Vuyisile Msila

"Mama does not speak that (language) to me": indigenous languages, educational opportunity and black African preschoolers

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of young black African preschoolers as well as their parents' perceptions towards their mother tongue. It investigated the factors that influence black African parents to prefer English over their indigenous language. The paper also explores how aspects such as cultural and social capital affect parental choice of schools. This was a qualitative study conducted in the Eastern Cape, Port Elizabeth. Four daycare centres were purposefully selected for data collection where 30 parents and 80 preschoolers became part of the sample. Two of these daycare centres are situated in a historically black area (township), and the other two are historically white daycare centres situated in the centre of the city.

The study's findings show that there is much sociocultural influence on language acquisition and cognition. Parental choice of schools and how they socialise their children determine the kind of education their children have and this includes medium of instruction. The children preferred English to IsiXhosa and parental goals of education supported this as they fostered the English language. Yet one of the aspects captured by the article is how aspects such as cultural capital affect parental choice of the indigent parents. Learning a second language might not be simply seen as a pedagogic issue; it can also be perceived as a political issue, and children from a young age become passive participants in a political process.

Keywords: indigenous languages; South Africa; daycare centres; educational opportunity; black preschoolers

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Introduction: languages and education in South Africa

South Africa has 11 official languages, which includes South African Sign Language, although many people will contend that English and Afrikaans are more prominent than the other languages in public spaces. African children may grow up hearing a number of languages from the media, at home and from the community. However, they soon learn that it is important to acquire and use a language other than their indigenous language. When the majority of parents send them to school for the first time, they expect them to learn English instead of their (the parents') mother tongue. Yet sometimes the second language does not replace the native language and the individual speaks both; this is referred to as additive bilingualism (Mio, Barker-Hackett & Tumambing, 2006: 106). However, when the second language replaces the first language, this is referred to as subtractive bilingualism (*ibid.*). Both these terms have significant semiotic power: Subtractive bilingualism is sometimes known as language attrition and this occurs when a language is not used often even when the first language is very well ingrained. Snow (1993) furthermore contends that sometimes two languages are used in a home, and as a result people become bilingual from birth and this is known as native bilingualism. A number of studies have highlighted the benefits of bilingualism in children. Passer and Smith (2007: 288) cites Bialystok, who states that bilingual children perform better in many tasks because in learning a second language they gain continuous experience in using selective attention to inhibit one set of responses while making other responses. Furthermore, Passer and Smith (*ibid.*) point out that learning a second language may also help children perceive the unique grammar of their native language and help them realise that the words used to label objects are arbitrary.

Prah (2003: 17) argues that the language of instruction becomes the language of educational formation in any society and it is also the language of power. Prah further states that this is the language in which the production and reproduction of knowledge is taught. Generally, there tends to be choice by black African parents to educate their children in English, and Prah refers to this as the denial that signifies social and cultural inferiority of the culture and people whose mother tongue is denied. There are a number of debates on the use of languages for literacy in primary schools with many commentators supporting the initiatives of countries such as Tanzania for ensuring that Kiswahili, an African language, dominates as a language of instruction. Prah (2003:17) comments:

> *Cultural freedom and African emancipation therefore cannot be cultivated, expanded or developed where the LOI (Language of Instruction) is different from the languages or language the people normally speak in their everyday lives. Where the language instruction is different from the languages of mass society, those who work in the language of instruction, foreign from the languages of the masses, become culturally removed and alienated from the masses.*

Black African parents who register their children in former model C schools might not be aware of the racial and cultural implications of sending their children in these 'mixed schools'. Fataar (2009) cites Jansen who argues that black African children in

former white schools encounter a hostile environment where they learn that English has more status than black indigenous languages; that good teachers are white and failure happens to black children. This article is based on research findings from a study that included four daycare centres in Port Elizabeth. The main questions asked were:

- Which factors influence (potentially) bilingual preschoolers' preference of one language over the other?
- How do the parents' perceptions and attitudes (towards the medium of instruction) shape their choice of daycare centres?
- How does cultural capital and class affect the families' choice of early schooling?

