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**21 August 2024**

## **Monolingual English for kids? A modern colonial dilemma – UCT lecture**

Learners should be taught in their native language so they can grasp the subject matter more efficiently compared to the current situation where English, which is foreign to them, is used as a language of instruction.

Learners must continue with their African language instruction in grade four, with English added to the instruction, for them to be more proficient in the language as opposed to the current system where African language instruction ends at grade three, a University of Cape Town (UCT) Inaugural Lecture by Professor Carolyn McKinney heard on Wednesday, 14 August 2024.

Professor McKinney, professor of language education in the [School of Education](#) and a stream leader in applied language and literacy studies, said the topic of how language fails learners at our schools was “a difficult topic, an uncomfortable topic because it forces us to face racialised inequality. But it is also a story of inequality that we can change going forward. It is not a hopeless story but a hopeful story which takes the responsibility of all of us.”

The lecture was titled “How are we failing our children? Language and exclusion in schooling”. Contributing to international research in critical applied and sociolinguistics, her research shows how colonial and racialised beliefs about language and literacy, or language ideologies, fuel the deficit positioning of multilingual and African language-speaking children.

At the beginning of her talk, Professor McKinney said research activism and advocacy should be kept very separate, “but as you have already heard for me it’s not the case; they are deeply intertwined, they feed into each other. I think it is really the research that drives the advocacy for the education system to be better for our children”.

Her talk covered three different research projects conducted over a period of 20 years in very different spaces, from under-resourced to elite, well-resourced schools, and in informal learning spaces outside the formal schooling domain.

“What is very striking and disturbing that I’ve noticed over time is that people react very differently in an experiment where grade six white boys in an elite school are taught science in isiXhosa as a third language. It is when people actually see those white boys struggling

that the penny drops as to what is going on, and the really heart-breaking reality of that is that actually it's because people expect the black children to struggle and they don't expect the white children to struggle. When they see those white children struggling that's when they realise what's really going on for most of our children at schools," she said.

She added that "forcing children to be English monolingual is forcing them coloniality. English speakers are the most monolingual, who have turned their deficit to be something superior".

The current language policy in schools was introduced in 1997. She said Professor Neville Alexander was instrumental in igniting her interest in her current field of research, which promotes multilingualism and enables anyone of the 11, and now 12, official languages to be the language of learning and teaching as well as to enable multiple, bilingual load like you have for English and Afrikaans where there would be dual medium schools where English and Afrikaans are used together in the same class and those students can write assessments in these languages. It enables bilingual load in any language of South Africa.

Professor McKinney said what happens for almost all schools is that they offer grades one to three in an African language, which is the home language of the child, and then there's a sudden switch to English as a language of learning and teaching from grade four onwards, which means from grade four there's no learning and teaching material and assessments in African languages at all.

"Every single thing that a child engages with from the beginning of grade four is in English, and that is after learning two to three hours of English additional language in grade one, two, and three," she said.

Professor McKinney said there has been a fantastic pilot with bilingual education in isiXhosa, Sesotho and English in the Eastern Cape, which is the only exception there is. Teachers move between English and the children's familiar language. But when it comes to written activities, those are done in monolingual English, including assessments.

"What happens is that this emergent bilingual learners are positioned as deficient bilinguals because their isiXhosa, isiZulu, or Setswana is no longer a resource they are allowed to use in any of their subject areas except when they do that language as a subject. They are now seen as deficient monolinguals, not good enough in one language, whatever other resources they have don't count."

Professor McKinney said looking at the difference between her child in grade four, who had a good grasp and background of the English language, compared to the Khayelitsha learners in the same grade who were using the same textbook and writing the same assessment as her child made her see things in a different way and amplified things.

In introducing the speaker, UCT Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mosa Moshabela, said he was excited to host these lectures. He said "they give us a glimpse of the work done by our academics. What Carolyn has accomplished is not a mean feat. The work of Carolyn come timely in that not long ago the former minister of basic education recommended that children be taught maths and science in their languages".

He shared his own experience of the difficulties he had with language instruction. He said that they were taught English in Sepedi when he was in matric. When he did his first year in medicine in KwaZulu-Natal, he could not express himself well in English. To make things

worse, he also had to learn isiZulu to cope at university as it was the language commonly used in the province.

Professor Shose Kessi, dean of the Faculty of Humanities, said the work of Professor McKinney added value to national needs and it was an honour for UCT to have work of this magnitude produced at the university.

Professor McKinney's research and teaching focus on language in education policy, language and literacy ideologies, and the use of languaging-for-learning in multilingual education contexts of the Global South. She has led several ethnographic-style school-based research projects in these areas.

Her publications include the books *Language and Power in Post-Colonial Schooling: Ideologies in Practice* (2017, Routledge) and *Decoloniality, Language and Literacy: Conversations with Teacher Educators* (2022, co-edited with Pam Christie, Multilingual Matters). She is the lead editor of the second edition of *The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism* (2024) and a founding member of the bua-lit language and literacy collective advocating for the use of African languages and multilingualism in education.

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