

MOTHER TONGUES AS MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION: THE CASE OF KENYA¹

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This paper advances the argument that using mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning in Kenya is the best option there is for the children's education. The use of mother tongues as the media of instruction has been a vexing issue in Kenya. Besides the indigenous languages or mother tongues, the country also has English, which was inherited from the colonial past. This ex-colonial language (English) is associated with the professions, white-collar jobs, upward mobility, power and material prosperity. On the other hand, mother tongues are seen to signify pre-modernity and lack of sophistication. Kiswahili, a mother tongue for some Kenyans and also Kenya's national and official language (alongside English), is placed in-between English and the other mother tongues in a three-tier language prestige hierarchy. Since English has the highest prestige among the languages spoken in the country, many parents want their children to learn the language well. Consequently, a policy providing for the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning has attracted reactions ranging from scepticism, at best, to hostility, at the very worst, not only from parents but also from other members of society who consider them as being of little value. There is no doubt that there are challenges standing on the way of the efforts to implement such a policy but it is still reasonable to submit that the challenges are surmountable.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the colonial days in Africa, the language question in education has been pestering. Some people (see the references in especially parts 2 and 3 below), basing their comments on perception rather than facts, have advocated locking out indigenous African languages from the education system especially when they are used as media of instruction. Moreover, some parents, thanks to the massive colonial brainwashing that painted virtually all things African as "backwardness", do not see a good reason for their children to be subjected to the languages as the media of instruction in schools. The parents are not the only group of Kenyans who do not see much worth in the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning. The perception is shared by other groups such as teachers.

In the second camp, in the mother-tongue-for-media-of-instruction debate, there are experts in education, psychology and linguistics who argue

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for the use of indigenous languages as the media of instruction at the lower levels of education. As will be illustrated below, these experts point at concrete benefits to the child and to the community that come about from the use of the child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early stages of formal education.

In this paper, I review arguments advanced by the two contesting sides drawing examples from Kenya. Subsequently, I advocate for the use of indigenous African languages as media of instruction in early formal education. I adduce arguments and advance evidence to show that, contrary to the perception that mother tongues as media of instruction in the early stages of formal education are not appropriate for the role, they are the best media for the purpose. Furthermore, whereas there are challenges in the use of the languages as media of instruction in early formal education, the benefits to the child, to the community and to the country that accrue from using the languages far outweigh the inconveniences of tackling the challenges of implementing a policy of using such languages as the media of instruction.

2. CURRENT CONTROVERSY IN KENYA

In January, 2014, Kenya's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, issued a circular responding to "reports appearing in both electronic and print media that the Ministry [had] introduced a new language in education policy where the medium of instruction is local languages" (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST), (2014:1). The Ministry wished to clarify that the language policy was not new and that it had been in use for over three decades; and that the Report of the National Committee on Education Objectives and Policies of 1976 (commonly referred to as the Gachathi Report) had made two recommendations on language of instruction; namely, that the predominant language spoken in the schools' catchment area be used as the language of instruction for the first three years of primary education; and that English be taught as a subject from Primary 1 and eventually be made the medium of instruction in Primary 4.

The circular also referred to Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012 titled "Reforming Education and Training Sectors in Kenya." Under Section 2.10, the Circular observed that the Sessional Paper recommended the following:

National and County Education Boards shall encourage the use of the two official languages [that is,] Kiswahili and English both in and out-of-school as provided for in the Constitution of Kenya 2010. The language of the catchment area (mother tongue) shall be used for child-care, pre-primary education and in the education of Lower Primary children (0-8 years). Sign language, Braille or other appropriate means of communication shall also be used in the delivery of education to learners with special needs. For schools located in metropolitan areas such as (sic), Kiswahili shall be adopted as a language of the catchment area. (MOEST, 2014:1)

The Sessional Paper was in conformity with The National Language Policy of 1976, (Brown, 1976). According to a document availed to this writer by the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development in 2015, the Policy gave three directives. First, learners from a single ethnic group in the neighbourhood of the school would be instructed in the same language that they use in their homes; second, learners from a mixed ethnic neighbourhood would be instructed in Kiswahili; and third, a few schools, mainly in urban centres, would use English as the medium of instruction in lower primary.