Cognitive development in linguistic and cultural context

Vygotsky (1978, 1986) perceived cultural context as pivotal in any child's development. In his theory he highlights that interactions with adults, peers as well as instruction are all essential for cognitive development (Gupta & Richardson, 1995: 13). Understanding the cultural tools acquired by children is a very crucial component of Vygotsky's theory. Gupta & Richardson (1995: 13) posit:

> *He argued that concepts, language, voluntary attention and memory are functions which originate in culture (i.e. in the interactions between people) and are acquired through development in interaction between the child and another person. Each of these functions appears first as an interpersonal process before it appears within the child as an intrapersonal process (Vytgotsky, 1988). To take a hypothetical example given in Richardson (1994) – when young children first attend nursery, many are highly emotionally motivated. But collective play around objects and equipment requires regulation of group feelings and activities, and 'tools' of regulation (such as queuing or prioritising) among participants soon emerge.*

The adult's role is underscored in the above. Furthermore, Vygotsky states that the child has a "zone of proximal development" or of potential development and this is only achievable through the intervention of an adult who observes a child's understanding through performance. Gauvain (2001: 35) contends that interaction in the child's "zone of proximal development" involves exposing children to increasingly more complex understanding and activity than they are capable on their own and in which they benefit from adult interaction. Furthermore, in this theory, Vygotsky concedes that children are capable of developing concepts of their own through everyday experience; however, they need instruction in other abstract systems. It is also critical to note that although Vygotsky gives equal importance to intrinsic (individual) and extrinsic (cultural) forces in his theory, in practice his investigations focused on the impact of culture on the growing child (Gupta & Richardson 1995: 14). The child, according to Vygotsky can learn through various stages, to reach the highest level of thinking.

From the above, it is clear that Vygotsky perceives the socio-cultural context as crucial, for it interacts with cognitive development. Vygotsky explicates the social context of cognitive development; that children can be assisted by significant others

to solve problems. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development emphasises the role of these significant others. Passer and Smith (2007: 407) point out:

> *Why is the zone of proximal development important? For one thing it helps us to recognise what children may soon be able to do on their own. Second, it emphasises that we can help move a child's cognitive development forward within limits ('the zone') dictated by the child's biological maturation. Parents who assist a child on scientific tasks may push the child's understanding further by using age-appropriate but cognitively demanding speech.*

This theory needs to be understood within various contexts and among these is social class. Children might grow differently due to the influence of social class. Many writers argue that class affects the cognitive growth (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Kelly, Power & Wimbush, 1992; Conger *et al*., 1992). Moreover, research has shown that class differences affect children's progress in schools (Lareau, 1987). Lareau and Horvat (1999) also aver that race and class influence the transmission of educational equality. These writers also cite Bourdieu who posits that learners with more valuable social and cultural capital fare better at school; that this raises educational inequality. Applying Vygotsky would mean that the significant others who are in contact with the child will be influenced by their cultural capital. Wells and Serna (1996: 95) state that according to Bourdieu cultural capital consists of culturally valued tastes and consumption patterns which are rewarded by the educational system. Schools usually perceive middle class and upper class parents as having more power because they possess social and cultural capital. All these might have a bearing on children's views about schools and schooling.

The inquiry

The study employed a qualitative approach to data collection. Qualitative research involves the studying and collection of a variety of empirical materials which are based on words and not on figures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 165). It also involves the why, what and how issues around social experience are created and given meanings (Merriam, 1998: 11). Purposive sampling was used in selecting four English medium daycare centres in Port Elizabeth. Struwig and Stead (2004: 122) aver that purposeful sampling is not concerned so much with random sampling as it is with providing a sample of information-rich participants. Results in this study were contextual and analysis thereof included identifying, coding and categorisation of data collected. The researcher did thematic analysis and apart from individual analysis, there was also a cross-case analysis.

Daycare contexts

Four daycare centres[1] were part of the study and these were:

i. Fundani Day Care

1 Not their real names

ii. Happy Valley Day Care

iii. Jolly Kids Day Care

iv. Khulani Preschool

Jolly Kids and Happy Valley are situated in the city and they are historically white daycare centres although the numbers of black African children are now more than 60 and 70 percent respectively. Khulani and Fundani are both situated in historically black African areas; Khulani is situated in Motherwell township and Fundani is in Zwide township. In each of the four centres, 20 children were selected as participants. I initially addressed the parents to explain the aims and objectives of the study before asking them for consent to conduct the study. All the centres selected had similar characteristics crucial for the study; there was a high number of black African children (Fundani and Khulani had 100%), the medium of instruction is English, the parents are insisting on an English medium language policy.

Khulani and Fundani are both impoverished and as implied above; they service mainly working class families. Of the five teachers met in both township centres only one has formal Early Childhood Development (ECD) qualifications. Both daycare centres have cash flow challenges; the school fees are R120 per month in one and R150 in the other. Jolly Kids and Happy Valley largely service children of black middle class professionals. One charges R900 per month and the other charges R1 150 per month.

Participants

Parents and children

There was a sample of 30 parents who were participants in the study. Their numbers were distributed as follows; nine parents at Jolly Kids, seven parents at Happy Valley, 11 parents at Khulani and three at Fundani. An interesting aspect was that there was a total of five male parents out of this sample.

