

Teacher Preparedness and the Implementation of the Mother Tongue Education Policy in Public Lower Primary School Education in Meru County, Kenya

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Abstract

Teaching in the first language is beneficial to both the learner and the teacher. The policy that provides for usage of the first language as the instructional medium for lower primary education in Kenya was established after independence. Despite the establishment and integration of this policy into the 2019 Kenya Basic Education Curriculum Framework, it remains unclear how prepared various stakeholders are in the execution of the regulation. The purpose of this study was to examine teacher preparedness in the implementation of the MTE policy in lower primary schools in Meru County, Kenya. The study was grounded on Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, and utilized a descriptive survey design with a mixed-method approach. A sample of 155 head teachers and 155 grade 3 class teachers was selected using random and purposive sampling techniques respectively. Data was collected from Grade 3 teachers using questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions collected data from head teachers and interview guide was used to collect data from the County Director of Education, sub-county Quality Assurance Standards Officers, and Curriculum Support Officers. Reliability and validity of research instruments were ascertained accordingly. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive techniques and Spearman correlation analysis. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically. Results indicated that although teachers had received initial training on mother tongue teaching, gaps existed in teacher in-service development, and support from Ministry of Education. Only 20% of teachers had received in-service MTE training, and 25% had been involved in developing the MTE curriculum. The study recommends in-service training programs by the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) and development of accessible and up-to-date MTE by the requisite institutions. The government should foster policy alignment, promote multilingualism, establish continuous professional development, and encourage research on the efficacy of mother tongue instruction for improved educational outcomes.

Keywords: *Mother tongue, teacher preparedness, in-service training, lower primary*

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1.0 Introduction

There exists a debate on both the policy and the context of language of instruction (LoI) among stakeholders championing for an education system based on mother tongue (Piper & Miksic, 2011). However, researchers have confirmed that the solution to declining academic results is ensuring that learning and teaching is done in a language well understood and used by the learner at home (Trujillo, 2020). Indeed, education delivered in the first language (L1) of a child is the best for knowledge acquisition.

Across the globe, the right to first language classes in countries like Sweden is accorded to all children speaking a language other than Swedish. However, the implementation of the mother tongue (MT) is greatly affected by learners' attitudes. In the USA, there is a deficit in instructional materials such as books written in mother tongue, with translation of instructional materials to MT posing significant challenges. In Cambodia, the government in collaboration with NGOs has initiated various projects, such as developing MT orthographies, curricula and learning and teaching materials in order to deliver education in the indigenous languages (Lartec et al., 2014).

Most Sub-Saharan countries did not deviate from the language of their colonial rulers but accepted it automatically, perhaps because their systems of government were based on the languages of their colonial masters (Mbah, 2012). In Zambia and South Africa, implementation of MT as an instructional language in lower primary has encountered a challenge in insufficient training of teachers (Magocha et al., 2019). As a result of this

challenge, teachers apply code-switching techniques in teaching, and students are allowed to use their native language in specific pedagogical situations, such as when explaining complex concepts. However, implementation of the MT as LoI in lower primary is successful in Ethiopia, where primary education is carried out in Amharic, the national language (Alemayehu, 2021).

Regionally, Uganda's current language policy enacted in 1989 and implemented in 2007 stipulates that MT should be used as an instructional language in the first four years of learners' education, while English should be as a subject. In Kenya, legal and statutory frameworks have supported the implementation of MT language education (MTE) since its independence. However, effective implementation has been hindered by the preparedness of teachers, attitude, and insufficient instructional materials (Chebet et al., 2018). To achieve effective implementation of MTE, Specia et al. (2022) underscores training of teachers, accessibility of relevant instructional materials, institutional support, and cultivation of the right attitude in teachers and learners.

Statement of the Problem

The benefits of delivering instructions in the first language are immeasurable (Kobia, 2017). Consequently, the policy that provides for usage of vernacular language as an instructional medium for lower primary education was established over 50 years in Kenya. However, despite the policy's establishment and its integration into the 2019 Kenya Basic Education Curriculum Framework, there is uncertainty regarding stakeholders' readiness to execute the

directive effectively (Choppin et al., 2020). Its implementation has been largely unsuccessful. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), which is responsible for developing instructional materials has been slow to incorporate MT in the curriculum. This in turn has led to ineffective implementation of MTE policy in lower primary school education in Meru County, Kenya. According to Tackie-Ofori et al. (2015), effective implementation of MT as a language of instruction requires teacher training, and availability of reference and training materials.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to determine how teacher preparedness influences implementation of MTE policy in public lower primary school education in Meru County, Kenya.

