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Lydia Kananu Kiramba

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, lkiramba2@unl.edu

James Alan Oloo

*Gabriel Dumont Institute, Saskatoon, SK*, oloo200j@uregina.ca

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# Untapped communicative resources in multilingual classroom settings: Possible alternatives

Lydiah Kananu Kiramba <sup>1\*</sup> and James Alan Oloo <sup>2</sup>

1 Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education, College of Education  
and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, USA

2 Gabriel Dumont Institute, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

\* Corresponding author: L. K. Kiramba, email [Lkiramba2@unl.edu](mailto:Lkiramba2@unl.edu)

ORCID: Lydiah Kananu Kiramba <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0231-4711>

## Abstract:

This paper presents a critical review of literature relating to language policy and literacy practices in education, with a particular focus on multilingual Kenya. Existing research on schooling in Kenya often draws attention to the use of languages that are distanced from students' daily realities and localities. This article synthesizes research on literacy practices in Kenyan primary classrooms to explicate the current language-in-education policy and practices, and, to discuss their impacts on literacy access and knowledge production in the classroom. We argue that Kenya's language-in-education policy, which informs curricula and teaching, and is itself grounded in monoglossic orientations, inhibits students' participation in knowledge production, and, thus, silences students' voices, leading to epistemic exclusion of the often-marginalized rural students who have limited or no access to school language outside the classroom. We recommend adoption of home languages and legitimizing translanguaging practices in multilingual classrooms as a possible remedy for literacy access, sustenance, and development.

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## Introduction

Literacy and the use of language go hand in hand. This is often evident in rural Kenya where mother tongue (MT) and Kiswahili are the languages that a child tends to learn first and is surrounded by at home, on the playground, in the market, at places of worship, and even at school. Mazrui (2002: 268) speaks to a 'maximum convergence between language and thought' in that only local languages can effectively connect individuals, including such Kenyan youngsters, to their local social environment, which in turn influences their worldview. Mwaura (1980: 27) concurs with this observation in his assertion that '[l]anguage influences the way in which we perceive reality, evaluate it and conduct ourselves with respect to it'.

Similarly, classroom discourse processes and practices affect learning. However, literacy practices can foster or hinder students' ability to learn based on the language of instruction (LOI), especially when students' home languages differ from the language(s) used in school. Scholars (Heath 1982; Adger, Wolfram and Christian 2007) have described the problem of a mismatch between classroom language use, speaking rules, speech performance interpretation, attitudes and values about home languages. Saville-Troike (2003: 244), for example, underlines the recurring mismatch between cultural competence, linguistic competence, and interactional competence of teachers and students, noting that in 'many speech communities formal education is conducted in linguistic code quite different from the one children may have acquired at home'. The development of communicative competence in school settings stresses a formal style of literacy skills unique to the school: one that may interfere with the co-construction of meaning between students and the teacher. However, as Ouedraogo (2000: 89) reminds us, '[e]ducation and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual situation'.

Oloo (2016) describes classrooms as spaces where languages and cultures often meet and clash, usually in contexts of unequal power relations. Conflicts in most linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms are increasingly becoming more common. Brock-Utne (2007) argued that linguistic challenges represent a major barrier to the teaching and learning process in many an African classroom. Although multilingualism is a characteristic of speech communities across Africa, when African children begin formal schooling, they are often faced with a different language, along with new forms and conventions of language use. Language-in-education policies impose a monolingual praxis that, in the case of Kenya, prioritizes English and inherently assumes that all learners (should) possess the same linguistic background. Instruction, thus, takes place in a language that is not normally used in the students' immediate environments.

The framework for this article draws from research findings in global multilingual settings to explore literacy practices in Kenya, especially the ways in which LOI intersects or fails to intersect with literacy access in rural Kenyan primary schools. The purpose is threefold: (1) to explicate the current language policy and literacy access in a Kenyan context; (2) to discuss the impact of the current language policy and resulting literacy practices as depicted in research; and (3) to recommend possible alternative frameworks as a means to mediate instruction and hence epistemic access. We argue that the current use of English-only as LOI in primary education in Kenya excludes many learners from participating in knowledge production.

To explore these three objectives, this article is structured as follows. After this introduction, we review the research literature on language policy. This is followed by a section on the implications of the current policy for Kenyan primary school children. The article then draws on an examination of research literature to argue for inclusive language policies, including legitimizing translanguaging strategies to tap into students' multilingual resources as funds of knowledge. This is followed by a conclusion and possible future research agenda for Kenya.

### **Multilingual Kenya and language policy**

Kenya is a multilingual state with 68 living languages (Kiramba 2019). Out of those, 42 are indigenous languages (Mbithi 2014). Kiswahili is the national and official language, along with English. Although it is not a mother tongue to most Kenyans, Kiswahili is one of the indigenous languages that is more accessible to most Kenyans outside their homes as it is the language of trade in the nation and everyday use among various communities. Other Kenyan languages are used mainly in interpersonal communications in the home and immediate neighborhood.

