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# Disrupting language of instruction policy at a classroom level: Oracy examples from South Africa and Zambia

Liz Chamberlain , Lucy Rodriguez-Leon  and Clare Woodward 

## Abstract

Education policy in the Global South often focuses on two areas: learner-centred education (LCE) and language of instruction (LoI). For over a decade, LCE has been promoted throughout sub-Saharan Africa and has been referred to as a 'policy panacea'. The basic premise of LCE is that it offers learners substantial control over what and how they learn through active engagement. Pair and group work involving talk are key aspects of LCE; however, in contexts where teachers and students are not proficient in the official LoI, the efficacy of this pedagogic approach is brought into question. Drawing on vignettes based on observational data of early years and primary classroom practice in South Africa and Zambia, this paper offers a discursive exploration of how valuing oracy and legitimising multilingualism alter classroom dynamics and interactions between teachers and children. Encouraging translanguaging as a pedagogical approach enables more effective meaning-making through talk and supports pedagogic shifts to more learner-centred classrooms. Exploring the potential of professional development to inspire change, we critically draw out some of the observable shifts in practice, alongside the challenges, for practitioners moving to a more multilingual classroom whilst simultaneously operating within the LoI policy.

**Key words:** multilingualism, home language, learner-centred pedagogy, language of instruction, oracy, translanguaging

## Introduction

Many students come to class with diverse language repertoires, experiences and proficiencies. In many countries in the Global South, it is not unusual for children to have experience of a home language, an official language, a more localised language and/or dialect, and to attend schools that operate in a different language of instruction (LoI), with teachers who may also

speak another language. Thus, opportunities for children to demonstrate success in literacy, defined within a socio-cultural context as, "a set of practices which afford people with opportunities for learning and participation in a range of social contexts" (Veliz and Hossein, 2020, p. 65), are limited. However, when this definition is combined with the notion of multilingual learning, "the practice of welcoming and using students' entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning" (Erling et al., 2021), young learners are afforded the opportunity to cross language boundaries and fully demonstrate their potential (Bloch and Mbolekwa, 2021).

In this discussion paper, we explore the observable pedagogical shifts that took place for young literacy learners in South Africa and Zambia when multilingualism was legitimised (Alexander and Bloch, 2004) in their educational settings. In Zambia, seven regional languages have national or official status, although a total of 72 languages are used across the country. Familiar language, referred to as the local language of the community, and not necessarily one of the seven regional languages, should be used to teach children in Grades 1–4, and English becomes the primary LoI from Grade 5 (UNICEF, 2017). In South Africa, 11 regional languages have national or official status, although 35 languages are spoken across the country. Government policy for students in Grades 1–3 is to start learning in their local language with English as a parallel discrete subject before English becomes the LoI from Grade 4 (USAID, 2020).

It is not unusual in everyday life in these two countries for multiple languages to be used in different situations, with speakers blending and alternating across languages. As a result, translanguaging is part of everyday life. This paper adopts a definition of translanguaging, based on work by Cen Williams' (1994, 2000), and refers to the pedagogical practices in which languages are used for different

activities and purposes and includes the ability to transfer language use, such as presenting information in one language and allowing students to respond or produce related information in another language. For example, in a Grade 6 science lesson in Zambia, the teacher might introduce the lesson in English presenting new vocabulary and explaining the task. However, during small group work, the learners might move between Bemba (local language) and English, as they explain the experiment and its outcomes, with no restriction being imposed by the teacher, who himself speaks both languages. However, this everyday practice of translanguaging is not reflected in many classrooms (García and Lin, 2016) due to the nature of restrictive LoI policies. We argue that in shifting to a multilingual perspective where all languages are valued, and where translanguaging is framed as a pedagogic resource, learners are enabled to use it as both a scaffold and a bridge connecting their worlds within and outside the classroom (Carstens, 2016). In so doing, practitioners can better shape authentic learner-centred practices supported by the language repertoire of students underpinned by meaningful oracy experiences.

