

# What is certain and uncertain about the future of mother tongue education in SA?

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# Outline

1. What is mother tongue education?
2. South Africa's mother tongue policy
3. Key features of mother tongue education
  - Argument pro-MTE
  - Arguments against-MTE
4. Impact of mother tongue education
  - Focus on the Eastern Cape Province
5. Areas of improvement
6. Implications / possibilities ahead of 2030
7. Conclusion





**“Mother-tongue education is in a state of flux, even turmoil, as it struggles to find its way and map out its place.”**

# What is Mother Tongue Education?

***Mother tongue:*** The main language used constantly from birth to interact and communicate with a child by their family

***Mother-tongue-based education:*** Education which is based on, and begins teaching in, the language used by the child at home since birth

***Mother-tongue-based multilingual education:*** Learner-centred, active basic education which starts in the mother tongue and gradually introduces one or more languages in a structured way, linked to the children's **understanding in their mother tongue**

***Language of instruction:*** The main language used to conduct most or all learning and teaching, the language used in textbooks, classroom materials and for examination purposes across the curriculum

(Adler, 2001; Pinnock, 2009; Essien, 2013)



**\*Mother-tongue education is especially beneficial in ECD programmes, pre-school and the early grades\***

# South Africa's Mother Tongue Policy

- A relatively loose policy of **mother tongue** instruction varying from province to province

- **Bantu Education Act** changed language policy, extended the use of **mother tongue** instruction among black learners, to disable them educationally

- **SOWETO uprisings:** caused by the vehement **resistance of the LiEP** designed to serve the **apartheid regime**

Before  
1948

1948 -  
1953

1953

1959

1976

1997 -  
current

- **Afrikaans** established alongside **English as official LoLT** for all learners in minority white, coloured and Indian schools

- **All 8 years of primary education for black learners** conducted in the **mother tongue**, **secondary** used **English** and **Afrikaans** as **LoLT** in a ratio of **50:50**

- **LiEP encourages the use of mother-tongue instruction during FP**, followed by a **transition to English / Afrikaans from IP onwards**; allows **SGBs** to decide



