses teacher perceptions on the use of isiXhosa (one of the nine official African languages) as a language of teaching and learning in Mathematics and Science in two selected primary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. Data were collected by means of classroom observations, interviews and document analysis. The paper contends that, while English is perceived as the most prestigious language by teachers and learners, it is also a barrier to teaching and learning when it is used as the main language of instruction to learners who learn it as an additional language. It concludes that there is a need to revisit the question of medium of instruction, especially in disadvantaged South African schools to ensure that learners are not deprived access to academic knowledge and skills for socio-economic development.