The document availed by the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development, has a section subtitled “Rationale for the Existing Language Policy” referring to the situation in 1976. In the section are observations in defense of the use of mother tongues as media of instruction. The observations are summarized below (Brown, 1976:3):

- 1) Mother tongue is the language in which children first learn to express their thoughts and establish relationship with their immediate social environment;
- 2) The learners’ ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so long after they have learnt to speak English;
- 3) The culture of the people is expressed in mother tongue; hence mother tongue should be taught positively so that learners respect their cultural heritage as a basis for appreciating that of other people;
- 4) Mother tongue is the most comprehensive expression of the child’s cultural heritage comprising the character as well as moral and religious values;
- 5) Mother tongue acts as the link among home, early childhood development centres and primary school and encourages the child’s free expression;
- 6) A good mother tongue education programme lays a strong foundation for the learning of other languages;
- 7) As medium of instruction, mother tongue provides children with a sense of belonging and self-confidence and motivates them to participate in all school activities thereby providing a smooth transition from home to school; and
- 8) Mother tongue makes meaningful what is taught because it relates to the child’s experience.

The circular of January 30, 2014, which sought to re-introduce the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in lower classes of primary school was met with both hostile and positive comments almost in equal measure. It was opposed by individuals as well as parents and teachers associations. Njeri Mwathe (2014), writing in the nation’s biggest daily, described it as absurd. The National Parents Association termed it retrogressive. They claimed that the move amounted to abetting tribalism in the academic sector. Mr. Gerald Nyaga, an official of the Association is reported to have said that the Association was totally against the directive and that any attempt at implementing the use mother tongues would be met with strong opposition, (Nation Correspondent, 2014:22).

According to the Kenya National Union of Teachers, not only is the policy difficult to implement but it is also retrogressive. Saying that the policy “was

not applicable in view of the technological advancements and the push for national integration”, the Union asked the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to suspend it and consult teachers (Kiplang’at, 2014:10).

In response to the circular on the Policy, Wa Ngatia said:

Some policies originating from some people in government leave one wondering whether the government has the interest of children at heart. Take for instance the recent announcement that the government intends to introduce the teaching of vernacular languages in all primary schools. While the intention is noble and has research evidence to back it, I hasten to add that in our Kenyan context, it is not prudent to do so. This is because introducing vernacular languages will only entrench tribalism as our children become conscious at the tender age that they belong to different ethnic groups. At a time when our society is riven (sic) by ethnic hatred, it would be prudent to formulate policies that would help make Kenyans more homogenous. Language policy, if well thought out, could go a long way in making Kenyans more homogenous. (Wa Ngatia, 2014:30)

An education researcher, Dr. Abagi, sees the policy of using mother tongues as media of education as retrogressive. He claims it has been overtaken by what he calls socio-economic and technological development as well as the country’s needs as spelled out in Vision 2030. He further claims that the policy contradicts the government’s commitment to promoting national unity and cohesion. Moreover, he states that, besides being difficult to implement, the policy will go against the rights of children whose parents work in communities outside their original home areas. He concludes that, “more critically, such a policy will further lower the learning outcomes in most public schools, which are already lagging behind private schools” (Abagi, 2014:13).

As stated above, there are those who are positive about using mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of education. Advancing a positive view, Echessa, a newspaper reader said that:

I want to thank the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology for the proposal that will see local languages being taught in public schools. I am convinced that this proposal will have far-reaching implications in terms of value addition to our education system. This is not the first time lower primary pupils will be taught in vernacular. I am personally a product of the same system. I recall how my class teacher used to teach us Luhya oral narratives and how we spent time analyzing one of the most prolific Luhya story books, *Wambani Nende Inungo*. Another class teacher taught us mathematics using our local dialect. (Echessa, 2014:16)

3. CONFLICTING POLICY POSITIONS

Before taking a position on the current controversy, let us look at what has been witnessed in the past with regard to the issue of indigenous languages as media of instruction. There have been many commissions on education in

Kenya since 1907. Some of the commissions have a section on language in education in their reports. The reports of two of these commissions are instructive on the contradictory positions taken on the issue of using indigenous languages as media of instruction. Let us look at some of the commissions and their positions.

