

**INCLUDING MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN THE
CURRICULUM OF TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME:
TOWARDS PROMOTING SENSITIVITY TO
CULTURAL/LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN A MULTILINGUAL
SOCIETY**

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Abstract

The authors examined the inclusion of Mother Tongue Education as a course in teacher education curriculum as a strategy for developing teachers' sensitivity to cultural/linguistic diversity in multilingual societies. The theoretical, conceptual and philosophical aspects of the paper, centered on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Translanguaging Theory, alongside African communitarian and Ubuntu perspectives. The authors argued that teacher preparation should recognise linguistic diversity as an integral dimension of professional competence rather than treating learners' linguistic backgrounds as peripheral to formal education. The analysis revealed that Mother Tongue Education can strengthen prospective teachers' understanding of multilingualism, language and identity, culturally responsive practice and indigenous knowledge. It is vivid in the paper, that the inclusion of mother tongue education would promote an additive approach to multilingualism in which indigenous languages are recognised without undermining learners' acquisition of national and international languages. The authors concluded that Mother Tongue Education represents meaningful curricular response to the realities of multilingual educational contexts.

Keywords: *Mother tongue education, teacher education, multilingualism, cultural diversity, inclusive education*

Introduction

Multilingualism and cultural diversity are defining features of many contemporary societies and present important demands for the education systems and teacher preparation. Teachers increasingly work with learners whose languages, cultural experiences and identities differ from their own. Consequently, effective teacher education requires more than subject knowledge and general pedagogical competence; it should also prepare prospective teachers to understand and respond appropriately to linguistic and cultural diversity.

Language is particularly significant because it functions not only as a means of communication but also as a resource through which learners construct knowledge, express identity and participate in social life. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory highlighted the role of language and social interaction in learning, while Cummins (2000) affirmed the educational value of learners' existing linguistic resources. In multilingual classrooms, therefore, teachers' understanding of learners' linguistic backgrounds can influence how they interpret participation, communication and learning.

Despite this significance, the knowledge of indigenous and mother tongues is not always systematically integrated into teacher preparation. Attention to mother tongue may focus primarily on language-of-instruction policies, leaving prospective teachers insufficiently prepared to engage with the broader relationship between language, culture and education. This paper consequently argues that Mother Tongue Education should be included as a distinct course in the teacher education curriculum to develop teachers' sensitivity to cultural diversity in multilingual societies. (What is the position of mother tongue education in the curriculum of teacher preparation to warrant this call? You need to do more in your background to justify this call or intervention, please.

The paper is theoretical, conceptual and philosophical. It draws on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Translanguaging Theory, alongside African communitarian and Ubuntu perspectives. It argues for an additive approach in which recognition of learners' linguistic heritage complements, rather than replaces, the acquisition of national and international languages. The paper, therefore,

proposes Mother Tongue Education as a component of professional teacher preparation capable of strengthening teachers' understanding of linguistic diversity and their capacity to respond appropriately to culturally diverse learners.

Methodology

This paper adopted a conceptual, theoretical and philosophical approach to examine the inclusion of Mother Tongue Education as a distinct course in teacher education programmes. The analysis involved critical examination and synthesis of relevant scholarly literature on multilingual education, teacher preparation, language and identity, culturally responsive pedagogy and indigenous knowledge systems. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Translanguaging Theory provided the theoretical foundations, while African communitarian philosophy, Ubuntu and decolonial perspectives informed the philosophical analysis. The literature and theoretical perspectives were examined thematically to establish the educational, professional, cultural and philosophical justifications for the proposed course. This process informed the development of a proposed course structure, including its major content areas, practical learning experiences and implementation challenges. As a conceptual paper, the study did not involve empirical data collection; rather, it developed a reasoned argument for integrating linguistic and cultural responsiveness into professional teacher preparation.

Conceptual Analysis

The central concepts in this paper are mother tongue education, teacher education curriculum, multilingualism, cultural/linguistic prog diversity, cultural sensitivity and educational inclusion. These concepts are closely related, but each addresses a distinct dimension of the proposed inclusion of Mother Tongue Education as a course in teacher preparation. Clarifying their meanings is necessary for establishing the conceptual basis of the argument.

Mother tongue generally refers to the language acquired naturally within the family or immediate social environment during early childhood. In multilingual societies, however, individuals may acquire several languages from an early age, making the identification of a single mother tongue less straightforward (UNESCO, 2003). To this paper, Mother Tongue Education

refers to the education that systematic prepares prospective teachers to be aware and understand learners' first and indigenous languages, multilingualism, language and identity, language use in education and the pedagogical implications of linguistic diversity. It is broader than simply using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. The proposed course (a course?) is intended to develop teachers' knowledge and sensitivity regarding the languages that learners bring into the classroom.

