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NAVIGATING MULTILINGUALISM: TRANSLATING LOCAL LANGUAGE POLICIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN KENYA

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Abstract: Language promotes inclusion, diversity, and equity within Kenyan communities. In a multilingual society like Kenya, local languages are essential for social cohesion, identity formation, and equal access to education and public services. However, indigenous languages remain underutilized, particularly in the formal education system, limiting their potential to foster cross-cultural communication and social integration. This paper explores the impact of local language policies on inclusion and equity, focusing on the challenges Dholuo translators face in interpreting English policy documents. Based on interviews with Education Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (EQASOs) from Homabay and Migori counties, alongside secondary data, the study examines how local language promotion can enhance social inclusion, career development, and equitable access to resources. The study analyzed the constitutional mandate in promoting Kenyan Indigenous languages and offered strategies to overcome language barriers in education and governance.

Key words: Inclusion, diversity, equity, cross-cultural communication, language policies, Kenya

1. Introduction

Language is a vital communication component, fundamentally influencing social, cultural, and political dynamics within societies. In Kenya, linguistic diversity is a hallmark of its multicultural identity, featuring 62 living languages (Eberhard et al. 2023). Among the prominent languages, Swahili, Agikuyu, Dholuo, Luhya, and Kamba

enrich the nation's cultural tapestry. Despite this richness, indigenous languages face marginalization, particularly in formal education and governance sectors where English prevails (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1986). This linguistic exclusion impedes effective communication and civic engagement, exacerbating social inequalities. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution article (7)1 recognizes Swahili and English as the national and official languages while advocating for promoting and protecting other linguistic identities (Republic of Kenya 2010). However, local language policies have been inconsistent, limiting participation for communities with low English proficiency. This inconsistency raises concerns regarding equitable access to educational resources and governance.

This study investigated the influence of local language policies on inclusion and equity, focusing on the education sector. It scrutinized the challenges faced by Dholuo translators in interpreting English policy documents and explored how promoting indigenous languages can enhance social integration and career development. By addressing the gap between constitutional mandates and actual policy implementation, this research seeks to illustrate how Kenya can harness its linguistic diversity to improve educational outcomes and governance (Awuor & Anudo 2019). The significance of this study is underscored by the systemic barriers that persist due to the dominance of English in Kenya's educational framework. Students from communities with limited English resources confront substantial challenges in achieving quality education, thereby perpetuating socioeconomic disparities, particularly in rural regions (Brock-Utne 2000; Awuor & Anudo 2019). Although the Kenyan Constitution acknowledges the value of indigenous languages, English remains the predominant medium of instruction, reflecting enduring colonial legacies that further marginalize local linguistic identities.

Recent studies emphasize on the necessity of multilingual educational systems for fostering social equity. Incorporating indigenous languages into the curriculum significantly enhances cognitive development and academic success for marginalized groups (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillip-

son 2017). Additionally, utilizing local languages in education fosters social justice, facilitating greater access to the resources needed for full community engagement in national development (Brock-Utne 2000). In this light, the study is timely and relevant, aligning with global initiatives promoting language as a critical factor in achieving equitable access to education and public services (UNESCO 2020). Through examining the role of local languages in facilitating inclusion and equity, this research contributes meaningfully to the discourse on leveraging Kenya's linguistic diversity for a more inclusive and equitable society. Awang-Hashim et al. (2019) also advocate for a holistic approach to inclusivity in higher education, integrating pedagogical, institutional, and policy-level interventions to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

1.1. Research questions

i. What challenges do Dholuo translators face when interpreting English policy documents for native Dholuo speakers?
ii. How do local language policies impact inclusion, diversity, and equity in Kenyan communities?
iii. What strategies can overcome language barriers in education and governance to promote social equity?
iv. How does using local languages in education influence career development and social integration?