The Ominde Commission of 1964 claimed that “the great majority of the people” who gave their views on the language to be used as the medium of instruction wanted to see only the English language as the medium of instruction from Primary I. Some of the observations in the Commission’s Report were that, “the English medium makes possible a systematic development of language study and literacy which would be very difficult to achieve in the vernaculars” and that, “the foundation laid in the first three years is more scientifically conceived and, therefore, provides a more solid basis for all subsequent studies than was ever possible in the old vernacular teaching”. The commission went on to conclude that, “In short, we have no doubt about the advantages of the English medium to the whole educational process.” (Ominde 1964)

The position of the Ominde Report on language is baffling. It refers to “the great majority of the people” recommending that English should be used in the country’s education system from Class 1. Interestingly, the Commission agrees entirely with the purported views and recommendations of “the great majority of the people” on the use of English as the medium of instruction in the early classes of formal learning. The Commission then goes on to give reasons for agreeing with the view of using English only as the medium of instruction in the entire education system.

The Ominde Commission’s statement that “the English medium makes possible a systematic development of language study and literacy which would be very difficult to achieve in the vernaculars” sounds more of a Euro-centric prejudice rather than a reasoned scientific observation. English is not the only language that makes “a systematic development of language study and literacy” possible. Other languages, including African indigenous languages, are just as good for the purpose.

Contrary to the thinking of some of the inhabitants of Britain’s former colonies, English is not the only language capable of handling science. Therefore, the claim that, when English is used as the medium of instruction in the early years of formal learning, “the foundation laid in the first three years is more scientifically conceived and, therefore, provides a more solid basis for all subsequent studies than was ever possible in the old vernacular teaching” is not scientifically verifiable. Consequently, it is untenable.

It is instructive that the authors of the Ominde Commission Report were aware that indigenous languages, or what they called vernaculars, had previously been used as media of instruction. Unfortunately, the Commission’s conclusion that favoured the English language portrayed the

earlier use of indigenous languages as media of instruction as ill-informed. However, the commission does not demonstrate any clear fallacies of deficiency of rationality in the earlier commissions' recommendations of the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction for the early years of formal learning.

It is curious that the Ominde Commission did not find anything positive to say about the use of mother tongues as the media of instruction. Equally curious, the Commission did not have a single negative thing to say on the use of the English language as medium of instruction in a country where the language's world-view is in sharp contrast with the local languages of the learners. One gets the impression that the Ominde Commission was not an impartial group seeking people's opinion on whether or not indigenous languages could serve as media of instruction in the early years of education. Instead, the group appears to have been comprised of individuals who had taken a position against the issue of mother tongues even before conducting the survey on the issue if, indeed, they did a survey. Furthermore, if they did a survey, their sampling technique has to be called into question for the one-sidedness of the views expressed by the purported informants.

The report of the Commission is also surprising because all the other reports on education, even when they support the use of the English language as medium of instruction, do not lack something positive to say about the use of the mother tongues as media of instruction. For illustration, let us take the report of the Bessey Commission of 1972 (Bessey, 1972). Contrary to the Ominde Commission's position, the Bessey Commission pointed out that Kenyan indigenous languages are priceless and must, therefore, be preserved. It observed that indigenous languages bring developmental benefits to the children and cultural benefits to the community when school life begins without the shock of the confrontation with a new language.

Despite the positive view on the use of mother tongues as the media of instruction, the Commission admitted that there were challenges in implementation. There was the issue of the recruitment of teachers. The Commission noted that recruitment of teachers competent in local languages essentially means hiring locally and that availability of trained teachers in some areas may be uncertain thereby disadvantaging the children by availing to them untrained teachers. The Report also pointed out the possibility of separate training and recruitment, thereby creating divisions between the locally trained and recruited teachers and the teachers who were trained and recruited nationally.

As we have seen above, the Gachathi Commission of 1976 as well as National Language Policy of the same year overturned the recommendations of the Ominde Commission with regard to the role mother tongues as the media of instruction in early years of education.

4. ARGUMENTS FOR THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUES AS MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION

Contrary to the sentiments expressed against the use mother tongues as media of instruction in the early years of schooling in Kenya, such an approach is the most appropriate for an education system not only in Kenya but also across the globe where local languages are in competition with a language imposed on the population by a former colonial power.