The history of Kenya's language policies in formal schooling goes back to 1920 when the country became a British colony. Between 1920 and 1963 (the year Kenya attained its political independence) a number of education commissions were established to help inform the colony's education policies. The Education Commission for Africa (the Phelps-Stokes Commission) report (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1949) underscored the key role of home languages in upholding and furthering self-esteem among local populations and in simplifying the acquisition of English. The Phelps-Stokes report recommended the use of mother tongue (MT) as the language of instruction until grade five, and that Kiswahili be excluded from the education curriculum, except in areas where it was spoken as the first language (L1).

The Beecher report of 1942/1949 placed more emphasis on home languages. It recommended a shift to Kiswahili from third grade as the medium of instruction, and to continue teaching Kiswahili in junior secondary school. The Beecher report recommended that English replace Kiswahili as the lingua franca (Sifuna 1980).

Colonial education was racially and linguistically segregated. Educational outcomes for African and Asian learners were below those of their European counterparts. The colonial Ministry of Education attributed the gaps in education outcomes to the use of the MT in the initial years of education of African and Asian students (Sifuna 1980). This created a platform for the introduction of English as the medium of instruction (Mbithi 2014). After the Second World War, Africans began to demand more literacy in English. Further, the colonial government needed more clerks and skilled workers. Knowledge and use of English was a prerequisite for these jobs. This was a period of political awakening and the struggle against colonial rule. At the time, the colonial administration used English for vertical communication and Kiswahili for communication with the masses. English proficiency was, therefore, important to access white-collar jobs and to fight for independence.

British rule lasted until 1963, at which point Kenya attained independence. After independence, the political and economic structures of the colonial system were largely maintained by the new regime. The new government inherited a colonial system of education that was intended to meet the economic interests of the colonizers (Woolman 2003). The education system was formed around Western and colonial standards, resulting in social and economic inequality, cultural and intellectual subordination, and a curriculum that was often not aligned with the developmental needs of the country.

Soon after attaining political independence, the government of Kenya appointed the Ominde Commission to review the country's education system. Among the recommendations of the commission (Ominde 1964) included an end to segregation of the country's education system by race, and that English be the LOI from grade one, while Kiswahili became a compulsory non-examinable subject in primary schools. The Ominde Commission downgraded the local lingua franca and relegated home languages to verbal communication in the first three grades in primary school.

Recommendations of the Ominde Commission paved the way for the mushrooming of English-medium schools in the country (Bunyi 2008). English proficiency became a key indicator of academic progress in formal education (wa Thiong'o 1986), with those who could speak English well having greater access to educational and career opportunities.

Just over a decade after the Ominde Commission report was released, the government of Kenya established another education commission. The Gachathi Commission (Republic of Kenya 1976: 54) stipulates that

(a) The mother tongue [should] be the LOI for the first three years of primary education, while English and Kiswahili are taught only as subjects during this period, (b) English takes over as medium of instruction from the fourth year onwards as Kiswahili continues to be taught as a compulsory subject up to the end of secondary school, (c) English and Kiswahili be the official languages, and (d) Kiswahili be the national language.

Instruction in the students' indigenous (L1) language generally stopped at the end of grade three after which indigenous languages were mainly left to perform interpersonal communication functions in the home and neighborhood. The teaching of Kiswahili was strengthened in 1985, when the new 8-4-4 system of education made Kiswahili an examinable subject in K-12. This was through the Mackay report of 1981 which recommended restructuring the education system to the current 8-4-4 system, i.e. eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education and a minimum of four years at tertiary level. This report also recommended Kiswahili as a compulsory and examinable subject and the establishment of a second university (currently Moi University-Eldoret). Today, Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) early-exit is the education program implicit by default in the Kenyan language policy statement. This TBE early-exit program is designed to enhance English language skills, which is essential for success in an English-only classroom.

Piper and Miksic (2011: 141) point out that although the

British system of colonialism provided more educational opportunities than did the alternative colonial systems on the [African] continent, Kenyan local languages were marginalized by the demand in schools for education in English for official communication.

Further, while MTs were used as the LOI in early primary education in missionary-run schools across the country, 'English was...the target language for upper primary and secondary education' (ibid.).

According to Mbithi (2014: 3), language policies of the newly independent African states, including Kenya, 'did not change with change in government' as the new 'political elite sidelined the [local] indigenous languages'. Rather, 'the usual practice [included] honour[ing] the foreign European languages with the exclusive status of official languages' (Organisation of African Unity 1985: 18). Mbithi (2014: 3) speaks to Kenya's 'misguided language policy at independence' that resulted in 'national languages which enjoyed no privileges and giving to foreign languages all the rights and privileges of official languages'. The effect, Mbithi asserts, was that '[i]n Kenya, the preferential treatment of English produced, in turn, an elite government which

shunned the indigenous languages. In the end, the indigenous languages suffered...“low intellectual estimation” (ibid.).

