

The Problems and Prospects of Mother Tongue Education in Sierra Leone: A Case Study in the Schools in the Kono District

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Abstract: This work is an investigation on the problems and prospects of the implementation of the government of Sierra Leone's Mother Tongue Education Policy in Sierra Leone – a case study in the schools in Kono District. To meet the objectives of this work, questionnaires were administered to school heads and teachers in six selected secondary schools in the district. After the analysis of the data, it was discovered that not much success has been made because of the following problems: lack of trained teachers, inadequate learning materials and poor funding towards the implementation of the policy. Also, the heads of schools, teachers and pupils have a negative attitude towards this policy. They are of the view that the indigenous languages are inferior and not internationally recognized. These perceptions are major setbacks to the implementation of this policy. Recommendations were therefore made to do a thorough sensitization on the importance of Mother Tongue Education as every language could be used as a medium of education. Adequate training of teachers and the provision of teaching and learning materials is important for the success of this policy. The government also should increase funding towards the implementation of this policy.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Policy, Education, Implementation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of Sierra Leone as a colony of Britain, and up to independence in 1961, its educational system was modelled mainly on that of England. After independence, some policy statements were made, notably by *The White Paper of 1970* and *The New Educational Policy for Sierra Leone* (1995). The system we got from Britain emphasized liberal education, which leads to the conservative professions of law, medicine and teaching. It focused more on children that are very intelligent. Those with practical gifts or abilities were labelled dropouts or failures. This system did not come to terms with the problems of a developing country or poor nation pulled apart by different languages, tribal affiliation and cultures. It is believed by many that this system failed to nurture proud, creative, efficient and self-assured or native Sierra Leoneans.

There was therefore need for an educational system, which caters both the intellectual and practical abilities of the learner. This precipitated the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system of education that will be of benefit to both the

individual and the state. This system caters for the economic, cultural and civic needs of the country, and emphasizes the acquisition of agricultural, technical and scientific skills. Subject like the Sierra Leonean languages and Sierra Leone studies were introduced as core subjects.

In the *New Educational Policy for Sierra Leone* (section B.5.5, 1995), provision was made for the teaching of national languages throughout the school system and the tertiary institutions. A national institute of Sierra Leonean language was to be established, which will be responsible for promoting the development and the use of these languages both within the educational system and the country at large.

It is widely accepted that language is a product and replica of man. The development of one's mother-tongue for education is also the development of his culture and self. In the Sierra Leonean context, this has been ignored because of colonial influence. The indigenous languages are regarded inferior to English, which is the official language and language of instruction in our educational institutions. Although efforts are being made to change this narrative,

not much has been achieved towards that. The purpose of this research work is to investigate the problems and prospects of the implementation of the Indigenous Language Policy in the Junior Secondary Schools in Kono District.

➤ *Statement of Problem*

The first collectors of the Sierra Leonean languages materials were mainly missionaries, explorers and traders, who had little or no expertise in linguistic description. Often when confronted with the range of puzzling sounds, the English sound system and writing system are the alternatives selected, which is often not the right option. This rendered the work in these languages very difficult. The search for a standard orthography for many of these continues.

The Sierra Leone literacy rate 2023 stands at 47.7%, compared to its counterparts like Ghana 80.3% and Nigeria 62.0 % (www.macrotrends.net/sle), is very low. It has been observed that the high literacy rate is a setback to the national development of a country. This seems to be the situation in Sierra Leone. Strategies and measures must, therefore, be put in place to reverse this trend. One of the best ways of doing so is to give the citizens the opportunity to be literate in their mother tongue or the dominant language of their community. This led to the introduction of the Mother Tongue Education Policy (1991). This policy emphasizes basic education and the teaching of the Sierra Leonean Languages, both as media of instruction during the first three years of primary schooling and as subjects of study from Junior Secondary School upwards. This research is geared towards investigating the problems and prospects of the implementation of the Mother Tongue Education Policy in the Junior Secondary Schools in the Kono District.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE ON MOTHER (L1) EDUCATION

Many countries in Africa are advocating for an increase in the percentage of literacy rate in their respective countries. Although to some extent they have succeeded in increasing the access to learning institutions by building more schools, but this however does not reflect on the child's ability to read fluently and write. Urgent measures must be put in place to achieve the Millennium Development Goal 2. *“Achieve universal primary education.”* Much have been achieved by the western countries as compared to their African counterparts.