This distinction is important because language is central to learning and communication. Vygotsky (1978) established the significance of language and social interaction in cognitive development, while Cummins (2000) ascertained that learners' existing linguistic resources can support additional-language and academic development. Mother Tongue Education should, therefore, equip teachers to recognise learners' existing linguistic knowledge rather than interpreting differences in language as evidence of intellectual deficiency. Does literature support this assumption?

Teacher education curriculum refers to the organised knowledge, experiences, values and competencies through which prospective teachers are prepared for professional practice. It is not simply a collection of subjects but reflects assumptions about what teachers need to know and what forms of knowledge are considered professionally valuable. Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that effective teacher preparation requires teachers to understand both pedagogy and the contexts in which learners develop. From this perspective, knowledge of linguistic and cultural diversity constitutes a relevant dimension of professional preparation, particularly in multilingual societies.

Multilingualism describes the coexistence and use of several languages within individuals, communities or institutions. It is a significant feature of many societies and should not automatically be regarded as a barrier to education. García and Wei (2014) emphasised that multilingual individuals draw dynamically upon their linguistic repertoires across different contexts. For teachers, understanding multilingualism is important because classroom language differences may affect participation, communication and access to learning. UNESCO (2023) similarly advocated multilingual approaches that recognise learners' home languages as important resources for inclusive and effective education.

Closely related to multilingualism is cultural diversity, which refers to the coexistence of different cultural identities, values, traditions, practices and ways of understanding the world. In education, cultural diversity should not be reduced to the inclusion of occasional cultural examples or celebrations but should..... Rather, it requires recognition that learners' experiences and identities influence how they participate in educational processes (Banks, 2016). Since language is an important carrier of cultural knowledge and identity, linguistic diversity represents a significant dimension of cultural diversity.

Cultural sensitivity refers to teachers' capacity to recognise, respect and respond appropriately to differences in learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It goes beyond merely tolerating differences. Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to connect instruction with learners' experiences and cultural frames of reference (Gay, 2018). Mother Tongue Education can contribute to this professional capacity by giving prospective teachers opportunities to examine language attitudes, linguistic differences and the relationship between language and cultural identity. Finally, educational inclusion concerns learners' meaningful participation, belonging and access to learning, rather than merely their physical presence in school. UNESCO (2020) emphasised that inclusive education requires the identification and removal of barriers that prevent learners from participating and achieving. Linguistic barriers can constitute one such form of exclusion, particularly where learners' home languages are consistently ignored or devalued. Mother Tongue Education can consequently strengthen teachers' capacity to recognise linguistic diversity as part of learner diversity and to develop more inclusive classroom practices.

Theoretical Perspectives

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory provides a foundation for understanding language as a mediator of learning and cognitive development. The theory maintains that learning occurs through social interaction and is mediated by cultural tools, particularly language. Knowledge develops through interactions between learners and their sociocultural environments rather than in isolation. Consequently, the language used in interactions with teachers, peers and communities has important educational implications.

The theory suggests that teachers should understand the linguistic and cultural contexts in which learning occurs. Learners bring prior experiences, concepts and linguistic resources into classrooms, influencing how they interpret new knowledge. Teachers who recognise these resources can connect existing understanding with new learning. Conversely, when learners' linguistic experiences are disconnected from classroom communication, opportunities for meaningful learning may be reduced. Mother Tongue Education can prepare prospective teachers to recognise language as both a communication medium and a cultural and cognitive resource. This perspective aligns with Cummins' (2000) emphasised on the relationship between learners' existing linguistic resources and academic development. Sociocultural Theory, therefore, provides a developmental rationale for incorporating linguistic awareness into teacher preparation.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy offers a second theoretical foundation by emphasising the relationship between learners' cultural backgrounds and effective teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) conceptualised culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach that promotes academic achievement, affirms cultural identities and develops critical consciousness. Gay (2018) similarly argued that culturally responsive teaching draws upon learners' cultural knowledge, experiences and frames of reference to facilitate instruction.

Language is a significant dimension of cultural identity. Teachers' understanding of learners' languages can inform their selection of meaningful examples, learning activities and communication strategies. Culturally responsive teaching does not require reduced academic expectations or restrict learners to familiar experiences. Instead, it connects existing knowledge with new academic content while maintaining educational rigour (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Mother Tongue Education can provide structured opportunities for prospective teachers to examine assumptions about language and culture, recognise linguistic biases and develop strategies for teaching culturally diverse learners. This perspective establishes the pedagogical and professional justification for integrating linguistic and cultural responsiveness into teacher education.