This complexity in the history of language policy is not unique to Kenya. In Ghana, language policy in education has been revised several times since the country achieved independence in 1957. For example, from 1957 to 1966, and 2002 to 2005, English was the LOI at all levels of education from grade 1. And from 1967 to 1969 and 1974 to 2002, the policy was revised to make several Ghanaian languages the dominant LOI from kindergarten to grade 3 (Owu-Ewie 2006). Monolingual educational policy, particularly English (or some other European language such as French or Portuguese) as the LOI remain entrenched in several postcolonial African countries (Clegg and Simpson 2016).

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya provides a detailed documentation of the Kenyan language policy. Kiswahili is defined as the national language and the country's official language in addition to English. The constitution enunciates a commitment to promoting and protecting the diverse languages of the Kenyan people. These protections include the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenyan Sign Language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. Further, provisions for linguistic rights of Kenyans are spelt out in the Bill of Rights. Although the constitution affirms the value of multilingual and multicultural diversity of Kenyans, English is both a compulsory and examinable subject in the curriculum and the LOI for all subjects other than Kiswahili.

### **Ambiguities in language policy implementation**

Despite the official language policy in Kenya that mandates the use of English as the LOI from grade four, research shows ambiguities in its implementation across the country. Dubeck, Jukes, and Okello (2012) write about a school in Kenya where English as the LOI is used from grade one. Similar findings have been presented by Muthwii (2004), Ogechi (2009), and Dhillon and Wanjiru (2013). The latter noted that Kenya's official LOI policy is not always followed by schools, and that this is complicated by a lack of instructional materials in the indigenous languages. Kiramba (2018) describes a common belief among educators and parents that students who began instruction in English in early primary were more likely to perform well in the standardized national examinations at the end of grades eight and twelve. Thus, despite its good intentions, the TBE, is often not followed or honored in many schools, and its implementation has been shown to be inconsistent across the country (Muthwii 2004). The Kenyan Ministry of Education's efforts to enforce this language policy has often faced resistance and criticism by many education stakeholders and parents.

In January 2014, the Ministry of Education required schools to implement Sessional Paper No. 14 (2012), which mandated home languages to be used as the LOI in grades one to three. The Sessional Paper also provided for support to students in the use and mastery of English and Kiswahili. This caused an uproar in the country, with parents and teachers strongly contesting the policy (*Daily Nation* 2014). Many felt that teaching in African languages would be retrogressive in a global era and not applicable given technological advancements and the push for national integration and cohesion. Many parents and teachers argued that this kind of policy would not only compromise learning outcomes in many public schools, but also that infrastructure, including study materials in MT, did not afford an instant implementation of the policy (*Daily Nation* 2014). This turn of events is quite surprising because it appears that not much has changed since 1963 with respect to acceptance of or resistance to using MT as the LOI in Kenyan schools. However, as Milligan and Tikly (2016: 277) point out, the predominance of English as a medium of instruction in postcolonial contexts is due 'in part to the colonial and postcolonial legacies that have favored global languages and that have often led to the undervaluing and underdevelopment of indigenous languages'.

Language-in-education policy decisions have influenced attitudes towards home languages. The impact of these attitudes in providing access to equal educational opportunities is what educators and researchers are grappling with. Piper and Miksic (2011: 141) write that

throughout the era of [presidents] Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi (1963–2002), there was local resistance to mother-tongue instruction [in Kenyan schools]. The rationale...was that families expected the school to provide the student with what they often could not, namely English.

These reactions against the use of MTs in Kenyan public primary schools indicate a lack of consciousness not only about language, identity, and indigenous knowledge production, but also of the available research on second- and foreign-language acquisition. Thus, indigenous language use in schools has been construed as a problem that needs to be solved in order to clear the way for academic excellence in English. In addition, it has projected a power- or class-based denigration of 'non-English' Kenyan culture. As Dhillon and Wanjiru (2013) reported, with national examinations being the key determinant of a student's academic progression in Kenya, pressure from parents, teachers, and students to learn English has contributed to the regression of teaching in MTs.

## **Impact of language policy and uncertainty in its implementation in education**

### ***Teacher-centered instruction***

Kenya's official language policy and individual schools' (un)written language practices affect the pedagogical strategies that teachers employ in the classroom. One major area is in interactions between teachers and students, and among the students themselves. Research on language and literacy studies in multilingual Kenyan classrooms (Pontefract and Hardman 2005; Bunyi 2008; Kiramba 2016) draws attention to the highly teacher-centered approaches used in schools. Kiramba (2016) found that fourth-grade students in an English-only classroom mostly remained silent in the classroom, repeated phrases after the teacher and responded to teacher's questions with one word or yes/no answers.