Research has shown that children learn better in their L1 as compared to learning in the foreign languages like English or French. (UNESCO 2008a) affirms that children's L1 is the most desirable language for literacy and learning throughout the primary school. Ghana to some extent has made significant gains with 80.3% literacy rate as compared to Sierra Leone with just 47.7% (www.macrotrends.net/sle). Various factors are responsible for the snail pace at which the literacy rate is growing in Sierra Leone. This ranges from the language policies adopted, their implementation patterns and the attitude of the parents towards L1 education.

The use of Mother Tongue Education in Sierra Leone can be traced back to the colonial era. It was recommended that the indigenous languages should be the medium of instruction in the early primary school, with English introduced after the third year. In fact, literacy in one national language, became a pre-requisite for entering the civil service. This system continued onto and even after independence. *The White Paper Policy (1970)* made provision for the teaching of the community languages as a language of instruction in the first, second and third classes in the primary schools. In class four, English was to be introduced as a medium of instruction. From that time up to now, not much has been achieved. There has been the problem of trained personnel, materials and standardized orthography for the indigenous languages.

Also, it is worth nothing that language should be taught for its functional values. There must be provision for the use of these languages in schools and beyond. The position of the minority languages should also be clearly stated. Should they be absorbed? Or should they be left to die a natural death? Because of the lack of proper planning, the goals of the policy are yet to be achieved. In India for instance, with over eighty (80) languages, problems were encountered when Hindi was declared the official language. Although books and learning materials were developed, it failed because of language royalty, religion and political systems. The policy makers did not pay sufficient attention to these factors in their planning.

In 1979, Sierra Leone launched the Indigenous Language pilot project. Provision was made in this project to teach Mende, Limba, Themne and Krio in thirty-six (36) schools. This project failed because:

- There was a problem of securing and acquiring learning materials.
- The attitude of people towards the teaching of Sierra Leonean languages. They were regarded less important to English.
- Lack of resource persons or teachers to teach these languages and appropriate and adequate learning and teaching materials.

The New Educational Policy statement for indigenous languages states:

The high-rate illiteracy is a setback to national development in Sierra Leone. Therefore, strategies must be developed to eradicate illiteracy. One of the quickest and best ways of doing so, is to give its citizen the opportunity to be literate in the mother tongue and or one of the community languages in the country. Also, there are social, psychological and pedagogical benefits that will be derived through literacy in mother tongue and community languages.

In recognition of this, new policy directions were made by government for the use of national languages in our educational system. The 6-3-3-4 system of education made the following provisions for the indigenous languages:

- For the primary level, the dominant or prevailing language in the district shall be the language of instruction in classes one to three. In classes' four to six, one national language should be taught as a subject.
- At Junior Secondary School level, the prominent community language shall continue to be taught and another community language, which should not be the pupils mother tongue as a core subject. The same prevails at Secondary School level.
- At tertiary level, one indigenous language (krio, Temne, Mende and Limba) shall be core subject in the first year.

This research work is geared towards investigating the problems and prospects of the implementation of the indigenous languages policy in the schools in Kono. We should also note that Kono which is the dominant language in the district is not among the prescribed languages for the Mother Tongue Education Policy. This could be a possible problem area. At the Junior Secondary School level, most of the students in the district stand at a disadvantage, since they are compelled to learn two languages, none of which, is their mother tongue.

The colonisation of the African continent did not only affect the political system, but also greatly hindered the development of the indigenous languages. For territories under the British and Belgium domination, it was decided to use some indigenous languages as media of instruction in the early stages of the primary school. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the mother tongue education was used in primary. In the other cases, particularly so for territories dominated by French and Portages, who adopted the assimilation policy, the native languages were allowed no place at all in the scheme of the educational programmes. They were not even taught as school subjects, let alone employed as a medium of instruction. Quite ironically, the French policy of assimilation wanted to transform the average African into a Frenchman in terms of language, manner of dressing and culture. (Fyle 1989)

In the editorial of *A Guide for Creating Metal Linguistic Terms for African Languages* (1989), traced how educational experts saw these problems early enough and began pointing out the harmful effects of this assimilation approach to African languages. They advocated to put in its place a system in which the child will be introduced to formal education through the medium of his mother tongue. Their effort was fruitless, since most colonial governments as well as the post independent governments that took over the reins of power, did not pay much attention to what those experts said. Instead, they continued to operate much as before.