Translanguaging Theory provides a third perspective on multilingual learners' language practices. García and Wei (2014) explained that

multilingual individuals draw flexibly upon their linguistic repertoires to communicate, interpret experiences and construct meaning rather than necessarily treating languages as entirely separate systems. In multilingual classrooms, learners may use different languages to clarify concepts, collaborate with peers and connect prior knowledge with new information. Such practices can enhance comprehension and participation while supporting acquisition of the language required for formal schooling. Creese and Blackledge (2010) similarly demonstrated the educational value of flexible multilingual practices in classroom interaction.

For teacher education, Translanguaging Theory encourages prospective teachers to view multilingual repertoires as potential instructional resources rather than classroom obstacles. Teachers should learn when and how linguistic flexibility can facilitate understanding while respecting curriculum objectives and language policies. Together, these three perspectives provide complementary foundations for including Mother Tongue Education in teacher preparation. Sociocultural Theory explains language-mediated learning; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy establishes the importance of learners' cultural experiences; and Translanguaging Theory demonstrates how multilingual repertoires can support learning. Collectively, they justify preparing teachers to understand linguistic diversity and apply culturally responsive, contextually appropriate multilingual teaching practices.

Philosophical Foundations

The inclusion of Mother Tongue Education in teacher preparation is not only a pedagogical or curricular question; it is also a philosophical question concerning the nature of the person, knowledge, culture and education. The underlying issue is whether education should recognise the linguistic and cultural worlds from which learners emerge or whether formal schooling should privilege a dominant linguistic framework as the principal means of legitimate knowledge. This section draws on African communitarian philosophy, Ubuntu, the philosophy of language and decolonial perspectives to establish the philosophical justification for giving mother tongue a legitimate place in teacher education programme.

From an African communitarian perspective, the individual is understood in relation to the community rather than as an isolated and self-sufficient

entity. Gyekye (1997) noted that African social thought recognises both individual agency and the individual's embeddedness within communal life. Education, from this perspective, is not merely the transmission of abstract knowledge to autonomous individuals but it is also a process through which persons develop relationships with their communities and acquire values, knowledge and responsibilities necessary for social life. Language is central to this process because it provides a principal means through which communities transmit their histories, values, narratives and accumulated knowledge. Consequently, excluding learners' languages from teacher preparation can weaken the connection between formal education and the communities that education is intended to serve.

This position is strengthened by the philosophical idea of Ubuntu, which places human relationships, mutual recognition and communal belonging at the centre of personhood. Although Ubuntu has diverse interpretations, its educational significance lies in the recognition that human development occurs through relationships with others (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2011). Education informed by Ubuntu should, therefore, acknowledge learners as persons whose identities are shaped through family, community, language and shared experience. A teacher who understands learners' linguistic backgrounds is better positioned to establish relationships based on recognition rather than cultural distance. Mother Tongue Education can consequently be interpreted as part of an ethical preparation for relational teaching and education: it enables prospective teachers to approach linguistic difference with respect rather than treating it primarily as a problem requiring correction.

The philosophical significance of language can also be understood through African philosophy of knowledge. Wiredu (1996) argued for the importance of examining philosophical concepts in relation to the linguistic and cultural contexts in which they emerge. His position does not imply that African languages contain knowledge inaccessible through other languages, but it highlights the danger of assuming that one linguistic tradition provides a universally neutral framework for understanding reality. Language can influence how concepts are expressed, interpreted and related to lived experience. For teacher education, this raises an important question: if prospective teachers are prepared without meaningful

engagement with the languages and cultural contexts of their learners, what forms of knowledge might remain invisible or undervalued?

This concern connects with the broader argument for epistemic diversity. Educational institutions have historically privileged particular forms of knowledge while marginalising others. Dei (2011) argues that indigenous knowledge systems can provide alternative ways of understanding human and environmental relationships and should not automatically be excluded from formal education. Similarly, Battiste (2002) stressed the need to challenge educational structures that marginalise indigenous knowledge. Mother Tongue Education can contribute to this process by enabling prospective teachers to examine the relationship between language and locally situated knowledge. Its purpose would not be to romanticise indigenous knowledge or regard all traditional claims as unquestionably valid, but to enable teachers to engage critically with knowledge produced within the communities they serve.