Ackers and Hardman's (2001) observation of classroom interactions and discourse styles of teachers in Kenyan primary schools found that in all of the lessons they observed, teacher recitation with memorization and repetition by the students dominated the classroom discourse, with few to no student-generated questions. Similarly, Pontefract and Hardman (2005) found a dominance of teacher-led recitation, with memorization and repetition constituting 66 per cent of the teacher's input, and little attention paid to securing student's understanding. In both studies, choral responses were common, with a discourse structure of initiation, response, evaluation (Cazden 2001). Initiation, response, evaluation (IRE) is a questioning strategy that is teacher-centered and directed. The Knowledge Network for Innovations in Learning and Teaching (2009) describes the IRE model as a 'verbal test with only one right answer', and argues that while IRE is an 'effective way of checking for factual knowledge, or fact recall...[its] style of questioning really does not produce a lot of benefits with regard to higher order thinking'. Although choral responses may be helpful if used effectively in a classroom (Hardman, Abd-Kadir and Smith 2008), that was not always the case in the examples mentioned above. Pontefract and Hardman pointed out that while the Kenyan primary school used English LOI, it was evident that the students had not mastered English well enough to engage in academic discourse. Abdi-Kadir and Hardman (2007) refer to 'ritualized participation' strategies in which cued elicitations are applied as a form of 'teacher checks' in Kenyan and Nigerian classrooms.

Similar findings were reported by Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2016) who examined classroom literacy practices in a fourth-grade science and math classrooms and reported that teachers acted as the only source of linguistic input. Kembo-Sure and Ogechi found that questions that were cognitively

undemanding dominated classrooms, and were often centered on the recall of facts, hence students had little or no opportunity to make inferences or solve problems in English. The students were expected to recall, when asked, what they had learned and to report only other people's thinking. However, there were notable differences, in the form of increased student participation, when Kiswahili or MT was used (see also Kiramba 2018). Kembo-Sure and Ogechi argue that the current language policy is ineffective in that the quality of the delivery of instruction is compromised because both teachers and students often struggle with the mastery of English language. This results in the exclusion of students from epistemic access (Kiramba 2018).

Taken together, the prevalence of IRE in the classroom discourse in Kenya (Abd-Kadir and Hardman 2007; Ogechi 2009; Kiramba 2016; 2018) is often characterized by a teaching methodology and classroom environment that centers on the teacher, with limited student participation. Students are also rarely challenged by teachers and they end up with less-developed critical thinking skills. There is also limited space for students to link what they learn to their sociocultural experiences and localities. The central purpose of recitation is to transmit information to students and to review it with students, whether right or wrong. And the system of grading involves testing if that acquisition of information occurred. In all of this, student voices are silenced, ignored, or denigrated. Students are not given space to be active participants in knowledge creation. Knowing is thus operationalized as remembering information properly within a delimited recitation context. Such teacher-centered practices are not unique to Kenya. Studies in other African settings that employ monolingual English-only instruction have reported similar findings (see Brock-Utne 2007; Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Clegg and Afitska 2011; Ngwaru 2011; Clegg and Simpson 2016).

We submit that teacher-dominated participation patterns are partly as a result of LOI constraints and inadequate teacher preparation to work with multilingual students. In English-only classrooms, the teacher dominates classroom conversations, thereby affecting the process of meaning construction and learning. In such a context, students are not able to effectively access and use knowledge acquired out of school because of using a language they have not mastered, and learning involves concepts that are often disconnected from their immediate environment. Thus, the current language policy may be hindering students' classroom participation, meaning-construction, and access to literacy. Meaning-construction occurs when students engage in questioning, respond to open-ended questions, and elaborate their own ideas within a range of literacy practices (Oloo and Kiramba 2019). Inviting students to participate in language(s) they can understand, and encouraging more open-ended questions and extended oral responses to encourage critical thinking requires a high level of language mastery.

### ***Literacy access***

Literacy access refers to the ability to understand, engage, and make meaning from instruction that is provided in the classroom. While almost 74% of Kenya's population live in rural areas – that is, large or isolated locations with a population of less than 2 000 people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2010), many rural schools are often disadvantaged with respect to resource allocation, access to the language of instruction, and literacy levels. For example, most students in rural settings in Kenya only have access to English in school, while they mostly communicate in their native languages outside of school (Kiramba 2018).

The current literacy outcomes based on the TBE early-exit program do not show that Kenyan students are reaping the cognitive benefits of education. As we will further demonstrate, the implementation of this program raises urgent questions around the acquisition of literacy, especially to the extent that it obstructs, rather than facilitates, literacy practices in bi/multilingual classrooms in the country, and the pedagogical strategies applied by teachers to ensure comprehensible input (Echevarria, Vogt and Short 2004). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) has written about the stresses of learning via an unfamiliar language. She points out that listening to an unfamiliar language demands higher concentration, is tiring, and requires a constant pressure to think about the form of the language. Further, it provides less time to reflect on content. As Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani and Merali (2006) noted, in education systems whose language policies are informed by monoglossic orientations, local languages and the students who speak them are often excluded from the teaching-learning process.

A survey by the Institute of Economic Affairs (2015), a public policy think tank in Kenya, reported that 1.3 million students joined grade one in 2003. Of these, 875 300 (or 67.3%) graduated from grade eight in 2010. The same cohort of 1.3 million students who started primary schooling in 2003 were surveyed 12 years later in 2014 to determine the proportion that had successfully completed high school. The graduation rate for the cohort was 35 per cent (36% for boys and 34% for girls).