However, despite these problems, there are encouraging signs today of changes for the better. In some African countries, like Tanzania, Ugandan and Ethiopia, some indigenous languages have for some time now served as media of instruction, not merely during the early stages of primary education, but for the entire duration of such education. The West African Countries appear to be behind their East Africa counterparts.

In an article, *The African Language as Instructional Media* (UNESCO 1983), reasons are given for why the teaching of African Languages should be encouraged. This goes a long way to buttress the argument for a dire need to implement the teaching of the indigenous languages in the schools in Sierra Leone.

As one of the goals, the teaching of African languages aims at linking education with life. Through these languages, citizens are trained to be responsible, able and determined to cooperate with others for the building of a new and harmonized society. This goal gives an answer to the need of Sierra Leone learning in a language that meets the needs of the learner.

Also, there is a need for every country to develop its productivity and manpower skills, which is often lacking in most developing countries of which, Sierra Leone is no exception. Mass training for agricultural and other productive occupations and middle level skills, is only possible and at a faster rate, if training is given in mother tongue. This is done to avoid the time needed for training is not wasted or spent in the imperfect learning of the adopted official European languages, of which, English in our case.

Taking a careful observation of both the Mother Tongue Education Policies of Sierra Leone and Ghana, they follow similar patterns of policy statement, framework and in terms of implementation. In this regard, they are therefore bound to encounter similar problems. This however does not reflect on their literacy percentage output. Ghana has however made remarkable progress, scoring 80.3% over Sierra Leone with 47.7%. The Sierra Leone National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment Baseline Survey of 2021, shows that (64-73%) of the learners from grade 2 to 4 are not able to comprehend the text they read. Should we attribute the low literacy rate in Sierra Leone to these reasons?

- The Mother Tongue Education Policy made provision for the teaching of only four dominant Languages Mende, Krio, Limba and Themne. No provision was made for the other twelve languages.
- The lack of personnel and materials to teach these languages are also a setback.
- Also, most Sierra Leoneans regard the indigenous Languages to be inferior as compared to English and French.
- In Sierra Leone, the trained teacher in primary school is estimated to be around 63.06 %. (UNESCO 2020). Whereas in Ghana, according to the 2015 Education Sector Performance Report 75 % of primary school teachers are trained. (Ministry of Education, Ghana 2015)

With these problems highlighted, there is need to change the mentality of the average Sierra Leonean towards the mother tongue education. Also, for mother tongue education policy in Sierra Leone to succeed, curriculum implementers should endeavour to see that the policy is fully implemented. Although attitudes are difficult to drop, but

with continuous reinforcement on the importance of mother tongue education, this negative attitude will be a thing of a past.

➤ *Research Procedure and Output*

To achieve the overall objectives of these studies, the research proceeded in the following order, which subsequently led to the outcomes recorded:

➤ *Objectives and Hypotheses*

The specific objectives of this study include the following:

- To investigate the problems of the implementation of the teaching of the indigenous languages in the Junior Secondary Schools in Kono.
- To investigate the attitudes of the pupils, teachers and school heads towards the implementation of this policy.
- Discover the level of success and impact the implementation of the policy has made in the schools in Kono.
- Find out what can be done to facilitate the implementation process.

➤ *Significance of the Work*

The current educational system of every country in the world is laying premium on mother education. It is hoped that curriculum planners will find the findings of this work useful in guiding them on how to improve the process of implementing the Mother Tongue Education Policy. It is also hoped that that work can be of relevance to language teachers. It will give them an insight into the problems that teachers, school heads and pupils encounter with these languages and the country's language policy. This work will help them solve and find solutions to these problems.

III. METHODOLOGY

The data for this work was collected through the administration of questionnaires and guided interviews. Questionnaires were administered in six secondary schools in Kono District to school heads. These schools were Koidu Secondary School (KSS), Koidu Girls Secondary School (KGSS), Ansarul Islamic Boys Secondary School (AIBSS), Ansarul Islamic Girls Secondary School (AIGSS), Yengema Secondary School (YESS) and Islamic Secondary School (ISSK). The responses received from these questionnaires were categorized as follows: problems encountered in implementing the policy, the advantage and disadvantages of the policy and the level of success and impact the policy has made in the community. From these responses, conclusions, summary of findings and recommendations made.

