FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN KENYA PRIMARY SCHOOLS, AND THEIR EFFECT ON PERFORMANCE (IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRICULUM)

by

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ABSTRACT

The present study was set up to investigate into factors that influence the pupil's ability, at the primary school level, to acquire sufficient functional proficiency in the language of instruction and their effect on performance. The findings of the investigation would form a basis for recommendations for both curricular and system changes in the system then existing with a view to enhancing the pupils' gain from the system both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

The four hypotheses upon which the study was based were that in-school resources, per pupil cost would significantly promote learning in school and hence language learning and proficiency; that the social environment of the child would significantly influence the direction of the pupil's acquisition of language proficiency; that the school linguistic environment to which the children are exposed would significantly
influence the acquisition of language proficiency; and that the residential background of the children (measured by the Urban/Rural dichotomy) would significantly influence the acquisition of language proficiency.

The tools of investigation included two exhaustive questionnaires, one to probe the pupils' background and the other to probe the actual physical distribution of resources in the schools in the sample. In addition to the questionnaires, there was a written test in two alternative language media to test pupils' relative comprehension of curricular material in the two media. There were also impromptu lesson observations aimed at investigating on the methods and approaches adopted by the average teacher in teaching his subject. Lastly, the researcher interviewed school authorities on their views concerning problems of language teaching. The results of all these investigations were presented in the form of frequencies and percentages from which correlations between variables were worked out.

The results of both the study of background information as concerns the pupils and the school plant and of the field study as carried out through the tests administered to the pupils in the sample and
the personal interviews and observations revealed gross imbalances in the physical distribution of what resources were available. The imbalances manifested were mainly at the expense of rural areas in general, but there appeared to exist inequality between categories of schools, even within the urban centres. These inequalities were both qualitative as well as quantitative. Staff turnover and resourcefulness as well as staff stability tended to have effect on performance in general, with a resultant bearing on acquisition of language proficiency.

In the area of pupils' socio-economic background, it was revealed that there was greater influence brought to bear upon ability by pupils socio-economic background more to the advantage of those in the rather well-to-do families. In this area, of all the contributory factors, the ability of the parents to afford a decent pre-primary education for their pupils in addition to private tuition appeared to contribute positively to the pupil's success within the formal educational system.

The In-school linguistic environment was established to have effect on the acquisition of proficiency and the use of the language of instruction. Constant practice at and use of the language of instruction
enhanced performance in that medium. In this area, active consciousness and encouragement from the school authorities contributed significantly. The isolationist approach of language teaching, without relation to other curriculum subjects also tends to militate against optimal acquisition of proficiency in the language of instruction in relation to other technical areas of the syllabus.

Consequent to the findings of the present study recommendations have been made for a re-orientation of training efforts in the field of teacher education in order to produce personnel with adequate proficiency in the language of instruction so that they can provide an acceptable standard of emulation for pupils. This improved training target should be backed by an efficient and adequate supervision of language teaching.

A recommendation is made for an interdisciplinary approach at the textbook preparation stage, in addition to structuring of examinations at all levels to test both attainment and proficiency in language.

To utilize the advantages of both residential and socio-economic backgrounds, it has been recommended that the benefits of pre-primary orientation, in the form of nursery schooling, be evenly spread through the system. A suggestion is made for a restructuring in
the educational system to bring nursery education under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. This is to help streamline and consolidate all training efforts in the field of education.

On the curriculum, it is finally recommended that there should be no conscious attempts to achieve literacy in the narrow sense, at the nursery school. The child should only be introduced to the spoken function of the language of instruction so that he can, on commencing primary education, communicate, at elementary level, with his teachers. In achieving literacy, emphasis will be given to the child's predominant local vernacular, with the language of instruction being introduced gradually in appropriate stages.