Kembo-Sure (2002) noted that too many students in Kenya drop out of school, and that many who complete primary school (grade eight graduates) are semi-literate. Indeed, di Marco (2016) found that at the end of grade eight, 26 per cent of Kenyan students were semi-literate. Kembo-Sure further asserts that initial attainment of literacy skills affects educational outcomes. We submit that school dropouts can be attributed partly to the LOI, since it makes instruction incomprehensible to students (see, for example, Global Partnership for Education 2014). Consequently, many students fail, exams likely from not understanding the language of examination and/or a lack of linguistic proficiency to express themselves effectively in the LOI.

Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) have linked early literacy to increased chances of a timely attainment of the skills and abilities that are necessary for later school readiness and success. Yet, in his investigation of the possible link between LOI in school and the incidences of dropout in Western Kenya, Wasike (2016: 67) writes that the use of 'English as the LOI does not facilitate the acquisition of meaningful literacy'. Further, Wasike (2016: 79) suggests that

[t]he use of English as the LOI has other serious problems which include...poor quality education, low literacy rates, acquisition of bad language attitudes, identity problems, undeveloped creative abilities... These are serious problems, and they require Kenyans, and other people in Africa to rethink their educational policies in respect to language.

In the same vein, the Global Partnership for Education (2014) points out that 'children whose primary language is not the LOI in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades'. The Global Partnership for Education (2014) found that privileging a foreign LOI led to higher cases of 'children not able to engage successfully in learning tasks, teachers feeling overwhelmed by children's inability to participate, [and] early experiences of school failure'.

### ***Decoding versus comprehension***

With respect to reading instruction in Kenya, research has shown an over-emphasis on oral language skills, leading to surface fluency without comprehension. Dubeck, Jukes, and Okello (2012) observed that English reading instruction in Kenyan grades one and two classrooms emphasized oral language skills, specifically, whole-word reading with extensive oral repetition. Piper, Schroeder, and Trudell (2015) compared oral reading fluency and reading comprehension of third graders in two large communities in Kenya. They assessed the reading for four languages – English, Gikuyu, Kiswahili, and Dholuo – and found that students reading in L1 were more predictive of reading comprehension than those reading in L2. Students could readily recognize English words, but their understanding of English was minimal. Increased English instruction time and oral emphasis helped the students to unlock the orthography challenges of English and to gain basic fluency. However, student mastery of English remained inadequate for them to understand what they read. Piper, Schroeder, and Trudell (2015) concluded that the use of English-only as the LOI can impart basic decoding skills and word recognition, but not semantic skills essential for making meaning of those words.

Comprehension is a transaction between the reader and the text that involves the sociocultural context of the reader, and the reader's knowledge of the world (prior knowledge) to make meaning (Pardo 2004). Hudson (2007) has argued that learners who are already literate in their L1 use their knowledge of the orthographic and syntactic feature recognition, or what Brisbois (1995) calls 'grammatical ability', to draw on their L1 skills to make sense of the second language. Luke, Freebody and Land (2000) view readers as code-breakers who must decode systems of written and spoken languages and visual images, while also moving beyond rote memorization of words and phrases to become meaning-makers, i.e. individuals who participate in the text and construct cultural meanings from it. The ability to decode in English in Kenyan primary schools may not predict comprehension (Kiramba and Harris 2019). Many students may remain at the decoding level, hence affecting their engagement with literacy. The result is low literacy levels among primary school graduates (Kembo-Sure 2002; di Marco 2016). This is partly as a consequence of rote learning and a LOI that is distanced from students' localities and experiences.

### **Possible alternatives**

Many Kenyan children speak at least one Kenyan language at home, on the playground, and in their immediate communities, with little if any exposure to English until they start school. Such children, 'regardless of their capacity to learn, are handicapped by "learning" in a language that they do not understand' (Rosekrans, Sherris and Chatry-Komarek 2012: 597). We recommend two possible alternatives to remedy this situation. These include:

- 1) as indicated above, many Kenyan schools have their own (unwritten) policies on LOI and the use of MT in school which sometimes undermine or contradict the country's official language use policy. We call for an effective implementation of the current language policy in all publicly funded schools, namely the use of MT as the LOI from grades one to three; and/or reforming the current policy so that MT may be used beyond grade three; and
- 2) employing translanguaging.

These options are briefly discussed below.

### ***Use of mother tongue as language of instruction***

Multilingualism is widely recognized as one of the major funds of knowledge (Truong 2012; Trudell 2016; Kiramba 2019). Funds of knowledge refer to

'historically developed and accumulated strategies or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being' (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez 1992: 133). They are based on the notion that the 'students' community represents a resource of enormous importance for educational change and improvement' (Moll 1992: 21), and include knowledge of different and multiple linguistic systems, as well as sociocultural knowledge and histories inherent in languages and experiences (Smitherman 1999).

Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond (2011) noted that the Ghanaian teachers in their study regarded literacy as the ability to read and write in English and did not perceive literacy in local Ghanaian languages as being relevant. Heath (1982) writes that a common definition of literacy as the ability to read, write and speak in only one language accepted in school is inaccurate because it limits other resources that mediate meaning-making in the classroom. Heath argues that an exploration of multiple languages as resources in school is relevant to understanding how the linguistic resources are appropriated in the classroom.