Research Hypothesis

HO1: Teacher preparedness has no significant influence on the execution of MTE program in public lower primary school education in Meru County, Kenya.

Theoretical Review

The success of instruction depends to a large extent on the teacher factors. These factors include teachers’ attitudes, competence, and the MT teaching resources (Chebet et al., 2018). This study was anchored on Piaget’s cognitive development theory, expanded by Jean Piaget in 1936. The theory explains how people develop, acquire, and use knowledge throughout time. The thesis of the cognitive theory is that a child’s intellectual development is directly proportional to

language acquisition. Notably, language acquisition is majorly dependent on teacher preparedness.

“The study findings revealed that while teachers have positive attitudes about mother tongue instruction, there are gaps in teacher preparedness, proficiency, and training”

Empirical Review

In Hong Kong, trainers face challenges switching from English to Chinese as a method of instruction (MOI). According to Tse et al, (2001), examining teachers' perceptions is critical since they are a reflection of the real image MTE in schools, and they directly impact on successful enforcement of MT regulations. In South Africa, Magocha et al. (2019) investigated the experiences of instructors in isiXhosa as a means of instructions, and showed that teachers lacked training in teaching subjects using isiXhosa as an instructional language. Chebet et al. (2018) carried out an investigation on teacher preparedness for teaching English in 5 lower primary schools (Grade 1-3) in Kenya. The findings revealed that teachers lacked resources, and were overwhelmed not only by foreign concepts, but also by the pressure from government to persist in using English for instruction even in the lower grades.

2.0 Materials and Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design and incorporated a mixed-methods research design. The target population of the study was 773 government primary schools in Meru County. From there, the unit of observation was 263,892 Grade 3 learners and 773 class teachers for Grade 3. From the target population, 310 respondents were sampled. The sample size comprised 155 class teachers and 155 head teachers. The sampling techniques adopted in the study included random sampling techniques and purposive sampling techniques. The tools for data collection in the study included questionnaires and interview guides. A pilot study was undertaken in Maara Sub-County in Tharaka Nithi County. The study observed content and construct validity on the constructed tools accordingly. Reliability was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The analysis of quantitative data was done through descriptive statistics and inferential statistical methods. The data collected from interview schedules were analyzed using descriptive methods involving thematic analysis.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Response rate

The study distributed 155 questionnaires to grade 3 teachers out of which 125 were considered valid and used in data analysis, indicating a response rate of 81.2%. Out of the 155 head teachers scheduled for focused group discussion, 150 head teachers showed up. This led to an overall response rate of 81.8%. This response rate was considered higher than the recommended threshold of 60.6%, which was attributed to favorable level of engagement and cooperation from the participants.

Reliability of the Data

The reliability of the data was ascertained by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.811 which was above 0.7. This meant that the data collected for teacher preparedness was dependable and suitable for subsequent analysis.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study sought the demographic characteristics of grade three teachers and the results were presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of grade three teachers

Characteristic	Gender	
	Frequency	Percent
Male	28	13.3
Female	183	86.7
Total	211	100.0
Age bracket		
26 – 30 years	21	10.0
31 – 35 years	19	9.0
36 – 40 years	20	9.5
41 – 45 years	21	10.0
46 – 50 years	48	22.7
Above 50 years	82	38.9
Highest academic level attained		
Diploma	187	88.6
Bachelors	24	11.4
Years one has been a teacher		
Less than 5 years	5	2.4
5 – 10 years	54	25.6
11 – 15 years	36	17.1
16 – 20 years	31	14.7
Above 20 years	81	38.4

Findings in Table 1 indicate a majority of female teachers handling grade 3 learners in Meru County, consistent with prior studies. Most teachers were over 50 years old, with an overwhelming majority possessing diplomas. Regarding teaching experience, a significant portion had over two decades of experience, aligning with previous research. Schools were predominantly composed of a single ethnic group, with a smaller proportion having a mix of two ethnic groups, reflecting some diversity. The Ameru ethnicity dominated grade three teachers in public primary schools, comprising 65% of the

teacher population. Kimeru language usage in teaching was noted to be occasional, similar to findings in Malawi.