1.2. Objectives

i. To examine the challenges faced by Dholuo translators in interpreting English policy documents.
ii. To analyze the impact of local language policies on inclusion, diversity, and equity in Kenyan communities.
iii. To identify strategies for enhancing cross-cultural communication through the promotion of local languages.
iv. To evaluate the role of local languages in Kenya's social integration and career developments

2. Theoretical framework

This study employed Critical Language Policy (CLP) theory, which posits that language policies are deeply entwined with power dynamics and often reinforce societal inequalities (Tollefson 1991). In Kenya, the predominance of English in education and governance marginalizes indigenous languages, restricting their roles in public life (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1986). The CLP framework advocates for promoting indigenous languages to resist linguistic imperialism and enhance social justice. Additionally, this study integrated sociolinguistic theories related to language and identity, highlighting language's essential role in shaping individual and collective identities (Fishman 1991). Utilizing indigenous languages in the education system improves cognitive development and fosters cultural identity, which is critical for social cohesion and national unity. Applying these frameworks, the study investigated how promoting local languages can challenge historical inequalities and cultivate a more inclusive society. Efficient implementation of local language policies is vital for advancing social equity, nurturing cultural pride, and ensuring the full participation of all Kenyan citizens in national development.

3. Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the influence of local language policy in promoting inclusion, diversity, and equity in Kenya.

3.1. Data collection, results and challenges

3.1.1. Data collection and analysis

In the qualitative phase of the study, 25 Education Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (EQASOs) from Homabay and Migori counties participated in semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to uncover Dholuo translators' difficulties when translating English policy

texts for native Dholuo speakers. Questions focused on accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and the context of translation issues. This data collection method provided profound insights into the personal experiences of EQASOs, enhancing the qualitative findings. Additionally, the quantitative phase involved distributing questionnaires to teachers, students, and parents and examining secondary data from government sources.

For data analysis, the qualitative interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, which entailed coding the responses into identifiable themes related to the study's research questions. This process facilitated a nuanced understanding of the barriers faced by Dholuo translators during the translation process. Meanwhile, quantitative survey data were analyzed using statistical methods to identify trends and correlations within participants' experiences regarding local language policies. Descriptive statistics were employed to calculate frequencies and percentages, contributing to understanding how local language policies influence inclusion, diversity, and equity. This comprehensive analysis enabled the identification of measurable impacts on community engagement.

3.1.2. Results and discussions

The results indicate clear patterns in the challenges faced by Dholuo translators. Common issues included the lack of standardized terminology, insufficient resources for translation accuracy, and inadequate training opportunities (Ogechi 2012). Regarding local language policies, schools integrating Indigenous languages reported higher levels of student engagement and academic achievement, directly addressing the second research question on community engagement. The findings also highlighted significant disparities in educational outcomes, reinforcing the need to overcome language barriers in governance and education. Regarding strategies to overcome these barriers, the study identified training programs for translators and increased support for bilingual education as practical measures. Finally, the results showed that students who received instruction in their native languages displayed improved career prospects and a stronger sense of social belonging.

3.1.3. Challenges in translating and implementation of Kenyan local language policies

The implementation of local language policies within Kenya's education sector encounters significant challenges that hinder the effective use of indigenous languages. One primary issue is the absence of standardized terminology, particularly for specialized educational and legal terms, which complicates communication and consistently affects policy execution (Okombo 1997). This lack of a unified lexicon contributes to misunderstandings and the potential loss of essential information, ultimately undermining the efficacy of local policies.

Moreover, the variability in policy application across different regions exacerbates educational inequalities. Urban schools tend to prioritize English over indigenous languages, which limits access for students who primarily speak local languages. This preferential treatment creates a gap in educational equity, as communities may be excluded from fully engaging with policies that are intended to benefit them, diminishing the overall impact of such initiatives (Republic of Kenya 2010). Despite these challenges, schools that successfully incorporate local languages into their curricula have shown remarkable benefits, particularly in early childhood education. Instruction in mother tongues is associated with improved cognitive development and a strengthened sense of cultural identity (Heugh 2009). Thus, it is evident that consistent policy implementation is vital for promoting inclusivity and social equity.