A related philosophical concern is cultural recognition. Taylor (1994) argued that recognition is fundamental to identity and that misrecognition can produce forms of marginalisation. Applied to education, this suggests that learners' identities are affected by whether their languages and cultures are recognised within educational institutions. When a learner's language is persistently represented as inferior, inappropriate or irrelevant, the educational institution may unintentionally communicate that the learner's cultural identity has little value. Mother Tongue Education that is properly conceived and executed can help prospective teachers understand these processes and develop practices that affirm learners' dignity while maintaining the academic purposes of schooling.

The argument also has a decolonial dimension. Decolonial scholarship challenges the assumption that Western intellectual traditions should constitute the exclusive standard against which other knowledge systems are judged (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In the African educational context, this does not require rejecting knowledge associated with Western traditions. Rather, it calls for a more plural conception of knowledge in which African languages, histories and intellectual traditions can participate meaningfully in educational discourse. Including Mother Tongue Education in teacher preparation programme can, therefore, represent a modest but

significant curricular response to the continuing dominance of linguistic and epistemic frameworks that may not adequately reflect the realities of African learners.

Rationale for Including Mother Tongue Education as a Course

The inclusion of Mother Tongue Education as a distinct course in teacher education is justified by the need to prepare prospective teachers to understand linguistic diversity, indigenous languages and their implications for professional practice. Making the subject explicit within the curriculum would recognise linguistic and cultural responsiveness as an essential component of teacher professionalism rather than leaving it to personal experience or informal learning. First, the course would strengthen teachers' professional competence in multilingual education. Teachers require specialised knowledge to understand learners' linguistic backgrounds and make informed pedagogical decisions. Shulman (1987) argued that effective teaching requires an integrated body of professional knowledge beyond subject-matter expertise. In multilingual classrooms, this should include understanding how language influences communication and access to academic content.

Second, Mother Tongue Education would promote language-sensitive instructional practices. Teachers make decisions about explanations, classroom interaction, assessment and learning resources that can influence learners' understanding. A formal course would introduce prospective teachers to multilingual pedagogy and the educational implications of different language practices. Cummins (2000) highlighted the importance of distinguishing academic development from proficiency in the language used for instruction and assessment.

Third, the course would develop teachers' critical understanding of language policy and practice. Teachers interpret and implement institutional and national language policies within specific classroom contexts. Studying language choice, linguistic rights, language maintenance and language status would encourage prospective teachers to become reflective professionals. Bourdieu (1991) demonstrated how language practices are connected with social power and legitimacy, making this understanding important in linguistically unequal environments.

Fourth, the course would encourage the development and use of locally relevant educational resources. Prospective teachers could learn to identify, evaluate and adapt oral narratives, proverbs, indigenous terminology and local histories for educational purposes. These resources would complement existing curriculum materials, promote contextualised learning and connect classroom experiences with learners' cultural environments without compromising national educational standards. Fifth, Mother Tongue Education would promote teacher reflexivity. Prospective teachers need opportunities to examine assumptions about language, intelligence, academic ability and social status. Such assumptions may influence teachers' expectations and relationships with learners. Nieto (2010) emphasised critical reflection as an important aspect of preparing teachers to work effectively across cultural differences. A formal course would provide structured opportunities to develop this professional awareness.

Finally, the course would support the institutional sustainability of culturally responsive teacher preparation. When linguistic responsiveness depends solely on individual teachers, its implementation may be inconsistent. Embedding Mother Tongue Education in the formal curriculum would make teacher education institutions responsible for developing this competence systematically. It would also encourage relevant scholarship, instructional materials and practical experiences in multilingual education. The justification is not that Mother Tongue Education should replace existing professional courses or require prospective teachers to specialise in every indigenous language. Rather, it would establish linguistic and cultural responsiveness as a recognised dimension of teacher professionalism. By integrating language knowledge, multilingual pedagogy, language policy, cultural context and teacher reflexivity, the course would address an important curricular need in professional teacher preparation.

Proposed Content and Structure of Mother Tongue Education as a Teacher Education Course

Having established the justification for introducing Mother Tongue Education, attention should now shift to what such a course should contain. The course should be designed as a professional and interdisciplinary course, combining linguistic knowledge with educational application. Its content should be sufficiently broad to prepare teachers for multilingual

classrooms without turning teacher trainees into specialists in every indigenous language.

The first component should address foundations of multilingualism and indigenous languages. Teacher trainees should examine the linguistic composition of their immediate educational environment, language families, patterns of language use and the distinction between first, home, community, national and additional languages. This would provide an informed basis for understanding the linguistic situations that teachers encounter in practice (UNESCO, 2003).