Eighty (80) learners were observed in the four centres, 20 in each centre.

Research instruments

In each school I conducted the observations and interviews over a period of 13 days. The parents were interviewed twice, on the first week before observations and then on the last day in the second week. They were requested to come for at least three days during the course of the study although on average they came for about five days and this was beneficial to the researcher and his team because they were able to chat with the parents informally after lessons. The children were not interviewed although the research team had informal chats with them during and after classes. Observations were pivotal in collecting data in this study.

The research team consisted of three postgraduate students led by the author who was the lead researcher. Two females out of these three were registered for a

masters degree in Educational Psychology and the Ph.D. candidate was a male busy with a thesis in Curriculum Policy. All these members were trained for three months for the purposes of this study. To ensure that there was consistency, the team conducted a pilot study in three daycare centres two months before the study. This was a side study in a neighbouring town of Uitenhage. The research team was very critical in observations. All were trained to know exactly what to observe in the field. We also tried to underscore inter-rater reliability. When I was certain that our rating scores were similar, we then went into the field. In our observation instrument, we used a measuring tool that consisted of different categories. By the time we went into the field there was a very close similarity between the four scores of the team members.

Procedures

In all the four daycare centres the researcher worked with three research assistants. All the research assistants were IsiXhosa first language speakers. This was crucial because all the children in the study came from families whose first language was IsiXhosa. The child participants ranged between four and six years of age, with more than half ready for school the following year. During observations the research team focused on a number of aspects and the research team went into the field to observe with an instrument that had 30 items. The 30 items on the scale included the following:

i. Teacher roles in a language class;
ii. Learner roles;
iii. Oral skills in one or more languages;
iv. Cognitive skills in languages;
v. Observing how children respond to questions;
vi. Observing their interaction after the teacher initiated interactive exercises;
vii. Observing language skills outside the classroom, in the field of play; and
viii. Observing how the children respond to questions on the story line.

The 13 days in each site were divided as follows:

- The first four days – Reading stories in IsiXhosa and then observing interest and understanding and reading stories in English and then observing interest and understanding.

The first four days included many activities with the research team asking questions. The team also made use of pictures asking the children certain questions linked to the stories they had just heard. On average each book reading was followed by activities and this took a maximum of three hours. The team worked with the children for approximately six hours per day. The objective of the observations after story reading was to investigate aspects such as cognitive knowledge, elicit linguistic data and explore the general linguistic skills. The recall stories for example, reflected both linguistic ability as well as cognitive skills.

- The next four days – Asking the children to tell their own stories and asking them questions.
- The last four days – Observations of the participants in class during teaching and learning. The team also observed the children during play. In all the observations, the team was exploring the use of languages; how the children communicate.

One day in each centre was used for conducting parent interviews. The parents were asked several questions pertaining the choice of daycare for their children as well as their beliefs pertaining to the medium of language instruction. Before the study was conducted informed consent was asked from the parents. The research team explained the study's aims and informed the parents that the participants had to voluntarily agree to take part. The principal and the parents signed consent forms of participation. The main questions asked were the following:

a) Why did you select this nursery school?
b) What language do you prefer your child to learn in this nursery school?
c) Would you prefer bilingual instruction where IsiXhosa and English have the same attention?
d) What is your view of a good teacher?
e) How do you gauge the effectiveness of a nursery school?
f) Would you support the curtailing of IsiXhosa in the school?
g) How do you help your child learn English at home?
h) Have you decided which school your child will attend in Grade 1?

The findings

Fundani and Khulani daycare centres

These two centres have very similar circumstances; operating with less resources, teachers who are unqualified, and parents who are unemployed. Fundani is situated next to an informal settlement area and there are many parents who are not able to pay the fees. However, the centre does have a few useful resources including an old computer used by the principal, there are also a number of good toys and these were mainly sponsored by a non-governmental organisation based in the city. Khulani also struggles as they have few resources and they were mainly indebted to a major chain store for their upkeep for a whole year during the previous year although that had stopped when the research team was there. Yet in both schools there is much teaching of English from the morning to the late afternoon. After the first morning prayers in Fundani the children line up before they get their porridge to greet their teachers. They all sing in a chorus, "Good morning ma'm! Good morning teachers!" The children have learned recitations, dances and songs. Every morning the research team listened as the children sing rhymes such as *Mary had a little lamb*, *Humpty Dumpty* and *Little*

Jack Horner. In Fundani the children have many songs that teach them how to groom themselves, how to remain healthy and so on. One such song is:

Wash your hands

Wash, wash, wash your hands,

Wash those germs away,

Soap and water do the trick.