3.2. Strategic interventions

Addressing the challenges identified requires a multi-faceted approach. The study highlights strategic Interventions for the challenges highlighted in Figure 1 below:

i. **Development of standardized terminology**: Scholars advocate for the creation of standardized terminology within indigenous languages to improve the accuracy of educational translations.

This initiative would necessitate collaboration among linguists, educators, and community stakeholders, resulting in a comprehensive glossary of terms relevant to both education and governance.

ii. **Training of translators**: Enhancing the skills of translators is critical for ensuring the quality of translated materials. Investment in professional development opportunities will equip translators with the tools necessary to handle technical jargon in indigenous languages effectively, thereby preserving cultural contexts accurately.

iii. **Monitoring and evaluation framework**: Establishing robust frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of language policies is essential. Regular assessments should be conducted to gauge the effectiveness of local language integration in educational curricula, as well as its impact on student engagement and academic performance. Utilizing data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups can provide valuable insights into the experiences of both students and educators regarding language use in schools.

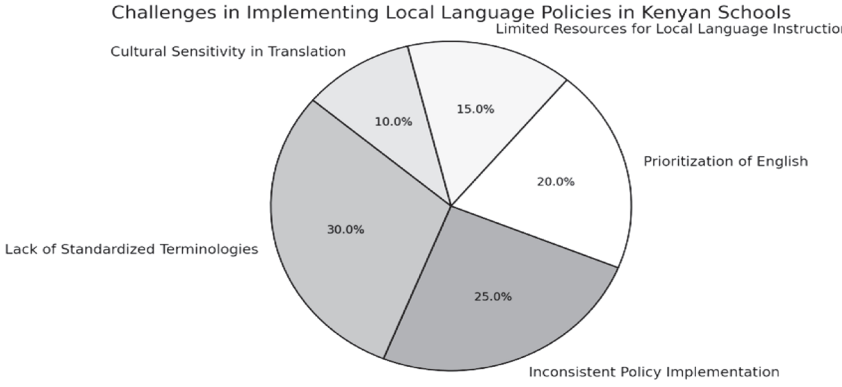

Figure 1. Challenges in implementing local language policies in Kenyan schools

Figure 1 visually represents the challenges encountered in implementing local language policies across Homabay and Migori County schools. Each segment corresponds to a specific challenge mentioned, reflecting the concerns expressed by the respondents:

i. **Lack of standardized terminology (30%)**: This significant portion emphasizes that one-third of respondents identified the absence of standardized terminology as a crucial obstacle. The lack of consistent definitions for educational concepts undermines translation accuracy, resulting in potential misunderstandings in instruction and policy implementation.
ii. **Prioritization of English (25%)**: Representing 25% of respondents, this segment indicates a substantial concern regarding the dominance of English within educational settings. Such prioritization restricts access for students who primarily speak indigenous languages, consequently widening educational disparities and affecting their learning experiences.
iii. **Cultural sensitivity in translation (20%)**: This portion highlights the importance of including cultural context in educational materials. The 20% of respondents who pointed out this issue stress that neglecting local cultural considerations may alienate students and hinder effective learning processes.
iv. **Inconsistent policy implementation (25%)**: This category, also encompassing 25% of the responses, draws attention to the uneven application of language policies across different regions. Rural areas often experience significant challenges due to inadequate support for local languages, resulting in further inequities in educational opportunities

3.3. Recommendations

3.3.1. Strengthen language policy implementation

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya stipulates that lower primary education should ideally be conducted in the mother tongue or a local language (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD]

2017). While this policy can potentially enhance cognitive development and improve educational outcomes, its implementation has been inconsistent. Rural schools that have successfully incorporated indigenous languages into their curricula report increased student enrollment and better academic performance, particularly among marginalized groups (Awuor & Anudo 2019). However, many schools still prioritize English, leading to educational access and achievement disparities.