Results on Implementation of the Mother Tongue Education Policy

This was the dependent variable of the study. Information on the implementation of the MTE policy in public lower primary schools in Meru County was gathered from grade three class teachers, head teachers, the County Director of Education, MOE Curriculum Support Officer, and Quality Assurance and Standards Officers. Their

responses were presented in a tabular format as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive results on the implementation of the MTE policy

Subjects taught in Kimeru Language	Rating					Med	Mod
	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Most of the time (3)	Always (4)		
Mathematics	16(7.6%)	48(22.7%)	114(54%)	33(15.6%)	0	2	2
English	37(17.5%)	101(47.9%)	59(28%)	14(6.6%)	0	1	1
Kiswahili	44(20.9%)	101(47.9%)	50(23.7%)	7(3.3%)	9(4.3%)	1	1
Science	16(7.6%)	27(12.8%)	123(58.3%)	41(19.4%)	4(1.9%)	2	2
Social studies	13(6.2%)	26(12.3%)	136(64.5%)	36(17.1%)	0	2	2
Christian religious studies	13(6.2%)	25(11.8%)	131(62.1%)	42(19.9%)	0	2	2

From the results in Table 2, the majority of respondents 114 (54.0%) reported that Mathematics is taught in Kimeru Language most of the time, indicating a relatively high frequency. The high frequency of Mathematics being taught in Kimeru Language may indicate a strong commitment to providing education in the local language. This can help students understand and engage with mathematical concepts better, potentially leading to improved learning outcomes. The results compare with the observations of Umar (2018) in the Yola district, that children in lower grades were moderately taught using three local native languages. Umar linked mother tongue engagement to improved academic performance of pupils. The subjects that were

rarely taught in Kimeru language were Kiswahili and English. The low frequency of English and Kiswahili instruction in Kimeru Language may impact students' proficiency in this widely spoken language. These findings were consistent with the results presented by Mwanza (2009) who noted that the utility of mother tongue in teaching learners influences the performance in language subjects, especially English. For Science and Social Studies subjects, the study indicated that the subjects were taught in Kimeru sometimes, indicating a relatively high frequency. The study notes that the instruction of Christian Religious Studies in Kimeru Language may facilitate a strong connection between religion and culture. However, educators should consider the need

for religious diversity and tolerance in the curriculum.

The study further sought to assess how the use of mother tongue language in teaching affected the completion of syllabi in lower primary school classes. A significant proportion 69 (32.7%) of respondents reported that using indigenous languages in teaching affects syllabus completion to a "moderate extent." This suggested that using mother tongue languages in teaching has a noticeable effect on syllabus completion. These findings were in line with the results presented by Darmody et al. (2014) who indicated that utilization of mother tongue as a language of instruction in Ireland caused learning difficulties in classroom, especially where different ethnic groups were involved.

Out of focused group discussions with head teachers, the study noted that code-mixing between English as the language in which the books are published, to the more familiar

language Kiswahili was very common. The head teachers confessed that in circumstances where the teacher noticed that the learner does not get the concept, Kimeru was used. Head teachers noted that the use of a language familiar to the learner was very helpful for the completion of work planned for the term.

Teacher Factors in the Preparedness to Implement MTE Policy

The lower primary teachers are expected to bridge the gap between traditional and formal education by utilizing their proficiency in various indigenous languages, instilling confidence in their teaching approaches, participating in training programs, and collaborating in curriculum development. The construct was therefore measured through several statements presented in five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Teacher Preparedness to Implementing Mother-Tongue Language Policy

Statements on teacher factors	SD	D	MA	A	SA	Median	Mode
a) During their initial training, teachers were taught how to use mother tongue to teach	33(15.6%)	35(16.6%)	29(13.7%)	107(50.7%)	7(3.3%)	3	3
b) Lower primary school	29(13.7%)	37(17.5%)	46(21.8%)	72(34.1%)	27(12.8%)	2	3

	teachers are able to teach using various mother tongue languages							
c	Use of mother tongue languages (indigenous language) require lower primary school teachers to get additional in-service training	11(5.2%)	59(28%)	28(13.3%)	57(27%)	56(26.5%)	3	1
d	Some lower primary school teachers have been attending in-service training on how to use mother tongue language for teaching Grade 3 learners	63(29%)	74(35.1%)	30(14.2%)	23(10.9%)	21(10%)	1	1
e	Lower primary school teachers are involved as stakeholders in curriculum development to ensure teaching strategies for	47(22.3%)	67(31.8%)	42(19.9%)	43(20.4%)	12(5.7%)	1	1

mother
tongue
languages are
considered

Statements on teacher factors	SD	D	MA	A	SA	Median	Mode
f) I am proficient in Kimeru language	10(4.7%)	28(13.3%)	31(14.7%)	84(39.8%)	58(27.5%)	3	3
g) I am comfortable teaching the learners in Kimeru language	33(15.6%)	44(20.9%)	55(26.1%)	39(18.5%)	40(19%)	2	2
h) Pupils are enthusiastic when taught in Kimeru language	7(3.3%)	15(7.1%)	30(14.2%)	89(42.2%)	70(33.2%)	2	3
i) The interaction of teachers and pupils while teaching in Kimeru language in the school is good	18(8.5)	40(19%)	37(17.5%)	76(36%)	40(19%)	3	3

From the findings in Table 3, about 107 (50.7%) of teachers agreed and 7 (3.3%) strongly agreed with a Mo of 3 and M of 3, that they were taught how to use the mother tongue during their initial training. This suggests that a significant portion of teachers had received training in using the mother tongue for instruction. They had the foundational knowledge to incorporate the mother tongue into their teaching practices.