To keep them clean all day.

Similar songs and rhymes are sung in Jolly Kids and Happy Valley. Most of these rhymes are dramatised in play and these include *Miss Muffet*, *The world is a rainbow*, *Three little mice* and *Three blind mice*. In Happy Valley, *The spider and the fly* is the most popular when one looks at their dramatisation. The research team found it conspicuous that the schools do not do many IsiXhosa rhymes. There were only two such songs at Fundani, one is an old song by the poet S. E. K. Mqhayi:

Ngubani na lo?	*Who is this?*
NguYeye.	*It is Yeye.*
Uhamba nabani?	*With whom is he?*
NoYise.	*His father.*
Umphathele ntoni?	*What has he brought him?*
Amasi.	*Sour milk.*
Ngendeb'enjani?	*In what colour of a jar?*
Ebomvu …	*In a red one …*

The children do it well as they divide into two. One group asks the questions and the other answers. The second rhyme is a song sung by the entire group:

Kukho abanqenayo.	*Some were lazy.*
Ukuya esikolweni.	*To go to school.*
Namhla bakhedamile.	*Today they are sad.*
Sithi, Ewe, kulungile.	*We say, yes, it serves you right!*
Sithi, Ewe, kulungile.	*We say, yes, it serves you right!*

There were no IsiXhosa songs sung at Khulani or the other three schools.

The research team read the children books while they also observed their reactions. Many of these stories were read through dramatisation. Stories such as *Three little pigs*, *Snow white and the seven dwarfs*, *Three Billy Goats*, *Dema and Demazana*, *Jack and the beanstalk*, and *Hello Zoleka* were all read with much dramatisation from the research team, frequently involving the children especially when everyone had to sing. Some of these stories were also told in IsiXhosa. *UMajeke nomthi weembotyi* (*Jack and the beanstalk*), *Molo Zoleka* (*Hello Zoleka*), *UDema no Demazana* (*Dema and Demazana*), *OoBilly Bhokhwe abathathu* (*Three billy goats*) and *Iihagwana ezintathu* (*Three little pigs*) were all told in IsiXhosa as well after they had been told in English.

In Jolly Kids and Happy Valley the children were very enthusiastic when the stories were read in English. However, there was confusion as well as a lack of involvement and communication when the stories were read in IsiXhosa. The learners were clearly not used to listening to stories read in IsiXhosa. In the township daycare centres there was not much involvement of the learners in both languages. It was clear that many learners were still learning the English language and unlike in the two daycare centres outside the township, the children in these two were still familiarising themselves with many words. There were very few who were following exactly what was happening in the stories. Out of the 40 children in the sample, only nine from the township centres were able to discuss what was happening in the stories. A number of these children were very instrumental in peer teaching.

The children's IsiXhosa language skills were also minimal as one could see they could not understand many basic sentences. Therefore, while their centres were emphasising English, they were gradually losing the African language skills. However, even though the children from the township centres were not as good in English, one could see that they were more used to listening to English than IsiXhosa. The role of teachers in the classrooms is immense and they play a crucial role in educating the learners. In Vygotskian tradition, the teachers become part of the socio-cultural context that the children need to learn and develop cognitively. During observations teachers were constantly moving helping the children in doing various linguistic exercises. The dominance of the English language were also evident. Especially in the historically white centres, the language skills in IsiXhosa were made to gradually dwindle. Moreover, many of these learners came from homes where the parents emphasised English.

The parents

The study showed clearly that the children are influenced by their parents' as well as other societal influences, namely their teachers to prefer English to indigenous language. It was also clear the majority of parents used more English at home than any other language. There was an implied idea that these parents wanted to anglicise their children. Many stated that they selected certain centres because they were simply good in English. Mava said:

> *It is a fact that English is a language for the future. I would not like my child to learn IsiXhosa. Where will it take her?*

This was agreed upon by a number of participants:

> *Getting him a good start will make me happy. English will give him a good start.*
>
> *I prefer English definitely. I still love my language, isiXhosa, but my children can speak less of that. English signifies a better future.*
>
> *They can teach her both languages, but they need to teach her more and more English.*

And one summarises this in his utterance:

> *It is easy to see the best of these schools, when your child comes home every day with new English words, you become proud. You know, it is worth it, your every cent pays for the right education.*

Yet a few parents also argued for IsiXhosa:

> *I am at this school because I know they will give my child a good foundation. The township schools are hopeless. I want more opportunities for my child.*

However, there are township parents who will also want the education of the black African middle class or the elite, but they cannot afford the education outside their township. They are 'trapped' in township schools. The latter disadvantages the poor parents who do not have the social and cultural capital. They would like their children to be educated like the children of the parents in former white schools.