The use of a student's language has intellectual and affective impacts as well. Potts and Moran (2013), drawing from a long-term Canadian study of multi-literate pedagogies, investigated students' multilingual resources and the extent to which the use of their languages impacted academic success beyond their affective contribution. They analyzed texts for the functions of home languages, as well as the broader context, activities immediately surrounding the production of texts, and the home language's function(s) in relation to the text's context. Potts and Moran (2013) found that over multiple texts realized by the three focal students – in texts produced independently and in interaction with their peers – home language was a resource, not only for thinking and feeling, but also for reflecting on the ways in which the students made meaning of their worlds. Home language signified affiliation, membership, and a sense of belonging to communities beyond the classroom. It was a dimension of the focal students' personalized meaning potential, as well as a resource for creativity and academic success.

LOI is important inasmuch as it is 'the means by which learners come to access and understand information that ultimately leads to their further acquisition of life skills' (Commeyras and Inyega 2007: 266). Truong (2012: 8), for example, submits that

based on Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical literacy and pedagogy, in which teachers and students engage in active dialogue and reflection, which is facilitated when students are learning in a language with which they are most familiar, rather than in rote memorization of foreign concepts...the LOI in SSA [sub-Saharan Africa] primary schools play a key role in education effectiveness and true national development.

Truong (2012: 10) calls for the use of MT as the LOI arguing that '[s]tudents perform well academically when they are proficient in the LOI; conversely, students suffer academically and cognitively when they do not understand the LOI'.

For many students in rural Kenya, the only place where they learn and practice the English language is at the school. Once they are outside the school, MT is widely used. As Truong (2012: 10) aptly puts it, '[Indigenous] languages are rendered minorities only in schools, but outside of school, they become the majority again...Radio shows are [often] in people's L1 or...lingua francas like... Kiswahili'. She concludes that 'the multilingual realities of [sub-Saharan African] countries make it difficult to enforce a monolingual method of instruction'.

Fafunwa, Macauley, and Sokoya (1989) performed an experimental study to examine the learning and thought processes of young Yoruba children learning in Yoruba and English. There were three groups of students between grades one and six, each studying science, math, or cultural studies in Yoruba, with English taught as a second language. In the control group, Yoruba was used as the LOI up to third grade, and then English was used as the LOI. After six years, the students who were taught in MT performed better on all levels of primary education, including in English language arts, compared to their peers who were taught in English.

Over half a century since attaining political independence, 'Africa is the only continent where a school child can have access to knowledge and science only through a language other than the one spoken at home or in the wider community' (Djité 2008: x). In Kenya, many people feel strongly that in order to succeed nationally and globally, they must have a strong command of the English language (Jones 2012). This English power influences pedagogy because education stakeholders tend to regard the use of indigenous languages in the classroom as a sign of incompetence (Trudell 2005). Nevertheless, Rosekrans, Sherris and Chatry-Komarek (2012: 598) write that language policies that mandate the use of languages other than MT as the LOI 'have deleterious effects on children's language and literacy development'. Similarly, Martin (2005) argues that a language-in-education policy that requires the use of L2, such as English, as the LOI in a multilingual classroom inhibits access to quality education to economically disadvantaged students.

We acknowledge that education stakeholders have been influenced by ideological stances about LOI. We therefore recommend an informational campaign to help all education stakeholders recognize that multilingualism is an asset that should be built upon in education to mediate student participation, to enable self-authoring around lived realities that connect the classroom to the world, and to fosters learning (Kiramba 2017; 2019). Inclusion of applied linguistics in teacher preparation curricula will go a long

way in preparing teachers to understand the interrelatedness of languages, skills and techniques for supporting multilingualism. It will help stakeholders to recognize local languages as valuable cultural resources and facilitators for current global languages. This will in turn allow parents who are not literate in English to support their children through everyday home literacy practices, while students can tap into their cultures, knowledge systems, and communities that are already coded in their home languages (Kiramba 2018).

### ***Translanguaging***

Educators in multilingual African classrooms have long recognized the role of home languages in negotiating institutional monoglossic policies through different agentive ways (Cleghorn 1992; Setati 2005; Chimbutane 2013; Probyn 2015). Through their own creativity, teachers recognize local African languages as being instrumentally important for communication and literacy access. Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond (2011: 89) posit that while the attitude towards the use of mother tongue in Ghanaian classrooms is not always favorable, '[i]n the real classroom situation teachers tend to code-switch between English and the local language on the grounds that pupils' understanding of English is inadequate'.

Research on multilingualism and learning among multilinguals has shown that languages are not strictly bound, but are rather fluid (García 2009; Blackledge and Creese 2010; Canagarajah 2011). Several terms have been used to describe the flexible use of languages by multilinguals, including translanguaging (García 2009), heteroglossia (Bailey 2007), and code meshing (Canagarajah 2011), among others. Translanguaging refers to the process by which multilingual learners draw from their collective repertoire to maximize their communicative needs (García 2009). It involves 'receiving input in one language and via cognitive or other processes producing an output in another language, and by doing so triggering a learning stimulus' (Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond 2011: 101). Translanguaging includes language practices that have been referred to as code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual classrooms (García 2009).