Supporting language learning through printed or online resources is a challenge for many educational settings. Only 7% of schools in South Africa have a functional library, and most classrooms do not have books to read with 50% of learners not having access to books at home, and where books are available, they are often not in African languages (Cilliers and Bloch, 2018). Whilst acknowledging the lack of appropriate multilingual resources to support early literacy, we argue that book-bound stories and texts should not be privileged above other more freely available resources, for example, local languages and story telling. Edwards and Ngwaru (2012) suggest that formal schooling creates a hierarchy where the written text literature is valued at the expense of oral literature that is “holistic, rich and complex” (Bloch, 2006, p. 13). In their study of children’s access to books in Malawi, Shin et al. (2020, p. 74) argue that access to “locally produced text relevant to linguistic and cultural contexts” is a fundamental human right for children.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give appropriate coverage of the historical, political, economic and cultural debates that influence discussion around literacy, home language and LoI. However, the authors acknowledge the significance of these debates within the postcolonial context and draw readers’ attention to noteworthy authors including Bloch (2000, 2006, 2015), Bloch and Mbolekwa (2021), Erling et al. (2017, 2021), Sefotho and Makalela (2017), Trudell (2016) and Trudell et al. (2019).

## Learner-centred education and language of instruction

Learner-centred education (LCE) is widely supported internationally as an example of ‘best practice’ pedagogy. It has been described as a ‘policy panacea’ (Sriprakash, 2012) and has become widely promoted by international agencies and national governments. National policy frameworks (e.g. India, 2005; Kenya, 2012; and Zambia, 2013) emphasise classroom pedagogy as a way of improving the quality of education and highlight the importance of LCE. However, many teacher education courses (both pre-service and in-service) remain very theoretical, often failing to model the participatory pedagogy that is central to LCE (O’Sullivan, 2010). Critics have cast doubt on its appropriacy in all cultural contexts, and there is growing evidence in the Global South of long-standing issues surrounding its successful implementation (Sakata, 2021). In her 2019 contribution to the UNICEF Think Piece Series, Michelle Schweisfurth acknowledged that there are questions to be resolved regarding the appropriacy of LCE in many cultural situations (p. 1) and suggested a range of principles that, if implemented, could help in developing a more effective learner-centred approach. One of the seven key principles is the use of authentic dialogue, grounded in communicative oracy tools such as open questioning and discussion, both of which require a shared oral fluency possessed by both teachers and learners. Furthermore, Milligan (2020) argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the role that the language of the classroom may play in “acting as a barrier to subject knowledge” (p. 2).

In parallel, a common and proficient LoI is key to the success of LCE; as Schweisfurth (2019) states, “if teachers are not fully proficient in the language of instruction, they will use more closed pedagogies and be unable to teach dialogically” (p. 5). However, in many countries, whilst home language is used in the classroom for the early years of primary, this is supplanted by English as learners progress through the school. This is sometimes due to government language policy, but the LoI or language-in-education policy (LEP) is not a straightforward decision in the multilingual environment of sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Banda (2009) writes, “In Zambia seven regional languages and in South Africa 11 regional languages have national or official status, but English has retained its position as the main language of education, government and business” (p. 2). Frequently, as enacted in the classroom, official language policy does not align with actual implementation as teachers have to work with local languages, regional official languages and English. In addition, external pressures

from intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) among others lead to a demand for proficiency in English. This is often supported by many parents who believe that its mastery will offer greater economic opportunities to their children (Erling et al., 2017). For example, in Zambia in 2011, a revised policy was put in place where regional local languages were to be used as media of instruction in all subjects from Grade 1 to Grade 4 with the English language being taught as a subject first orally and then in writing (Curriculum Development Centre, 2013). However, insufficient reading materials, inadequate teaching and learning resources, as well as mismatches between LoI and home language, make the policy difficult if not impossible to implement. Tensions between local and regional official languages, combined with limited proficiency in English of teachers and students, all threaten learners' progress.