The parents in the study explained that the majority of the children, if not all use their mother tongue when they play with friends at home, however, it is at the school that they stay for a long time each day. At the school they are expected to speak English at all times. The parents interviewed in the school did not hide their bias for English language teaching. All of them contended that English language will better the chances of their families as these children will grow and be productive workers for the families in future. As one of them put it:

> *Khulani is a good school, unlike other township crèches – it gives our children a chance through teaching them the English language. Many of us never had these chances and I am so proud whenever I hear my child singing songs or uttering a few words he has learned from school. You see most of us see these children as our future investment. Language will not only improve their chances, but the chances of their families as well.*

Another parent from Fundani argued:

> *It is not that we do not like our own language, but many of us never went to school beyond primary school. Here is a chance now for our children to do that for us. I always believe that many of our black children do not pass matric because of the inability to speak and understand English. Imagine if the children start at this level, they will never go wrong. I wish that we had many similar schools in the township that are doing this – teaching English the English way!*

One other parent concurred with many who said the above, but also added paying tribute to the teachers:

> *They are very dedicated. I mean look at them they are not born English speakers. But just look at what they have achieved with the children. This is sheer dedication. It touches me whenever I think about the extra effort by these women. They are indeed great.*

It was probably the effectiveness of the daycare centres as well, that built their reputation. A few parents for example stated that they did not primarily choose Fundani because of the English language teaching. It was its reputation in teaching the child in totality that mattered. However, the parents stated that they "found it a bonus to find that their children were improving in English speaking skills as well".

During class observations the research team noted that teachers led many activities as opposed to learner-centredness. The latter was very pronounced in Khulani where the learners listened to teachers most of the time. We also noticed that some children were very withdrawn and hardly spoke to the teacher apart from saying, "yes" or "no". In our sample there were five such children at Fundani and four at Khulani. At Fundani for example, two of these learners could clearly understand the stories in IsiXhosa much better than in English. However, when the same stories were told in English, they did not seem to understand much.

Happy Valley and Jolly Kids

As the research team we were in contact with a total of six teachers in the two schools. The teachers have some form of qualifications. Three of them have a one year qualification in ECD including a number of short courses attended. The principals in both schools have qualifications of more than three years in ECD with the Jolly Kids' principal in possession of a degree in childhood education. Of the six teachers met, three were white, two black Africans and one coloured. Whilst the majority of children could understand IsiXhosa to a certain extent in the two township daycare centres, the language was clearly not understood well by many learners. In fact, it was in Jolly Kids where I got the idea for the title of this article. When I greeted one lovely and precocious five-year-old girl:

> *Molo wethu unjani namhlanje? (Good morning, how are you today?)*

She eyed me with amazement as she answered:

> *My mama does not speak to me in that language! I smiled as I continued, Uhlala phi? (Where do you live?) This time she ran away not responding to my question.*

It was again apparent that the children in the schools hardly used IsiXhosa in their day-to-day living. The teachers in the schools confirmed this by stating that the parents in the school brought their children to these daycare centres because they wanted them to learn good English. The Happy Valley principal is very fluent in IsiXhosa, but she said in the school they do not have programmes that include IsiXhosa. All the activities are in English. It was no wonder then that very few children understood the research team when they first read the stories in IsiXhosa. They could not follow the sequences in the story although some words were very familiar. Words such as *Molo* (Hello); *ibhola* (a ball); *baleka* (run) were understood by many children, however, it was when these were in sentences that they could not be understood. English also appeared to come spontaneously to the children at play. A number of times when we were reading and acting out the IsiXhosa versions of the stories, we would ask those who seemed to have some understanding of IsiXhosa, one could see that the children were actually thinking in English before they answered the questions in a limited IsiXhosa.

I asked Sipho the question,

> *Ingaba isigebenga esasileqa uMajeke sasisikhulu okanye sasisincinci? (Was the giant that chased Jack small or big?)*

Sipho looked at me for a while and then verbalised this softly to himself as he thought of the answer,

> *The giant, eh, the giant was (using his hands as he stood up shouting), the giant was bi-i-i-g!*

The same response happened when I asked Buli,

> *Umama kaMajeke walahla ntoni ngaphandle kwefestile? (What did Jack's mother throw out of the window?)*

Before Buli could answer she looked on the floor and then at the team hopping as she bursted, "I know! I know!" then she thought for a second. Softly she said almost to herself, "she through beengs, three beengs," she said displaying five fingers.

The research team members also experienced the same. When they asked questions to the children in IsiXhosa, they cogently showed us that they were thinking the answer in English. Of the 40 children in both schools only seven answered us in IsiXhosa when we asked questions in IsiXhosa. Yet even these children, it was lucid that they were thinking and organising their answers in English. We could hear many of them as they talked almost to themselves whilst they planned to answer.