The results show a substantial level of preparedness during the initial training. The findings also indicate that 94 (44.5%) teachers feel that teachers in their school do not shy away from teaching and holding conversations in mother tongue languages. This suggests a positive attitude toward using the mother tongue in school. Pupils' enthusiasm when taught in the Kimeru language was acknowledged by 89 (42.2%)

teachers, indicating a positive perception of pupil engagement. The use of mother tongue languages is considered natural when teaching by 86 (40.8%) of teachers, indicating a substantial comfort level in using the mother tongue for instruction. Conflicting opinions were presented by Mbah (2012) who found out that although there was sensitization of teachers on the use of mother tongue for instruction in grades 1-3, there was no coherent application of MT for instruction due to negative attitudes towards the language. Negative attitudes towards teaching children in their mother tongue was caused by pressure to complete the syllabus, lack of native language books and instructional guides, high multilingualism, and poor teacher preparation.

The findings also show that 84 (39.8%) grade 3 teachers believed that they were proficient in Kimeru language, ($M = 3$, $Mo = 3$) indicating a significant level of self-reported proficiency in the language. The teachers' level of comfort in teaching learners in Kimeru language varies, with 26.1% moderately agreeing and 20.9% disagreeing. This suggests a range of comfort levels among teachers. The discomfort could be attributed to training. This indicates that there is recognition among teachers that further training may be necessary to effectively implement mother tongue-based instruction, highlighting a potential need for professional development. The level of teachers' involvement as stakeholders in curriculum development indicated that only 55 (26.1%) were involved as stakeholders. This suggests a limited level of teacher involvement in

curriculum development which had negative impact on the relevance and effectiveness of MTE strategies. These findings corroborate with results reported by Specia et al. (2022) who observed that teachers were hardly involved in curriculum development for mother tongue language from grades 1-3 due to their limitations in proficiencies, mother tongue training, and lack of instructional resources in the native language.

The focused group results with head teachers revealed three themes on the level of teacher preparedness to implement the mother tongue policy. These were low preparedness, geographical influence, and collegial support. The majority of head teachers expressed concern about the low-level preparedness of teachers. Similarly, Kobia (2017) attested to low teacher preparedness in teaching lower-grade pupils in Busia County. The head teachers noted mechanisms that can be put in place to enhance teacher preparedness for effective implementation of MTE policy such as attending workshops and in-service training. Different mechanisms of enhancing teacher preparedness such as pre-service teaching programs and practicum apprenticeship programs were put across in the results of Chebet et al. (2018).

Correlation Analysis

A Spearman correlation was conducted to assess the hypothesis that teacher preparedness does not significantly affect the implementation of the mother tongue language policy. The correlation results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Correlations analysis between teacher preparedness and MTE policy

			X1	Y
Spearman's rho	X1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.601**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	211	211
	Y	Correlation Coefficient	.601**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	211	211

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the findings in Table 4, a statistically significant positive relationship was observed (Spearman's rho = .601, $p < .01$, two-tailed). This indicates that there is a strong and positive association between teacher preparedness and the successful implementation of the mother tongue language policy in public lower primary schools. This suggests that as teacher preparedness increases, the likelihood of successful implementation of the mother tongue language policy also increases. This finding implies that well-prepared teachers may be more effective in executing the policy, which emphasizes the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools.

4.0 Conclusion

The study reveals that while teachers have positive attitudes about mother tongue instruction, there are gaps in teacher preparedness, proficiency, and training that must be addressed through expanded professional development, curriculum involvement, and proactive support at all

levels to ensure successful policy implementation.

5.0 Recommendations

The study recommends the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) to offer comprehensive in-service training programs for teachers to use Kimeru language for instruction in lower primary school. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should develop mechanisms for involving indigenous language teachers in developing curriculum to create culturally relevant teaching strategies, and in enriching instructional materials. The Ministry of Education (MOE) should ensure access to up-to-date Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education resources. Head teachers should collaborate with authorities to ensure policy alignment and promote multilingualism through community engagement. They should establish continuous professional development and encourage research on the effectiveness of mother tongue-based instruction for improved educational outcomes.

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