The analysis of the data collected will be analysed using the qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. For us to achieve the objectives of this work, research questions will be formulated. These questions will help us to reach at a satisfactory interpretation of the data and subsequently meet the objectives of this work.

IV. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

The presentation and discussion of this data, the school heads are the main informants. For the questionnaires administered to school heads, six questionnaires were administered to them and later collected by the researchers. The responses received from these questionnaires were categorised as follows: problems encountered in implementing the policy, the advantages and disadvantages of the policy and the level of success and impact the policy has made in the community. The responses of the school heads are summarised in table 1.

Table 1 Responses from Heads of Schools Questionnaires.

Schools	Languages Offered	Problems Encountered				Advantages	Disadvantages	Impact Level & Success
		Teachers	Textbooks	Fundings	Writing System			
KSS (MIXED)	Krio	Not enough teachers trained to teach the indigenous languages	No standard textbooks	Poor	Difficult to understand	L1 education makes learning easy and pupils understand better	L1 education has low prestige, lack vocabulary and enter fears with L2 learning	Not much was achieved. Success depends on the availability of teachers and learning materials.
KGSS	Krio	Difficult to get trained teachers	No textbooks	Poor	No response	It is easy to learn in ones L1	No response	The problems slowed down the process.
AIGSS	Krio	No response	Shortage of textbooks	No funding	No response	Advantageous to learn new language.	No response	The teaching of L1 is ineffective. Training and workshops are necessary to make it succeed.

AIBSS	Krio	No response	Shortage of textbooks	No funding	No response	It makes comprehension easier	No response	L1 education is ineffective due to the problems highlighted. Govt. should provide materials.
YSS (MIXED)	Krio	Shortage of teachers to the indigenous languages	No textbooks.	No response	No response	It makes learning easy and learners learn easily.	No response	The teaching of L1 is difficult. Proper funding is needed.
ISSK (MIXED)	Not started lack of teachers	No teacher	No textbooks.	Poor	Difficult to understand the writing system	It makes learning easy and learners learn easily	No response	The programme has not started fully. Govt. should monitor it properly.
Total responses calculate in percentages	83% are offering Krio. 17% have not started the programme	67% lack teachers, 33% did not respond	83% said there were no textbooks. 17% indicated shortages	83% of funding is poor. 17% gave no responses	33% had problem with the writing system. 67% gave no response	100% said L1 is advantageous	83% no response. 17% said it is disadvantageous	100% indicated that not much success has been achieved in implementing the L1 policy.

Key:

1. KSS (m) – Koidu Secondary school mixed
2. KGSS – Koidu Girls Secondary School
3. AIGSS – Ansarul Islamic Girls Secondary School
4. AIBSS – Ansarul Islamic Girls Secondary School
5. YSS (m) – Yengema Secondary School (mixed)
6. ISSK (m) – Islamic Secondary School Koidu (mixed)
7. L1 - Mother Tongue
8. L2 - Second Language Acquired