The 16 parents interviewed in the two schools stated unequivocally that the daycare centres' strength was English. Many had taken their children to these schools "to learn English and learn how to be good Christians". To the majority of the parents religion played an important role in the socialisation of theory children. When the team observed the children being taught by their teachers, they could see how their fluency in English helped in the interactive classroom activities. All the teachers were praiseworthy of the level of the learners' competency and they attributed this to the parents' assistance at home. At Jolly Kids the teachers stated that every year they encounter children who have difficulties in understanding English, however, the support tips given to parents usually help in overcoming such challenges. Parents are usually advised which books to use and which programmes for example, can supplement what the nursery school is doing. In both schools it was clear that the parents were very supportive of the schools' endeavours. After looking at the findings, I identified several themes and these are discussed below. The themes are:

- Parental choice of daycare centres;
- Vygotskian influences on language development;
- Daycare centres and democracy; and
- Children and society.

Parental choice of daycare centres

Some research has shown that with the advent of school choice many able black African parents are voting with their feet by choosing schools that they want for their children. Frequently though, these schools are not chosen on pedagogic grounds; parents choose them simply because their children will converse better in English and these schools have a high reputation in the English language. In her study De Klerk (2002: 7) contends that Xhosa parents who were in historically white schools were satisfied with their children's progress academically and in English specifically.

A Vygotskian perspective on what influences language development

The democratic dispensation in education has brought with it a number of paradoxes. Education in South Africa is based on the democratic Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in which it is evident that parents are able to make choices. The Manifesto on Values document (DoE, 2001) contends that the Constitution is unequivocal on equality, stating that all the people are equal before the law; that no one can be unfairly discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, sex, ethnic, social, origin, age, religion, belief, culture and language. However, there seems to be an exercise of choice by parents who tend to prefer English to other indigenous languages for their children in school. The latter was also witnessed in this study. The Manifesto on Values cited above acknowledges the invaluable nature of bilingual education stating that, most learners benefit cognitively and emotionally from the type of structured bilingual education found in dual medium programmes (DoE, 2001: 47). However, parents who usually vote on their feet emphasise to teachers that they want their children to be conversant in the English language.

In all four of the daycare centres in the study, the parents clearly stated that the main wish that they had was for their children to master English language skills. Even those who indicated that they would like their children to have some knowledge of indigenous language, the stress was on mastery of the English language. As stated in the research findings, the majority of parents spoke English to their children at home because they did not want them to be disadvantaged when they go back to the classroom. Kader Asmal, the former South African minister of education, once highlighted in the Saamtrek Conference that "... because of the constitutional compromise in 1996, language policy is a voluntarist tradition," parents and communities make their own decisions as to what language they wish their children to be educated in (DoE, 2001: 48). Many young black African learners in schools perceive learning English desirable because this is what the society teaches them – the Vygotskian influence.

The majority of the children in the study were comfortable in speaking in English although most of them had IsiXhosa as their mother tongue. They were confident and very strong in communicating their thoughts in their second language; it appeared

that they functioned better cognitively in English. Clearly, these language skills were shaped by the significant others in the society. From Vygotsky's social cognitive theory, two aspects were critical in this study. The first one being the emphasis on the importance of language in the development of intellectual functioning. It was striking to see how the black African children's thinking was so advanced in their second language. Vytgotsky's theory underscores the idea that language is a social and cultural phenomenon that is centrally involved in the development of higher mental processes (Hamachek, 1995: 164). Even when asked in their families' mother tongue, the children found it more spontaneous to analyse and respond to questions in English. The majority of them were exposed to English; books, television programmes, learning and a number of factors largely influenced their language and cognitive development.

Secondly, what was clear in this study was the idea that cognitive development is affected by the learners' cultural and social environments. Many children stated that at home their parents and significant others spoke to them in English. Vytgotsky's theory shows that cognitive development is strongly influenced by the learners' cultural and social environments (Hamachek, 1995: 164). The idea is that learners should be put in situations in which they have to stretch their minds to understand, but in which support and assistance from the teacher or peers are always available (Hamachek, 1995: 164). Parents in the study explained how they ensure that even at home, their children used English. A number of these parents cited how they supplemented with television programmes to teach their children especially those who were renting paid-per-view satellite dishes. The children's British educational programmes were part of the socialisation for many parents. Important in Vygotsky's theory is the contention that any child's development depends on language and social support (Vygotsky, 1986). Many black African children in schools, largely because of parental choice, develop intellectually through an immense role played by the English language.