### Learner-centred education and oracy

Whilst LCE comprises multiple variations and is differently enacted in different contexts, the concept is generally underpinned by constructivist theories of learning (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Dewey, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives, in essence, conceive of learning as subjectively and individually 'constructed' through learners' social interactions and active involvement in the learning environment. From a constructivist perspective, LCE should indeed be the panacea for education in low–middle-income countries. However, LCE not only requires some changes in practice but also involves a paradigm shift – a different way of perceiving the teaching and learning process (Tadesse et al., 2021). Constructivism directs the analytic lens to the learning and development that results from a person's active involvement. Socio-cultural perspectives, however, shift the lens to what is happening between people and environments, to consider how learning emerges in and through social interaction and is shaped by cultural forces. In essence, socio-cultural theories are less concerned with 'what' is being learnt and more concerned with 'how' learning happens. Considering LCE from socio-cultural perspectives may illuminate how and why the approach may be problematic when, firstly, pupils are not fully competent in the LoI in the classroom and, secondly, when LCE approaches misalign with teachers', pupils' and families' underlying beliefs about education (Brinkmann, 2019).

The central role of language in the co-construction of meaning and knowledge has become well established through socio-cultural research and scholarship

in the field of dialogic teaching (e.g. Alexander, 2008; Littleton and Mercer, 2013; Mercer and Littleton, 2007). The concept of 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer, 2013) exemplifies how people use language as a tool to think together in a productive, creative manner to build upon each other's ideas and co-construct knowledge; as the authors explain:

*[interthinking] means using talk to pursue collective intellectual activity. It represents an important and distinctive strength of human cognition, whereby people can combine their intellectual resources to achieve more through working together than any individual could do on their own.* (Littleton and Mercer, 2013, p. 111)

In this paper, the role of oracy within LCE is framed within a context of translanguaging. The term oracy was introduced in the 1960s by Wilkinson (1965) in an attempt to give speaking and listening equal status to reading and writing. Specifically, he defined oracy as "the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening" (p. 13). Mercer and Dawes (2018) argue that it remains the most succinct and precise term for referring to the skills involved in using talk to communicate effectively across a range of social contexts (p. 2).

However, not all talk is equally conducive to interthinking; 'exploratory talk', which involves pupils respectfully questioning, critiquing, evaluating and reasoning in reciprocal discussion, is found to be most beneficial for productive and creative shared thinking (Mercer and Littleton, 2007). Similarly, when pupils make extended contributions, give reasons for their views and elaborate on previous contributions, the benefits of classroom talk are optimised (Howe et al., 2019).

The group and pair work associated with LCE are potential sites for interthinking; however, the more complex, nuanced language needed for exploratory talk and extended contributions may be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, Jones (2017) argues that teachers' confidence in promoting talk in the classroom has been low and their practice is inconsistent. Secondly, the paradox in classroom group work is that simply putting children together does not lead to successful language-based experiences (Wegerif and Scrimshaw, 1997). It makes sense that classroom talk will be less productive if students must engage in a language in which they are less competent (Erling et al., 2021).

### Valuing multilingualism in educational settings

In a study of the role of multilingualism in mathematics classrooms, Essien (2020, p. 171) argues that "the

active engagement of students comes through the nature of talk that is inherent in particular classrooms". A comprehensive review of literature of teaching practices in sub-Saharan Africa undertaken by Westbrook et al. (2013) found that observed effective practice involved group and pair work with discussion, alongside teacher and pupil questioning and expanded responses. However, in addition, a fundamental characteristic of the effective practice was the "use of local languages and code switching" (Westbrook et al., 2013, p. 2). This type of practice reflects an alternative approach to language use in the classroom as proposed by Banda and Mwanza (2017). They argue that developing effective translanguaging by teachers in SSA classrooms can take advantage of children's multilingual heritage by bridging the languages of home, community and school. Rather than code-switching, that is, where the teacher uses a local language to translate what was just said in the LoI for clarity, the lessons are conducted in a mix of languages with both teachers and learners moving between local languages and the LoI. This also has the effect of placing value on local languages rather than seeing English as the "top of the global linguistic pyramid" (Alexander and Bloch, 2004, p. 3) to be achieved in the classroom (Bloch and Mbolekwa, 2021; Shin et al., 2015). In legitimising multilingualism in this way, Alexander and Bloch (2004) argue that children can engage across indigenous languages by utilising them as "fluid, discursive resources that are used flexibly by multilingual speakers" (Sefotho and Makalela, 2017, p. 42). However, it is not easy to quantify or measure learning across multiple languages. Therefore, what has been argued is for the creation of an 'indigenous pedagogy' situated within a country's framework of learner-centred pedagogy (Tabulawa, 2013, p. 157), which both values oracy and allows for local adaptation.