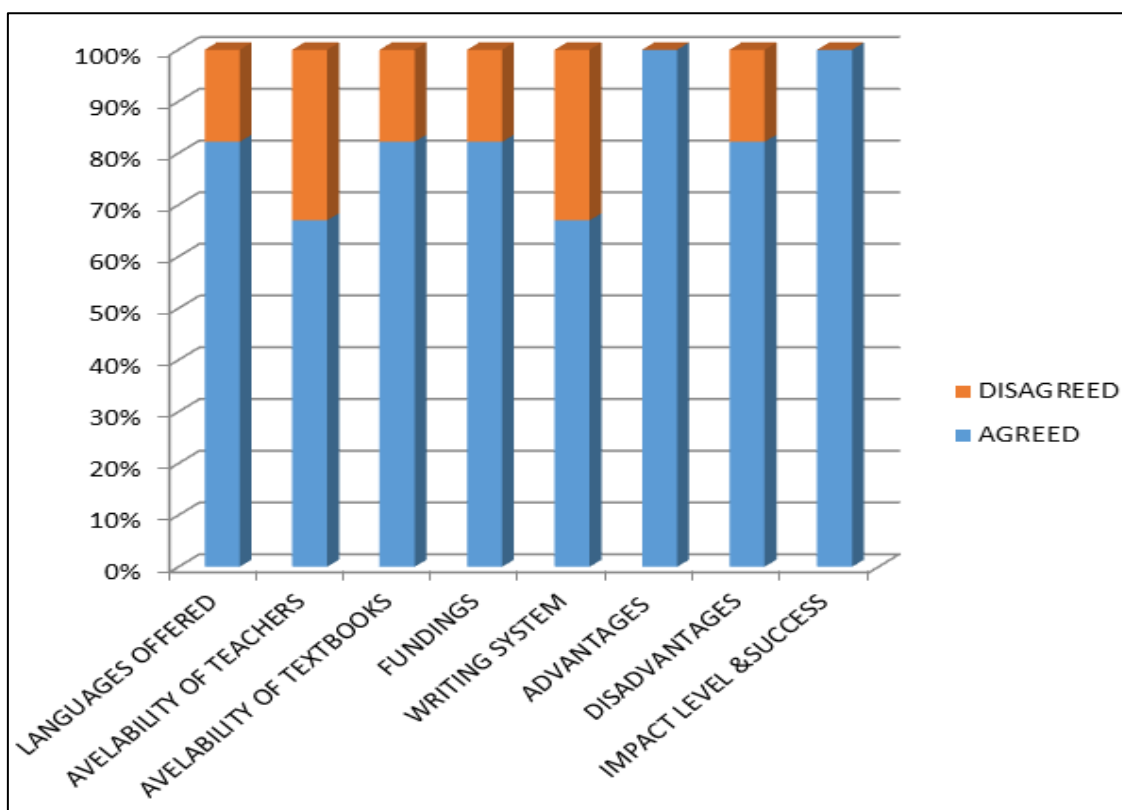


Fig 1 Responses from Heads of Schools Questionnaires

➤ Discussion of Data

This data highlighted certain problems, advantages and disadvantages and the impact and level of success the mother tongue education has made in the Kono District. These issues are discussed as follows.

• Problems

One reason why the L1 Education Policy was introduced is to enable every student to be literate in his/her mother tongue. From the data, 83% of the schools offered Krio, which is not the dominant language of the district. Kono, the dominant language, is not among the prescribed languages. The rest of the 17% have not started the programme, they lack trained teachers to teach the languages.

In terms of learning materials and funding, 83% indicated shortage and poor funding. The remaining 17% indicate shortage or made no response. For learning to be effective, not only trained teachers are required, but also equally important are the availability of learning materials and funding.

In terms of the writing system, 33% indicated that they encounter problems with it, while 67% said they have no problem with the writing system. To be literate in any language requires you to be able to read and write that language.

Due to the negative attitudes and the problems highlighted, 100% indicated that in the implementation of the mother tongue education policy, not much progress has been made.

• Advantages and Disadvantages

Every policy has both advantages and disadvantages. When the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, there is greater tendency for the policy to succeed. 100% said the policy is advantageous because of these reasons: it is easy to acquire learning in your L1. It creates awareness for both pupils and the community to appreciate their language.

• Impact Level and Success of the Policy

From the findings or analysis of the data collected, 100% of school's heads said that because of the numerous problems identified, not much impact has been made in the implementation of the mother tongue education policy. Success will depend on finding solutions to these problems.

V. CONCLUSION

The present education system has attached much importance to mother tongue education as one of the quickest and best ways of eradicating the high-rate illiteracy rate in the country. But from the investigations carried out in this research work, we can conclude that adequate preparations have not been made by government for the successful implementation of the mother tongue education policy. This conclusion is made on the following findings:

- Shortage of trained and qualified teachers to teach these languages.
- Inadequate availability of textbooks and relevant learning materials.
- Poor funding and lack of an effective monitoring system to ensure the successful implementation of the policy.
- Krio which is offered in these schools is not the mother tongue of most of the pupils. They have therefore developed a negative attitude towards the programme.
- The indigenous languages are often regarded by most Sierra Leonean as languages of low standard and inferior to English, which is internationally recognized and the official language of the country. This has rendered the teaching of indigenous languages ineffective.

These setbacks have led to the slow progress in the implementation of the mother tongue education policy in Kono District and the country at large.

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