As early as 1951, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation convened a meeting of experts on this matter (UNESCO, 1968). The report of the meeting appeared seven years later in a seminal collection of papers by Fishman (1968). In the summary section of the report the experts observed that:

- (1) The mother tongue is a person's natural means of self-expression, and one of his first needs is to develop his power of self-expression;
- (2) Every pupil should begin his formal education in his mother tongue;
- (3) There is nothing in the structure of any language that precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization.

In an important conference held in Asmara, Eritrea, on African Languages and Cultures, the participants came up with a number of resolutions. One of the resolutions, which is very pertinent to our discussion, states that, "All African children have the inalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues" (Asmara Language Organisers (2000).

A number of arguments can be advanced in support of the view that mother tongues should be used as media of instruction. We reproduce them below in a summary:

- 1) The use of a mother tongue as the medium of instruction allows for smooth transition from home to the school environment.
- 2) The child is allowed to concentrate on one task, that is, the subject being taught rather than having to divide his/her attention and mental energies between the subject and the demands of a new language.
- 3) The use and the early mastery of the mother tongue have the effect of developing positively the function of the brain that deals with language.
- 4) Scientific experiments have shown that children learn better and faster when they communicate in their mother tongues.

In a study by The Nuffield Foundation & Colonial Office (NFCO) titled "African Education: A Study of Education Policy and Practice in British Tropical Africa, it is noted that:

Learning a foreign language in the early stages is necessarily an imitative and memorizing process, and to place too much emphasis on this too early in school life is to encourage an imitative rather than a creative habit of mind. The mother-tongue is the most potent to awaken the dawning imagination through songs, stories, nursery-rhymes, folk-tales, and proverbs; it touches the heart as

well as the brain; it records and preserves a culture that is fleeting. Unless the study of the vernacular is given its right importance, another cause will be added to those which tend to uproot the African society. (NFCO 1953:79)

The study adds that:

During the first year of school life, instruction must necessarily be in the vernacular, for the symbols of literacy must first be related to the mother-tongue. If this is done when the child has reached the stage of reading readiness and not before (i.e. not before six years of age and perhaps later), reading and writing are learnt with great swiftness, not as an imposed discipline, but as part of natural development. (NFCO 1953:80)

Arguments such as the ones above inform the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation's advocacy of the use of the mother tongues as media of instruction in the first three or four years of learning. Since 1953, the Organisation has recommended that mother tongues be used for media of instruction in the lower levels of education (Kioko et al., 2014).

5. SOME RESEARCH RESULTS ON THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUES AS THE MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION IN THE LOWER LEVELS OF EDUCATION

In 2007, researchers in Tanzania investigated the differences of teaching the same topic in English and then in Kiswahili some days later. The experiment involved Form 1 students in six schools. The researchers gathered the data using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The two researchers discovered that, in every case, the students taught the same topic by the same teacher, performed better when the teaching was conducted in Kiswahili than in English or when code-switching was used. The examples demonstrated that students learn better when they are taught in a language with which they are very familiar (Rwantabagu, 2011).

Although the Tanzanian experiment involved secondary school students, the results have implications for the use of mother tongues as media of instruction at the lower levels of formal education. The results showed, as Rwantagu notes, that an indigenous language does not impede learning. On the contrary, mother tongues facilitate better understanding of the subjects being taught. This advantage to the learner is even more pronounced among younger learners than the secondary school students used in the Tanzanian experiment.

In Niger, according to Nikiema (2011), German Technical Assistance Agency (GTZ) conducted a comparative assessment of pupils from both experimental and traditional schools². The assessment involved pupils in

²Experimental schools refer to those using mother-tongues as media of instruction whereas traditional schools are those where French was used as the medium of instruction.

grades 4, 5 and 6. The assessment was conducted in both the national (indigenous) languages and in French. The pupils scored better in tests conducted in the local languages. The better scores in tests conducted in the indigenous languages were independent of the content of the tests. Moreover, when pupils were tested on the French language, there were hardly any differences between the pupils who had used the mother tongue as medium of instruction, (that is, those in experimental schools) and those who had used French (in other words, those in the traditional schools). This was especially so in the final year, indicating that using a local language as the medium of instruction did not disadvantage pupils in their learning of the French language. In other words, similar scores suggested that pupils from experimental schools are not any weaker in French than those from traditional schools. The tests also established that when a pupil succeeds in an exercise in his/her first language, they succeed in the same type of exercise when it is conducted in French, pointing to a positive transfer of competences from Language 1 (L1) to language 2 (L2).