### Positionality statement

We are mindful that our interpretations are through the lens of Global North researchers, reflected in this paper's definition of oracy. Our combined academic expertise is based on five decades as literacy practitioners, teacher educators and academics, with two authors having spent two decades working on collaborative literacy and language projects with colleagues in the Global South. One author is bilingual and has spent time working in Francophone Africa, whilst the other two authors are primarily English speakers. As literacy researchers, the focus of our observations and conversations with the practitioners who took part in the research was based within a context of curiosity and not judgement.

### Notes on the data

The vignettes presented draw on observational data from the two research studies in early years and primary school settings in South Africa and Zambia. The first study upon which we draw was an evaluation of the impact of a free online course entitled "Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook". The course involves approximately 24 hours of study and was adopted by Ntataise (an independent not-for-profit organisation that supports early childhood development programmes in South Africa) as part of their training programme for practitioners. The professional development (PD) was a blended approach of individual online learning and weekly group sessions to discuss the set tasks. Observational data were gathered in 2019 during a visit to South Africa, in which the researchers visited 13 early childhood settings, observed 11 story telling sessions and interviewed 26 practitioners who had completed the course.

The second study comes from the Zambian Education School-based Training (ZEST) programme. This is a 5-year project funded by the Scottish Government and currently engaging with over 400 primary schools in Central Province, Zambia. The project is a collaboration between the Zambian Ministry of Education (MoE), World Vision Zambia and The Open University. As part of the MoE-mandated regular teacher group meetings, teachers participate in enhanced school-based continuing PD (SBCPD) each month. The 2-year programme uses a blend of digital open educational resources (OER), peer observation and regular face-to-face teacher group meetings. Data were gathered in 2019 during a visit to the country when authentic videos of classroom practice (five examples) and follow-up interviews were filmed at two schools in Central Province, both schools being early participants in the ZEST project.

Both studies were granted ethical approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University, and both project teams were guided by the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical guidelines. Informed consent was sought from all participants before data gathering, and verbal permission was confirmed to take field notes during observations and to audio record interviews. All the participants and settings have been anonymised.

As previously stated, both countries have multiple official languages; multilingualism is the norm in these contexts, and thus, the data we draw on in the vignettes are apposite in illustrating our discussion. For the purpose of this discussion paper, across the entire dataset of 16 vignettes, we discuss six, four from South Africa and two from Zambia. Each pair of examples – presented as original field notes – was selected to demonstrate three criteria: (i) the role of

oracy as a valued practice, (ii) the potential of PD to influence practice and (iii) how translanguaging has the potential to legitimise and promote multilingualism in educational settings. The criteria aimed to identify any observable pedagogical shifts in practice that appeared to be leading to more dialogic exchanges and therefore more learner-centred classrooms.

## Oracy as a valued practice

### *Vignette 1*

It is early morning for Class 1 in a primary school in Kabwe, Central Province, Zambia. Their teacher captures the students' attention by getting them all to sing a song that is based on the sounds they have been studying in their literacy class. She explains later that she often uses songs to capture the learners' attention and enliven the class. When energy is flagging with her young learners, the use of targeted songs helps re-energise as well as strengthen learning.

There are more than 40 children in the classroom, with ages ranging from 7 to 12 years. This is not uncommon in Zambian classrooms, where children are often unable to access school regularly from an early age. The LoI in Classes 1–3 is the local language (L1), which in this school is Bemba.

The teacher asks for a volunteer to tell a traditional story, and a small girl jumps up. The teacher tells the learners to listen carefully as she will be asking some questions when the story is completed. The girl recounts her story using the local Bemba language; the story is a traditional cautionary tale, about the dangers of stealing. She is very engaged in the story telling and is very lively, and her classmates listen attentively. When she has finished, the teacher asks four or five questions, also in Bemba, and the other learners are eager to respond. Some of the questions are closed; for example, "What was the name of the girl?" Others are more open; for example, "How would you feel if you heard singing coming from underground?" A lot of hands go up after each question, and the teacher chooses a different child to answer each one.

After the lesson, in conversation, the teacher says: "I didn't want to tell the story myself. I thought there was a need for the learners to do it themselves – it's more learner-centred. All my learners know many traditional stories. That's why I called on the girl to tell us the story. After the story, I used closed and open questions with the learners to check they had understood."