# Key Features of Mother Tongue Education

- Arguments **pro-MTE**
- Arguments **against-MTE**

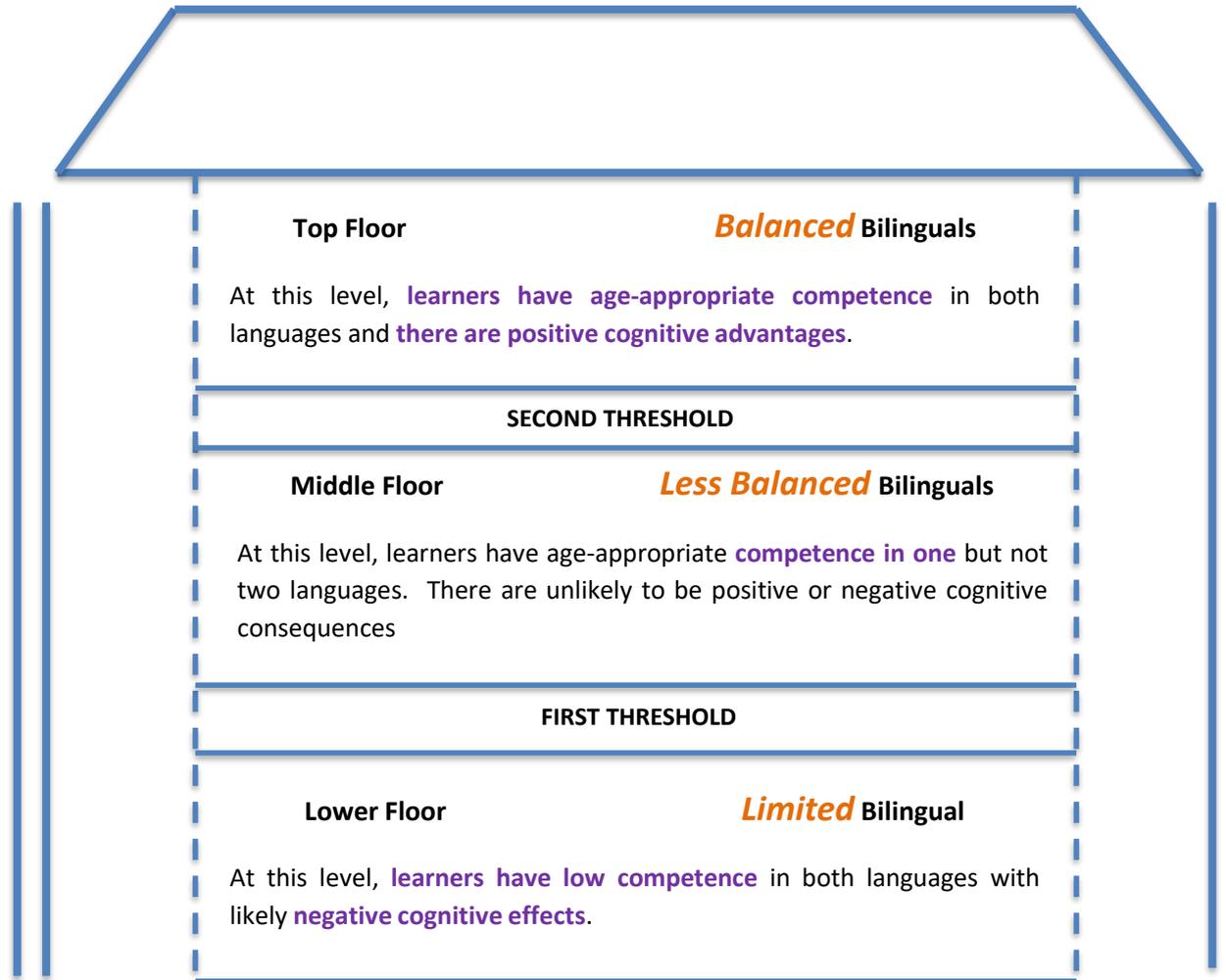


# *Arguments pro-*Mother Tongue Education

Mother-tongue education:

- leads to **better academic performance**;
- makes the **acquisition of a second language easier for learners**;
- instils in learners a sense of **pride in their heritage and identity**; and
- enables **adults to be significantly proficient in additional languages**

# Arguments pro-Mother Tongue Education confirm the *Threshold Hypothesis*



*\*Ideally, a learner needs to progress **beyond the second level** in order to derive cognitive benefits\**

# *Arguments against*-Mother Tongue Education

Promote English as the LoLT based on:

- English is the **language of the global market**;
- Immersing learners in English from the beginning of their schooling, enables them **to easily adopt it at a later stage**;
- English **integrates a linguistically diverse nation** such as South Africa with its 11 official languages;
- English allows **easy communication in linguistically diverse communities** that have developed from political and economic migration and displacement; and
- It is **practically challenging to provide teaching and learning resources in all official languages.**



# Impact of Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education: ECDoE

- A unique project involving learners in **81 schools in rural Cofimvaba District in the Eastern Cape Province is paying huge dividends**
- Learners from Grades 4 to 7 in these schools are **studying mathematics, natural sciences and technology in isiXhosa, (their mother tongue)**
- In 2014 Grade 6 learners at Luzuko Junior Secondary School scored **100% in mathematics** in the Annual National Assessment (ANA), compared to 40% obtained in 2012
- However, learners are still being taught other subjects using English as the LoLT
  - \* **mother-tongue instruction having a positive impact on learners' academic performance in the district\***

(Govender, P.; Mvumbi, N.; Skama, M. in *Sunday Times*, 2015 – 05 – 17)

- **Small scale investigations:** current evidence on the impact of language of instruction on learning outcomes is insufficient

# Areas of Improvement in SA

- Establishing policy commitments to **improve language of learning and teaching**, based on an intention to progress towards evidence-based good practice;
- Ensuring that **teachers understand that the more they help learners to use and develop their mother tongue, the better learners are likely to perform academically**, including acquiring second-language skills;
- Emphasizing that **if transition to an international language is unavoidable during the ordinary school system, then the transition should be gradual and managed purposefully**;
- Prioritising **under-resourced parts of the country** where:
  - foreign languages (including English) are not extensively available in everyday life, and
  - education outcomes are poor;
- Such areas should be provided with assistance to develop mother-tongue-based multilingual education approaches.



Pinnock (2009)

# Areas of Improvement in SA

- **Delivering the majority of the curriculum in a common language** in cases where a large variety of local languages present challenges to teaching in everyone's mother tongue.
  - Teachers should choose this language based on how familiar it is to the learners. For example, a rural area's lingua franca may be a far better choice as the medium of instruction instead of an international language;
- Instructing **teacher education institutions to deliver in mother tongue the curriculum that is supposed to be taught in these languages;**
- **Allocating resources, teaching time and training** to fulfil these aims progressively over time; and
- Requesting **external assistance to develop, expand and research mother-tongue-based multilingual approaches** in the specific context of the country.

Pinnock (2009)



# Implications & Possibilities for Schooling Vision 2030

There is a need for:

- **a clear and concise policy on mother-tongue education**
- **an increased awareness on the benefits** of delivering foundation skills to primary school children in their mother tongue
- quality **teaching and learning resources in *all* the official languages**
- **planned** and **purposeful** **multilingual teaching** and translanguaging allowing African indigenous languages **to support the main language of instruction**



# MTE & Teacher Education: the missing link

Most of the language practices in multilingual classrooms that teachers produce cannot be traced back to their teacher education institutions:

- teachers should cultivate **a culture of using learner languages as a resource in the teaching and learning process**
- for **teachers** to be well-equipped foot soldiers of the education system they **need to be well trained**
- if **teachers** are not well trained and supported during and after initial teacher education, ***they will not be able to deal with the diversity in their multilingual classrooms***



**\*the onus is on teacher educator institutions to ensure that teachers are well trained to promote multilingual instruction in the classrooms\***



**There is a chronic shortage of trained teachers!**



“ ... the critical nature and centrality of mother-tongue education requires finding defensible and shared ways to prepare teachers that reflect the changing nature, knowledge and practices of mother-tongue education...”

*Hulshof & Kooy (2010: 742)*