One of the important aspects in Vygotsky's theory is the importance of 'inner speech', which was evidenced in this study. Children begin to use language not only as a means to communicate with others, but also to plan and guide their own activities (Hamachek, 1995: 165). Furthermore, Hamachek mentions the role of the inner speech where the learner uses language to talk one's way through the steps needed to accomplish tasks. As seen in the study, even when the research team spoke in IsiXhosa with many of the children as we guided activities, their inner speech was in English. Inner speech helps the children in solving their problems.

Daycare centres and democracy: incipient shortchanging of learners?

Boyer (1998: 245) argues that a number of options surround teachers as they teach in their classrooms; the expectations others have of teacher-learners, colleagues, administrators and parents are equally wide-ranging and at times conflicting. Whilst the black African indigenous languages in South Africa are theoretically on the same level with English and Afrikaans, there is a tendency of parents to prefer their children

to learn in English. Teachers are in a dilemma even when they would like to foster bilingual education for many black African parents tell them:

> *I have sent my children here to learn English.*
>
> *I have sent my child to this preschool because it has a reputation for teaching good English.*
>
> *Leave IsiXhosa, they can always learn that in the neighbourhood when they play with others.*

These parents do not expect little Sipho, Brian, Prudence or Beauty to master IsiXhosa. Soon after the children have started their journey in education they start to be footballs in the inequality game, they become victims of education reproduction and experience the limits of schooling in which for the next 12 or 13 years they might never have any say.

The majority of parents, many people argue, as consumers choose what they want for their children hence they determine what schools stand for. Baker (1994: 7) argues:

> *There is also what might be described as a consumer model, where schools respond to market demands. The independent sector can be seen this way. Schools only survive if they provide what the fee-paying parents want. The nature of school provision is therefore determined by tens of thousands of individual choices ... The idea is that no one group (including government) should determine what schools are for. Instead the markets should decide.*

Many parents in the study claimed that they "liked their mother tongue, however, it was for practical reasons" that they chose daycare centres that would strengthen their children's English language skills. From nursery school, it was also clear that parents are concerned about economic implications of education in later years; that English language skills would be rewarding in the accomplishment of better qualifications and future employment. Furthermore, Baker (1994) avers that many parents want school to play a part in passing on common values from generation to generation although there might be debates as to which values should these be. Unbeknown to many though, the parents have started engaging in the politics of schooling and reproduction.

Bourdieu (1977) writes of how schools replicate existing inequalities. According to Bourdieu, learners with more valuable social and cultural capital will perform better in school than their less fortunate, indigent counterparts. Many children who start nursery school in the township and continue schooling in the historically black African schools will experience dysfunctionality and ineffectiveness. The social reproduction perspective has proved useful in attempts to understand how race and class influence the transmission of educational inequality (Lareau & Horvat, 1999: 37). Differences of class matter between the groups of black parents. The working class parents do not have the cultural capital that would enhance achievement in school. Books read at home, music played, television programmes viewed, all become part of the cultural capital children are exposed to. Many writers have found the cultural and social capital effective in affecting the achievement of children in schools (Lareau & Horvat, 1999: 42). Therefore, the cognitive development of poor learners is different from that of middle class children due to effects of cultural and social capital. In the study the

latter was evident when learners who read at home were clearly more advanced in development when compared to those who did not. Furthermore, Lareau and Horvat state that the parents' cultural and social resources become forms of capital when they facilitate parents compliance with the dominant standards in school interactions.

In their study Lareau and Horvat (1999) show the differences of social and cultural capital between black and whites where the legacy of racial discrimination plays a role in perceiving black parents as having less cultural and social capital. However, in this study class plays a crucial role. Children of poor black African parents do not have the same cultural capital as that of middle class black Africans. With their resources at home, middle class parents were able to prepare their children for school with the right tools.

Children and society

Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in South Africa is being replaced by a new national curriculum as enshrined in the new plan referred to as Schooling 2025. One of the points in Schooling 2025 is to highlight the importance of indigenous languages. Grade 1 to 3 learners will be encouraged to learn in their mother tongue so as to raise literacy and numeracy by Grade 3. Yet parents who are the basic consumers need to buy into this plan. Children are likely to value or devalue language according to what they see and hear. The language factor can affect learners who might be incorrectly viewed as having performance problems. Early Childhood Education had begun to get the attention it deserved from the mid-twentieth century. It was Bloom (1964) who contended that Intelligence Quotient (IQ) was not fixed at birth, but could be improved through special early childhood programmes. Looking at this study there is a necessity to raise working class children's confidence and close the achievement gap that will widen when compared to middle class children in later years.