This vignette exemplifies the value placed on oracy as a practice, as the teacher gives the children in her class autonomy in their choice of stories with which

she begins many of her lessons. Whilst listening, she develops a set of questions to ask the other children, and this involvement of the whole class legitimises and confers merit on the story teller's choice.

The Grade 1 LoI in this school is Bemba, but many of the children speak Nyanja as their home language. Learners and the teacher move between both languages in the classroom when speaking, but Bemba is used as the written text. The oral fluency of the learners in both languages enables the teacher to effectively carry out successful dialogic practice building on a learner-centred approach.

### *Vignette 2*

The large playroom in this school-based early childhood development centre in an urban township outside Johannesburg has a carpet, and there are four tables with 15 chairs placed at the edge; the room is open at the back and leads onto a side passage. Home-made posters in different languages show the months of the year, the alphabet and the body, together with rhymes and poems, are displayed on the walls.

The practitioner stands in front of the 41 children aged 3–4 years (a joint group of two classes for the purpose of our visit). She says, 'Good morning', and the children respond saying, "Good morning. We are fine." She starts to clap, and the children on the carpet join in. She stands at the front with a poster hidden behind her back. She asks the children what she might be hiding. She then shows a handmade poster showing a man in a tree, a dog and a sun. She starts to tell a story, asking questions as she goes, as the children freely share their ideas, saying words and repeating their ideas. She mixes home languages (the children in this class speak four different languages, and the teacher's home language is Ndebele) with English.

She shows the children two puppets – the children chant words and rhymes, and they are encouraged to join in. "There was a dog and a bird, and a monkey" – she links the puppets back to the poster. The monkey is asleep – all the children watch as she proceeds to tell, not read the story. She tells the story with expression, repeating key vocabulary. She is well-experienced and well-practised – she uses voices, making the children laugh and giggle, and they join in with her. She does not use a book, but there is no need for one – she is the text. She kneels on the floor with the puppets and acts out a scene. All the children clap for her. One girl asks to come to the front before she retells the entire story to the group. Everyone claps her, and the session finishes – the children leave the room giggling and laughing.

At the end of the session, the practitioner is keen to share her feedback about why she uses story telling to encourage oracy. She explains, "Storytelling is quite good because [...] it takes them to another different place, it makes their mind go all over the place through storytelling." She shares that even though she memorises the story, each time, "I add on something new." She reflects on her own early literacy experiences of visiting the library and hearing stories told by a visiting story teller, "... he reads the story you know like the way he is doing that thing. I just loved it. That time I just loved it." Whilst this practitioner utilised her own positive early literacy experiences to good effect, she also shares that it was her adult PD experience through the online early reading course that had legitimised the practice for her. In so doing, she was valuing the linguistic and cultural contexts of all the learners in her class. A point further emphasised when she shared that her online learning course had led her to the African Storybook website (a South African-based open-access online book repository). She had been delighted to find stories offered in the children's local languages, "I thought it was amazing. I would just love to have a library of those African stories."

### The potential of professional development to influence practice

All six practitioners in the vignettes had taken part in their own professional learning as part of a structured PD programme (see Notes on the Data). Practitioners in Zambia (Vignettes 1 and 6) had participated in the enhanced SBCPD, and the practitioners in South Africa (Vignettes 2–5) had been studying the blended PD based on the "Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook" online course. The practitioners in the next two vignettes were towards the end of their learning through the early reading online course.

#### *Vignette 3*

The teacher in this linguistically diverse early childhood development centre in an urban township outside Johannesburg had selected a story entitled 'The Greedy Mouse' and gathered a selection of props including a toy mouse, a porcelain cat figure and a puppet. She uses home-made word/picture flashcards of the main characters and has made a storyboard to illustrate the key events in the story, including a 'basket' made of paper, which she filled with corn kernels at the appropriate moment in the story.

With 21 children aged 4–6 years gathered in a circle around her, the teacher holds up each prop and asks

the children in English, 'What is this?'; most respond by naming the item in English. She then tells the story in English, using props to create dramatic enactments of the events. Many children move forward, straining to see, seemingly intrigued. The teacher pauses and asks the group, "Why is the mouse happy?"; one child responds with a short sentence in Sotho, and the teacher affirms his response.