Truong (2012: 11) writes that

it is not uncommon to find teachers code-switching with each other. Even school inspectors and politicians will address important issues in L1 and deliver the rest of a speech in a colonial language.

Translanguaging has a potential to mediate LOI difficulties in multilingual African classrooms (Setati 2005; Makalela 2015; Kiramba 2019). Kiramba

(2019) found that the use of translanguaging led to increased classroom participation and construction of knowledge among Kenyan students, and 'envoiced' (Bakhtin 1986), that is, gave voice to student localities and experiences. Teachers tend to apply translanguaging to facilitate learning in the classroom, especially if they notice that students do not understand concepts explained through the medium of English. Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond (2011) highlight the importance of translanguaging in helping to manage classroom discourse. They discuss the effectiveness of translanguaging in managing student behavior and discipline, attending to students who come late to class, settling students' complaints and grievances against each other, and inviting student participation in class discussions.

Although there are many students who succeed in school despite the fact that the LOI is not their MT or a local language, such a success can be attributed to a number of factors including 'a language transition program that helps [students] to acquire the LOI' (Global Partnership for Education 2014) while they continue to use their L1. In this study, we view translanguaging as a possible 'language transition pedagogy' that encourages the use of both LOI and the local language(s) to support language development and literacy access.

We view translanguaging as a lived reality in multilingual rural settings in Kenya. Students have a wide range of communicative repertoires – cultural and linguistic – to support their conversation and literacy goals. They draw from this repertoire strategically, depending on the contexts. We argue for adoption of translingual strategies in multilingual classrooms to mitigate the effects of English-only instruction in rural settings to provide epistemic access to students through tapping on the untapped linguistic resources. We acknowledge that while teachers play agentive roles by using translingual practices in the classroom to mediate literacy access, these practices are often considered illegitimate. Institutional constraints restrict possibilities for the multilingual potential of students and consequently silence students via negative attitudes towards their languages.

Through translanguaging practices, we view languages as both complementary and enriching each other, while at the same time enabling students to master the language forms that are valued at school for academic and professional success. We advocate for translingual pedagogies that encourage teachers and students to code-switch between languages and language varieties in the classroom strategically in order to scaffold students' learning and facilitate students' access to academic discourses. This is in line with Blackledge and Creese's (2010) view that educators need to adopt a translingual lens to 'envoice' students' realities, localities, social histories, circumstances, and identities, both in practice and pedagogy. Activating student's voices through translingual practices may support students' agency.

Translanguaging in classrooms is a pedagogical strategy that supports multilingual learners (Makalela 2015; Kiramba 2016) and could be an effective way to mitigate current challenges of teaching in multilingual classrooms. Education practice that is built on a student's home linguistic repertoire would provide students with access to both indigenous languages and global languages in order to provide high quality educational opportunities. Home languages supply bridges between school knowledge and the students' lived experiences.

Too many pedagogical possibilities are wasted because of restrictive language policies in education. As Kiramba (2016; 2019) has argued, translanguaging has the potential to disrupt the traditional IRE classroom participation framework. Kiramba shows that in instances where home languages were used during science lessons, students were positioned as competent members. With institutional support, translanguaging could help ameliorate the effects of practices that regard students as passive novices who mimic scripted knowledge. In the same vein, Martínez, Hikida and Durán (2015) argue that translanguaging is a potential resource for lessening the challenges experienced by students studying content subjects through unfamiliar languages. It can also lead to identity affirmation and literacy engagement (Cummins, Mirza and Stille 2012).

Scholars from the Global South have also called for the acceptance of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms and for other diverse forms of expression, such as drawing. These could be viewed as a way of improving education in multilingual classrooms (García 2009; Shoba and Chimbutane 2013; Makalela 2015). Translanguaging may help counteract both students' and teachers' linguistic insecurities in the classroom (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi 2016), while serving as a resource for easing the cognitive load by reducing the extraneous burden presented by an unfamiliar language, and aiding comprehension.

Although translanguaging permeates classroom discourses across multiple contexts, there are tensions around translingual practices. Such tensions include those between an official language policy that privileges English, and the multilingual realities and localities of students inside and outside of the classroom (Kiramba 2017), due to the continued ideological preference for standard language varieties (Cenoz and Gorter 2013; Sayer 2013). We, however, appreciate that the use of translanguaging can be messy and is often contradictory. We recognize the controversies around translanguaging such as language testing and assessment (Taylor and Snoddon 2013) and standard conventions of writing (Canagarajah 2011). For example, while translanguaging does indeed enhance classroom participation and the teaching-learning process, it is not used in assignments and examinations (language testing and assessment) where all subjects in Kenyan schools, except Kiswahili, are examinable in English.