A second component should focus on language, identity and educational experience. This should examine how language choices can influence learners' sense of belonging, participation and identity. It should also address language attitudes, linguistic prejudice and the social status attached to particular languages. Bourdieu (1991) provides a useful theoretical basis for examining how particular forms of language acquire greater social legitimacy than others.

The third component should involve multilingual pedagogical strategies. Teacher trainees should examine practical approaches for supporting learners who have different linguistic repertoires. These may include bilingual explanation, strategic use of learners' familiar languages, multilingual group activities, language-sensitive questioning and translanguaging. Such approaches should be examined critically, with attention to their appropriate use within particular curriculum and classroom contexts (García & Wei, 2014).

A fourth component should address indigenous knowledge and educational resources. Trainees could learn how to identify, evaluate and appropriately integrate locally relevant oral traditions, narratives, proverbs, terminology and community knowledge into teaching. The emphasis should be on critical engagement rather than uncritical preservation. This approach recognises indigenous knowledge as a possible educational resource while maintaining the need for academic scrutiny (Battiste, 2002; Dei, 2011).

The fifth component should examine language policy and educational practice. Prospective teachers should become familiar with relevant

national and institutional language policies and consider how policy decisions affect classroom practice. This would enable them to understand the relationship between policy expectations and the linguistic realities of learners rather than treating language policy as an exclusively administrative matter.

Finally, the course should include a practical component involving school observation, classroom-based activities or supervised teaching exercises. Teacher trainees could document the linguistic diversity of a school, analyse classroom language practices, develop a culturally relevant learning resource or design a lesson that appropriately incorporates learners' linguistic resources. Such activities would connect theoretical knowledge with professional practice and allow teacher educators to assess practical competence.

The proposed course should therefore combine knowledge, critical reflection and application. Its success would depend not simply on teaching about indigenous languages but on enabling future teachers to make informed professional decisions in multilingual educational settings.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its potential value, the inclusion of Mother Tongue Education within teacher preparation presents several challenges that require careful consideration. The first concerns the linguistic complexity of multilingual societies. Where numerous languages coexist, it may be impractical for teacher education institutions to provide detailed instruction in every language represented among prospective teachers or their future learners. The proposed course should, therefore, emphasise principles of multilingual education, linguistic awareness and locally adaptable practices rather than attempting to provide comprehensive proficiency in multiple languages.

A second challenge concerns teacher education capacity and expertise. Successful implementation requires teacher educators with appropriate knowledge of multilingual pedagogy, indigenous languages and culturally responsive approaches. Where such expertise is limited, institutions may need to strengthen staff development, establish interdisciplinary

collaboration and draw upon specialists from language education, linguistics and African studies.

A third consideration is the availability of appropriate learning materials. Indigenous languages may have limited standardised teaching resources, terminology or digital materials in some contexts. This challenge can, however, become an opportunity for teacher trainees to participate in the development and documentation of locally relevant resources, provided that such activities follow appropriate linguistic and scholarly standards.

There is also the possibility of language politicisation. Language is often connected with questions of identity, ethnicity, status and political representation. Consequently, Mother Tongue Education should avoid privileging one linguistic group over another. Its underlying principle should be equitable recognition of linguistic diversity rather than competition among languages.

Finally, the course should operate alongside, rather than against, the acquisition of national and international languages. Multilingual competence can provide learners with wider educational and social opportunities, while recognition of indigenous languages can support cultural continuity and belonging. The appropriate goal is therefore additive multilingualism, in which the acquisition of additional languages does not require the abandonment of existing linguistic resources (Cummins, 2000).

Conclusion

The inclusion of Mother Tongue Education as a course in the teacher education curriculum is justified by the linguistic realities of multilingual societies and the need to prepare teachers for culturally diverse classrooms. The conceptual analysis established that mother tongue is closely associated with learners' linguistic experiences, while the theoretical perspectives demonstrated the significance of language, culture and multilingual repertoires in learning and teaching. The philosophical discussion further established that recognition of language can be connected with identity, communal belonging, knowledge and human dignity.

The authors affirmed that Mother Tongue Education should be understood as part of professional teacher formation, rather than as an optional or peripheral area of study. Its purpose should not be to replace national or international languages, nor to require teachers to master every language spoken by their learners. Rather, it should develop teachers' knowledge and dispositions for working thoughtfully across linguistic differences. In a multilingual society, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers who can recognise linguistic diversity without constructing it as a deficit. Incorporating Mother Tongue Education into teacher preparation provides a structured means of developing such professional awareness. It can consequently contribute to a more inclusive conception of teacher education in which linguistic diversity is recognised as an integral feature of educational practice rather than an obstacle to it.

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