When the story ends, the teacher invites the children to retell the story, and one child immediately volunteers by raising his hand. He starts tentatively in a quiet voice, speaking in Sotho. As the teacher nods and encourages, he grows in confidence, speaking with varied intonation and facial expression. When he finishes, the teacher congratulates him and turns to the researcher saying, "That was the whole story."

In the interview following the lesson, the practitioner explained that translanguaging in story sessions had become the norm and that in this linguistically diverse setting, other children may have chosen to retell the story in a different language. One other aspect that stood out in these observational data and subsequent interview was the practitioner's resourcefulness in the face of limited resources. She explained that after completing the online course, she had been inspired to use technology and search engines to find appropriate children's stories, which she wrote out by hand and gathered available resources to enhance the story telling. This vignette exemplifies the potential power of PD in promoting practitioner-driven change; engagement with the course appeared to boost this practitioner's confidence to take ownership of her practice. She described how the course inspired her story telling, explaining: "From what I've learnt, I can say they motivated me more ... for us it was giving us more information and things that we didn't know ... we can make books for ourselves." She also felt that these changes in practice had a positive impact on children. She said, "And my kids, as you saw, they love to listen to the story, and they could tell the story and they learn language and listening skills."

#### *Vignette 4*

In this privately owned early childhood development centre in an urban township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, there are five playrooms in the grounds of the principal/teacher's home. There is a lot of equipment including a new computer in the principal's office. There are outdoor toys, including vehicles for the children to play with throughout the outside space that surrounds the home and the five playrooms. The outside spaces are labelled 'Road transport' and

'Fantasy area'. The walls of the playrooms are decorated with home-made and shop-bought posters.

The 20 children aged 2–4 years old sit on the edge of a circle, leaning back against one side of the classroom. The principal/teacher sits a distance away from them on a small chair; she has a book and two props for the story session. She says, "Once upon a time ...", and the children all reply 'mmmm'. She reads from the text – the book is too difficult; it is in English and is better suited to children aged 7+. She cannot show the picture or the text because it is too small, and the children are too far away. She reads in English the first few pages; this takes over 10 minutes – she then summarises the story, telling them about the singing dog. She repeats the next sentence, and the children chorus in response. The children are listening, but they are not understanding the story. At the end, she retells the story in home language. She then asks questions. She has three toys on the floor, all different sizes. She asks which one is the dog. She corrects a girl who rightly chooses the small toy, but she is told 'this is the lion' (the dog is in fact the large cuddly toy). She then points to the dog and the final toy, which is the rabbit. The children chorus, 'Yes, teacher', when she retells the story in the local language and asks them if they understand. She shows them a picture, but the children are not invited to answer any more questions.

There was evidence of the practitioner trying to involve the children through her use of questions; for example, 'Which is the dog?' and 'Which is the rabbit?'. The children did display their understanding of the story and knowledge of the three main characters and, in fact, correctly assumed that the small toy was the dog. However, her use of closed questions together with content and language that were both beyond the young children's understanding coupled with her tight practitioner control was not conducive to talk for thinking, and thus, meaning was lost. During the subsequent interview with the principal/teacher, she says the lesson has "not gone well". She shares that she read the story in English because she thought that had been "what was expected of her".

## Translanguaging to legitimise and promote multilingualism

### *Vignette 5*

During the observed story session in a small church-based playgroup in an urban township outside Johannesburg, the practitioner and eight children aged 2–4 years gather in a group on the floor. The

practitioner's and children's home language is isiZulu. She reads aloud from a short home-made book, printed from African Storybook in both English and isiZulu. She begins in English, explaining that the story is about feelings. She reads the simple sentences aloud directly from each page, and each time, she encourages the children to repeat the sentence. Some children do, and the practitioner affirms their responses and elaborates on the simple sentence in the book; for example, she explains, "I feel love when I'm with my family." Some children enact the emotions represented on the page with facial expressions.

On completion, she returns to the first page and rereads the story in isiZulu. She becomes animated, enacting each emotion with vibrant facial expressions, gestures and intonation. When reading about being 'happy', she tickles one of the younger children; when the child giggles, the practitioner nods and comments, confirming that the child looks happy. When the story ends, the children clap and spontaneously sing a song of appreciation.