To strengthen policy implementation, the government must enforce regulations that ensure local language instruction is practiced consistently. This includes training teachers, developing local language teaching resources, and ensuring that school administrators understand the value of mother-tongue education. Moreover, schools in multilingual regions must adopt multilingual policies to avoid favoring one indigenous language over others, thus ensuring equitable representation of all linguistic communities. Multilingualism in education promotes social cohesion by embracing the country's diverse linguistic heritage while fostering unity among ethnic groups (Ogechi 2009).

3.3.2. Develop standardized translation frameworks

By highlighting the necessity of translation frameworks, Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) contribute to the ongoing debate on language planning and policy, advocating for structured approaches to integrating Sheng into formal domains without compromising linguistic standards in Kenya. The Kenyan government should invest in developing comprehensive translation frameworks that provide standardized equivalents for terms used in policy documents. These frameworks would ensure that technical and legal language is accurately translated, making it more accessible to local communities. By developing such tools, Kenya could enable greater participation in governance, education, and civic life, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their language proficiency, have access to important public information (Owiti 2016).

However, translation alone is not sufficient. Effective communication also requires addressing the broader structural issues that contribute to

social inequality. Without tackling these systemic barriers, such as unequal resource distribution and discrimination, language translation will not achieve its full potential in fostering inclusivity. Therefore, policies must be accompanied by efforts to address these underlying issues and ensure that local communities are not only informed but also empowered to act on the information they receive (Hennink & Stephenson 2005).

3.3.3. Promote mother-tongue education

Mother-tongue instruction should be prioritized, particularly in early childhood education. Research consistently shows that children taught in their native language perform better academically, particularly in communities where English is not the first language. In Kenya, where many students in rural areas speak indigenous languages at home, teaching in these languages enhances understanding, cognitive development, and cultural continuity (Awuor & Anudo, 2019). To implement this effectively, schools must develop curricula and resources that are linguistically and culturally relevant, ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, can thrive academically.

3.3.4. Invest in digital resources and technologies

In the digital age, developing digital resources and language technologies is essential to preserving Kenya's linguistic diversity and ensuring that marginalized communities can fully participate in the digital economy. The government should invest in creating digital platforms that offer educational content in local languages, particularly in areas such as e-learning, government services, and health information. Digital tools can bridge linguistic divides, allowing communities that speak indigenous languages to access vital resources and participate in national development (Owiti 2016).

Furthermore, the development of language technologies, such as speech-to-text software and digital dictionaries, can help preserve indigenous languages by making them more accessible to younger

generations. These resources will also enable greater participation in education and governance by reducing the barriers posed by language differences. By fostering digital inclusion, Kenya can ensure that no community is left behind in the technological revolution, thus promoting linguistic equity and social inclusion.

4. Conclusion

The marginalization of indigenous languages in Kenya continues to perpetuate social inequalities, restricting the full participation of marginalized communities in national life. This study emphasizes the critical role of local language policies in promoting inclusion, diversity, and equity, particularly in education and governance. However, effectively implementing these policies requires overcoming several challenges, including the lack of standardized terminology, inconsistent policy application, and the dominance of English in educational systems.

Strengthening indigenous language policies, investing in translation frameworks, promoting mother-tongue education, and utilizing digital technologies are crucial strategies for enhancing linguistic diversity and fostering social inclusion. Yet, these efforts must be accompanied by broader reforms that address underlying structural inequalities, such as unequal access to resources, discrimination, and social exclusion.

To fully leverage its linguistic diversity in achieving social equity, Kenya must adopt a holistic approach that integrates language revitalization with broader social justice initiatives. This comprehensive strategy will ensure that all Kenyan citizens, regardless of their linguistic background or social status, can participate fully in the country's political, economic, and social life, thus contributing to a more just and equitable society.

This study underscores the critical role of local languages in promoting inclusion, diversity, and equity in Kenya. The country can harness its linguistic diversity to create a more inclusive and equitable society by overcoming the challenges inherent in translation and policy implementation.

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