In the two township daycare centres it was clear that a number of children struggled with the language of teaching. As a result of this they had become quiet and inward-looking. Unlike the middle class children, many of these children did not receive the support in their homes. The latter was confirmed by their parents who stated that frequently they did not have resources for social and cultural capital. There is then a need for society to be careful at how they educate children. Elkind (1987) has warned parents and educationists that inappropriate early intellectual stimulation can have a negative impact on children. The question then will be whether there is any potential negative impact of learning a second language, especially for disadvantaged learners introduced to subtractive bilingualism. The quality of poor early childhood centres will affect the achievement levels of the learners. Hurn (1978) avers that inferior schooling compounds the initial handicaps of the learners and leads them directly to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality.

Alexander and Bloch (2004) posit that when we consider how we introduce children to reading and writing, the challenges are to counter the grip of colonial and apartheid education that continues to influence early literacy learning. Lareau

and Horvat (1999: 37) argue that class differences in parents' and learners' attitudes or behaviours toward schools affect children's progress. A preschool child who does not have the social and cultural capital, who cannot understand what happens in the classroom, who does not see a positive attitude towards school from parents, soon learns to be unsure about schooling. As they grow up, they perceive the school as a place where they do not have any advantage.

According to Piaget's theory, the children in the study were in the preoperational stage and in this stage they experiment with language. Hamachek (1995: 153) points out that Piaget observed that language is essential to cognitive development in three ways:

- Language allows people to communicate ideas and thoughts;
- Language assists thinking and memory; and
- Language allows a person to construct mental pictures and images.

Middle class children in Jolly Kids and Happy Valley develop (English) language skills through their contact with their world. These children find pleasure in learning new words from books, pictures, television, and the environment plays a crucial role in enhancing these skills. In the world around them, the preoperational children can learn from imitating their teachers, their parents and their siblings. Imitative speech is the primary vehicle that children use to expand their awareness of the world. Moreover, parents and teachers can greatly influence language learning, for better or worse (Hamachek, 1995). Furthermore, Hamachek cites Ruth Beard (1969) who observed:

> *All evidence suggests that in addition to the provision of a stimulating environment, attention from adults and older children, especially in answering questions and in conversation, is immensely important to developing in this stage. It is in these respects that many children from poor environments suffer.*

As seen in this study, the working class child needs more support or they will continue to suffer the limits of schooling in Grade 1 and beyond; especially if they are placed in dysfunctional schools. Without good role models at home and at school the working class child will be behind. These children need to be listened to and be given time to explore their environment. There appears to be much pressure on working class children, trying to learn a second language where they get minimal support. This just delays cognitive development.

Conclusion

This study has confirmed much research that shows the role played by significant others in the schooling of the children. The participants in the study were unequivocal as to what they desired for the education of their children. This is in line with the Vygotskian theory that shows how children are influenced by the socio-cultural context. Their context undermines the indigenous languages and their social class affects their education. A number of incipient challenges and inequalities in education are sown in the nursery school. The upper socio-economic groups have enhanced

access to resources and they also have power to decide what knowledge is of most worth and how it should be taught (Hall, 2004: 53). Poor children frequently never get to the same levels of their middle class peers and this leads to literacy achievement gap. Alexander and Bloch (2004) aver that the intellectualisation of a language begins in early childhood, with the children and their caregivers. The challenge of African indigenous languages though, is that they are not continuously developed like other languages. Whilst many would argue about the positive effects of an effective bilingual policy in schools, there is still much education that needs to happen among the parents and the African elites as to what needs to inform preschool education and the use of African indigenous languages. Alexander and Bloch (2004) also discuss how people see the clinging to colonial languages as a way of maintaining the grip to power and influencing their life chances.

The study has shown that from nursery schools, black African children learn that indigenous languages are not an important part of their lives. They are influenced by their immediate environment, the family, that it is those who speak English well that the society recognises. School life will also reinforce these beliefs as learners will soon learn that English language skills are positively reinforced because social and cultural capital around them is supportive of this language. Those township children who start nursery school might be trapped in dysfunctional township schools where they might not necessarily glean cognitive and intellectual skills linked to the English language. There are still many who argue that the high failure rate in matric (Grade 12) is largely due to inadequacies linked to the language of learning and teaching in township schools. The study then also shows the inequalities between township education and education in former white schools; usually the differences grow as children advance in their schooling careers. The challenge for many poor learners trapped in the historically black dysfunctional schools is that they soon discover that their English is not competent enough, whilst their IsiXhosa skills are also not adequately developed. It is then no wonder that schools are seen by others as institutions that perpetuate inequality and convince lower class groups of their inferiority (Hurn, 1978: 31).

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