This vignette exemplifies a subtle shift in practice when the practitioner read aloud in her home language. In both readings, the practitioner encouraged children's participation; in English, she prompted repetition of the sentence, in what was possibly viewed as a 'language teaching' opportunity. In contrast, her expressive reading in isiZulu, with greater eye contact and interaction with children, seemed to emphasise social connection. In this rendition, the practitioner's focus appeared to shift to conveying meaning and feeling; she barely needed to look at the words on the page as she told the story, and her spoken language was complimented by multiple communicative modes. During this second reading, children were not prompted to repeat the sentence but, rather, encouraged to experience and empathise. This shift in practice was not explicitly recognised when the read-aloud session was subsequently discussed in the interview; hence, the extent to which the practitioner was aware of this strategy as a conscious switch is uncertain.

### *Vignette 6*

When students reach Class 4 in Zambia, they enter a transition year when the LoI shifts from the local language to English. The Class 4 teacher in this lesson is teaching a literacy lesson using the local language, followed by a social sciences lesson using English. The difference in the learners' responses to both lessons is illuminating. In the literacy lesson, there is a hum of activity, as learners are keen to answer the questions that she asks them, using their home

language, Bemba. The teacher introduces new vocabulary using flashcards and contextualises what they are about to read. The teacher produces each flashcard and asks for volunteers to read and provide an explanation of the word. The learners are keen to respond. There is humour and laughter as they answer.

In the social sciences lesson that follows on immediately, there is a switch to English as the LoI, and the atmosphere in the room alters. The learners are quieter, appear less eager to respond to her questions and engage noticeably less with their peers' answers. The teacher puts them in small groups, and they huddle together over the questions. The discussion in the groups switches to the local language and becomes livelier; the teacher moves between the groups and uses the local language to assist in explaining the task, but the requirement for the learners to use English when reporting back to the class has a visible impact on their engagement. They are quieter and more self-conscious.

As the literacy classes are focused on home language, the teacher explains that she uses the skills developed as part of her PD learning to create a lively communicative learner-centred activity. "When they work in groups, I encourage them to use the local language, Bemba, which helps them to express themselves well. They can give ideas when they are speaking their local language. They can freely express themselves; they then use English for reporting." In the second lesson, social sciences, English is the formal LoI. However, the teacher legitimises the home language as a medium for discussion enabling the learners to explore their thoughts and opinions. Nevertheless, the tension between home and LoI re-emerges when the learners are told that they must use English to report back to the class. Whilst the teacher in this vignette employs elements linked to LCE, for example, open questioning, pair work and discussion, the effectiveness of these approaches is substantially affected by the language the children are required to use. The teacher explains how the language policy is enacted within her class. "In Grade 4 we use the local language, but this is the last year for that. In Grade 5 they will use English so now we are advised to use English in Grade 4 but in order for them to understand my instructions I have to translate into the local language."

## Discussion

These vignettes illustrate multilingual classrooms and translanguaging in practice, and they exemplify how such practices enable children and practitioners to

use talk to participate and make meaning together in productive and creative ways.

The vignettes also demonstrate that multilingual practitioners themselves are key resources and conduits for learning. During our research visits, we were privileged to meet practitioners that appropriated available material resources to support their teaching and enhance children's experiences. Many practitioners were knowledgeable about each child's language preferences and the collective language repertoires of the community and setting. One aspect that stood out in some of our observations and interviews was practitioner resourcefulness and agency. Practitioners went beyond simply translating between local language and LoI. In some of the story sessions and lessons we observed, teachers and learners moved between languages quite fluidly and flexibly, which potentially enhanced the power of classroom talk. In addition to being an effective pedagogic strategy, it placed value on and legitimised the children's local, indigenous languages and cultures (Erling et al., 2021) rather than English being viewed as the dominant language (Alexander and Bloch, 2004). Despite limited resources, one practitioner explained how she used the Internet to find suitable stories; she would then write the story out by hand and make story props to enhance children's engagement and meaning-making. Other practitioners expressed their delight at being able to access children's books in their home language through the 'African Storybook' online resource.