Like Jaspers and Madsen (2016), we are not overstating the reach of translanguaging practices. We acknowledge the continuing symbolic power associated with language separation (e.g. in academic registers). However, we argue that home languages and translanguaging play a pivotal role in students' access to the curriculum and are essential in mediating epistemic access and acquisition of school languages. Research has suggested the importance of supporting students to engage in oral communication with peers, where oral language is used to allow interaction in productive ways, including bridging to an academic language (Gibbons 2015). This, in the case of rural Kenya, would involve the use of translanguaging. As Vygotsky (2012: 100) noted, thought is realized through words. That is, 'thought development is determined by language, i.e. by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child'. Translanguaging may act as a bridge that allows students to form concepts, to speak about the concepts and, through teachers' support, to bridge these concepts from daily language into academic registers necessary for testing. In this way, it may support concept formation and language development.

We submit that in the case of multilingual Kenya, languages often intersect and overlap both inside and outside the school. The key, therefore, is to develop a strategy that builds on the students' language repertoire while at the same time allowing the students access to literacy development and acquisition to enhance proficiency in the L2 which, in this case, is English. One such strategy is translanguaging.

## **Implications**

This article underscores the necessity of focusing on the many languages in Kenya with the goal of meeting each student's specific educational needs. This will help enhance literacy access and educational outcomes for Kenyan students, especially those in rural areas. Translanguaging practices hold promise in reaching this goal by creating spaces for students' linguistic repertoires to be tapped into in the classroom, thus providing students with access to indigenous and global languages and knowledge as well as providing high-quality educational opportunities.

The article calls for inclusive language policies that ascribe value to indigenous languages as LOI, especially in lower primary schools. Blommaert (2006), noting ideological constructs about language, observed that the written language is often more valued than spoken language and that standardized language is more valued than dialectical language. A possible way in which African governments could improve the status of local languages would be by encouraging their functional uses (Kembo-Sure 2002). Making local languages the LOIs could contribute to this, so that

they can be used in school literacy practices. In this way, local languages become recognized as the valuable resource they are and can flourish alongside global languages.

Language planning should consider language as a basic human right (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2000). Although there is a provision for pluralism that gives room for having all languages and their varieties to be recognized and protected by law, appropriation of these linguistic resources is constrained in the classroom. A multiplicity of languages should be regarded as a cultural resource and strength rather than a liability or problem that needs solving. We recognize that the use of English rather than home language(s) as the LOI in Kenyan classrooms is only one of a set of interrelated challenges. Two other important issues include the lack of support for strong reading instruction in any of the local languages other than Kiswahili, and the absence of a strong multilingual curriculum in the Kenyan school system. Attention to these, along with attention to L1 use as LOI, could turn the tide for Kenyan schools.

## **Conclusion**

Kenyan primary school children face challenges through learning in a second or foreign tongue; all the more so when their own knowledge in home languages is not validated. In this article, we have examined Kenyan language-in-education policy and practice and shown that the use of English only as the LOI affects student participation in knowledge creation, where the teacher is the knower and students are recipients of coded knowledge; where instruction is teacher-centered, hence limited knowledge co-construction in the classroom, and consequently hinders students from accessing literacy. Children learn to decode without comprehension, an aspect that can be attributed to rote memorization and primary school graduates who are not well prepared for high school (Dubeck, Jukes and Okello 2012; Kiramba 2016).

It can be argued that the language-in-education policy in Kenya is informed more by the ideological stances of those in power rather than by empirical evidence that shows L1 as a resource and a right rather than a hindrance to effective learning. The present language-in-education policy in Kenya is a recipe for the continued reproduction of educational inequalities, with the poor rural masses failing to reach their literacy potential due to linguistic challenges. Reliance on a foreign language leads to little meaning construction in the classroom and to meaningless repetitions on the part of the child. In such contexts, the linguistic resources of the children remain untapped in literacy instruction. We have argued that home languages are powerful resources for literacy access and for the potential

of translanguaging practices in Kenyan multilingual classrooms to ease the cognitive load in the process of learning an additional language and to access literacy, through drawing on the untapped communicative resources of multilingual students.

### **A possible future research agenda for Kenya**

There is a need for evaluation studies to examine the impacts and effectiveness of the current language-in-education policy and its practice for K-8 settings. This, however, requires a priori assessment and accountability policies to ensure fidelity in implementation of language policy in all Kenyan schools.

Many education stakeholders in Kenya view the L1 as interfering with English learning (Kiramba 2016). Research that explores pedagogical theories and practice would be of benefit to the Kenyan educational scene. As Crawford (2000) suggests, educators should be actively involved in policy discourses and debates, to explain the merits of bilingual instruction in their sociopolitical contexts in ways that leaders and the general public can understand and buy into.

More narrowly, there is a need to establish whether rural Kenyan students have sufficient proficiencies in English to study content areas in English by fourth grade. There is a need to examine classroom discourses prior to and during the transitioning year to establish the effects of language change on meaning construction among students. Educators must be able to navigate the slippery terrain of ensuring that the language needs of students in rural settings are met and that the prevailing opportunity gaps are bridged.

In sum, the use of L1 and translanguaging practices in rural classrooms have great potential for reducing illiteracy rates in Kenya and providing epistemic access, provided that the educational structures to support them are implemented and honored. Such a project would, in the long run, reduce the growing inequalities between privileged students with greater literacy access and those, especially in rural settings, who do not.

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