Consistent with other evaluations of online courses in sub-Saharan Africa (Stutchbury et al., 2019), most practitioners we talked with stated that their motivation to complete the online learning was to enhance their practice and improve outcomes for children. This was borne out in conversations with practitioners who mentioned how online learning had led to opportunities for reflection, which had enabled them to rethink and take ownership of the approach to language learning in their classrooms (Stutchbury et al., 2020). By legitimising translanguaging, amongst other things, the PD courses had seemingly inspired a shift in practice, that developed oracy pedagogy and enhanced children's involvement in their learning.

However, the observable shifts in practice identified across several vignettes did not always appear to be conscious changes enacted by the practitioners. Yet this shift in emphasis was discernible across the dataset; for example, in Vignette 5, the practitioner read aloud from a print book in English adopting a 'read – repeat' approach, and she rephrased many of the simple sentences in English as closed questions. In contrast, she appeared to use isiZulu to explain and expand on what was happening in the story (Carstens, 2016).

Furthermore, the teacher in Vignette 1, who was engaged in the ZEST project and its associated PD programme, had been equipped with pedagogical skills that enabled her to practise a more learner-centred approach in her classroom (Schweisfurth, 2019). However, such effective changes in practice were not observed in all the settings in the study.

Unlike the practitioners who demonstrated the pedagogical principles and agency in enacting contextualised solutions for their settings, the practitioner in Vignette 4 may have felt under pressure to perform in a particular way, through her prioritisation of a difficult English text (Schweisfurth, 2019). Whilst this practitioner had learned about the benefits of story telling, using props and home language through the PD programme, her lens of experience had resulted in a lesson constructed of a series of teacher-led activities rather than a meaningful language-rich experience for the children. What this example does highlight is the role of PD in improving practice when practitioners view or interpret it through their own potentially narrow experience and/or prior knowledge (Milligan, 2020). As previously discussed, for LCE to be effective, it requires a paradigm shift that leads to a different way of understanding the teaching and learning process (Tadesse et al., 2021).

However, whilst home language story telling and translanguaging were promoted in the PD learning that the practitioners had studied, we found that teaching in home language and translanguaging were not universally practised, due to the absence of a common language or the perceived advantages of English (Alexander and Bloch, 2004). Some urban settings near Johannesburg had greater linguistic diversity, and practitioners explained that they simply did not speak the home languages of many of the children; therefore, story telling took place in English as it was considered their 'common language'. For some practitioners, teaching in English was also expected by families and local communities. Whilst a language in common is important, this is not reflected in all classrooms, leading to educators and teachers disrupting the LoI policy through their skilful use of multiple languages, and indeed their whole bodies in creative and expressive ways, to engage children in learning activities (Banda and Mwanza, 2017). In doing so, practitioners did not disregard the local LoI policy but were enhancing oracy practice through local adaptation through the fostering of translanguaging (Tabulawa, 2013, p. 157). In learning environments where translanguaging was wholly adopted, learners were free to move between all their known languages, which lead to a greater depth of language, enhanced communication and social interaction, and thus was potentially a tool for interthinking (Mercer and Littleton, 2007).

## Conclusion

Translanguaging and familiar oracy activities, including story telling, are powerful pedagogic tools in the classrooms, and by valuing and celebrating them, they each legitimise local languages and cultures and help teachers to develop authentic learner-centred practice. Some of the vignettes presented illustrate the tensions that can exist between learner-centred practice and LoI and the impact these can have on classroom practice and children's engagement. This inherent conflict can be diminished by positively embracing the opportunities within the multilingual classroom, rather than seeing local languages as deficit and relying on externally produced learning resources. Legitimising learners' language choices and adopting multilingual practices that do not preference one dominant language over home languages better enable practitioners to embrace the plethora of local and traditional stories and practices available to them.

Effective learner-centred practice is built on talk: the vignettes presented in this paper highlight that when using their language of choice, children and practitioners' talk became more detailed and elaborate. Moreover, their activity became more animated and more enthusiastic and the children were more deeply engaged. We argue that the discussion points raised in this paper are applicable and transferable to all bilingual or multilingual educational contexts. The role of translanguaging also has a place in multilingual classrooms in traditional monocultural contexts to celebrate the socio-cultural diversity of classrooms and communities.

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