Supporting the use of indigenous languages in education, Rwantabagu observes that:

if development is seen in its broader and comprehensive dimension, the language factor weighs in heavily as a tool for the appropriate transformation of socio-cultural, political and economic systems of a society. Rwantabagu (2011: 460)

He continues to say:

It is indeed through the enrichment of local languages that the majority of the people can be empowered by accessing information in such vital domains as health, agriculture and environmental protection and thus become genuine actors in the determination of their destiny (p. 460).

In response to those who, after the circular on the use of mother tongues as the media of instruction in Kenyan schools were critical of the policy, Joseph Othieno published a very informative article in a local daily. He observed that:

In the education realm, it is a fact that pupils perform better when the language of instruction is familiar to them as it greatly improves the quantity and quality of information transmission. Countless researches have confirmed this and many countries in Africa have indeed piloted and implemented the use of vernacular languages as vehicles for transmission of knowledge in the lower classes. Pedagogy has it that for early learning to be effective, the teacher must start at a point familiar to the pupil. In a rural setting, what is more familiar to the child than his/her Language (Othieno, 2014:10)

Othieno then went on to support the views by giving, as an example, a case in Burkina Faso which, he stated, was published and widely disseminated by the World Bank with a view to stressing the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge in all development programmes in the Third World.

Alarmed by the high levels of illiteracy in the Nomgana community, a non-governmental organization, in collaboration with the Government and a university professor, developed a primary school curriculum in Moore, the local language. Primary school children were taught school subjects in Moore rather than in French. Indeed, Moore was also used as the medium of instruction for French. As it turned out, pupils taught in Moore performed better in the standardised examinations than those who were taught in French in the conventional curriculum.

Using Moore as the medium of instruction was exceptionally beneficial to the children. Not only did they perform better in the examinations but they also completed their syllabus in four years instead of the conventional six years. Particularly interesting, the pupils using Moore as the medium of instruction developed better skills in the French language than their counterparts who had used French as the medium of instruction, (Othieno, 2014).

6. USE OF MOTHER TONGUES AND THE FEAR OF THE CANCER OF NEGATIVE ETHNICITY

Some people have argued that introducing mother tongues as media of instruction in Kenya will worsen the problem of negative ethnicity. It would be prudent, they advise, to formulate policies that would help make Kenyans more homogenous. They claim that the policy of using mother tongues in the early classes of primary education contradicts the national government's commitment to promoting national unity and cohesion.

In a country where politics is driven not by issues but by politicians' selfish interests, in a country where there is ethnic suspicion and, sometimes, outright ill-feeling, in a country where politicians excite ethnic passions to secure votes, and in a country where we have had recurrent politically-engineered clashes christened "tribal clashes", we cannot fail to appreciate the concerns and apprehension of those who consider our indigenous languages as a threat to national integration and cohesion.

I sympathise with those who oppose mother tongues as media of instruction on the fear that they will threaten national unity. However, their arguments are not valid. Our mother tongues do not promote hatred or disunity among Kenyans. Speaking an ethnic language among the members of the same ethnic group in single-ethnic-group situations does not promote negative ethnicity. What promotes negative ethnicity and undermines national unity and cohesion are the scenarios, real or perceived, whereby some communities have allocated themselves more than their rightful share of national resources. Negative ethnicity stems from the unfair distribution of resources and opportunities. It is a product of people feeling, rightly or wrongly, that they have been discriminated against because they come from

Ethnic Group B rather than Ethnic Group A. Such discrimination hurts individuals and communities and leads to hard feelings against those communities known or perceived to have benefited unfairly from the resources that should be equitably shared.

The most effective way to fight negative ethnicity is not avoiding using our mother tongues and practicing other aspects of our ethnic cultures. The way forward is to resolve the abominable reality whereby political power is used to the advantage of some groups and the disadvantage of others. An issue-based politics, which is currently lacking in the country, would address such pertinent issues and bring about a culture of harmonious co-existence among Kenyans of different ethnic groups, the fact that they respect their languages notwithstanding.

7. CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE POLICY ON THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUES AS THE MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION

Among the challenges of using mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal education in Kenya is the perception that the languages are not equal to the task. This perception is founded on ignorance of the power of mother tongues. Research has shown that not only are mother tongues good for that role, they are actually the best vehicles for the purpose. Using them for the role enables the pupils to get better benefits than they can get when the English language is used as medium of instruction in the lower levels of formal education in Kenya.

Another challenge to the implementation of the policy is that the general public does not own it partly due to poor communication strategies by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The Ministry has never bothered, now or in the past, to engage stakeholders in education such as teachers, parents, education sector labour unions, politicians and religious and community leaders in decision-making. The result has been lack of public ownership of some of the Ministry's decisions including directives on language use in schools.

It has been pointed out, and correctly so, that there is not adequate teaching materials with regard to mother tongues (UNESCO, 1968). This is an issue that need not be belaboured. There are still languages that do not even have a writing system or orthography. Consequently, there are no written materials in the languages. Children being taught in such languages would not have class readers and other materials to support their learning.

It has also been pointed out (for instance, in the Bassey Report, 1972), that the country lacks teachers adequately trained in mother tongue teaching methodologies to effectively actualize the policy of using mother tongues as media of instruction.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

We strongly recommend the use of mother tongues as the media of instruction in Kenya as well as in other African countries. That would be the right decision for the child, the community and the nation. However, as we have seen above, there are challenges to the successful implementation of such a policy. These challenges can and should be addressed to make it possible to use mother tongues as the media of instruction.

One of the challenges mentioned above is the perception by the parents and, indeed, by the general public that mother tongues do not have the capacity to function as media of instruction in schools. To counter this wrong perception, there is need to educate the public on the issue. To this end, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology could organize open fora across the country for language experts to share their views with the public. Since running the lower levels of education has been devolved to the county governments, the Ministry could partner with the governments in conducting mass education to correct the wrong perception on mother tongues. Such fora would not only go a long way in educating the public on the intrinsic value of using mother tongues as media of education but would also give the various stakeholders a sense of ownership of the policy.

There is no doubt that lack of learning materials in mother tongues is a real challenge in the country. However, the challenge can be overcome. There are many people in the country who, with guidance from the curriculum developers and language experts, can create the materials for use in all mother tongue zones in the country. Furthermore, with the county governments' commitment to buy the materials, book publishers would be happy to publish the materials.

Related to the lack of materials to be used by learners and teachers in the lower levels of education, is the issue of unavailability of finances to support the production of the materials. However, besides the funding of the production of the materials by the national government, county governments could be called upon to financially support the production of such materials. After all, basic education is one of the devolved public service sectors and, therefore, such expenditure by the county governments would be within their constitutional mandate and obligations.

Finally, there is the challenge of lack of teachers trained in mother tongue teaching methodologies. This challenge can be addressed through in-service training of teachers as well as by making changes to the current primary schools teachers training curriculum to include methodologies in the use of mother tongues as media of instruction. True, in-service training of teachers would require funding. The suggestions I have made above for the funding of the production of teaching materials are equally valid for the financing of in-service training of teachers. In other words, a partnership

between the national and county governments would be the right approach to financing the in-service training of teachers.

9. CONCLUSION

I have argued that using mother tongues as the media of instruction in early primary education in Kenya is the best option for the child and the country. In my argument, I have adduced evidence from scientific research that clearly favours a policy of using mother tongues as the media of instruction in lower levels of formal learning. However, I have also acknowledged the concerns and challenges on the implementation of the policy. Such concerns and challenges cannot be wished away. Luckily, they are not insurmountable. They can be adequately addressed. All that it takes to surmount them is firm commitment, informed planning and adequate funding by both the national and county governments, as well as proper coordination between the two levels of the devolved system of government.

In a nutshell, there is nothing wrong with the policy per se. There are only challenges in its implementation. Consequently, rejecting the policy should not be an option. To do so is tantamount to not only placing an obstacle on children's learning but also violating a children's right. In 2000, writers and scholars from all the parts of Africa gathered in Asmara, Eritrea, for an important conference titled, "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century". At the end of the Conference, the participants made The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures. Article 5 of the Declaration states that all African children have the inalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Implementing a mother tongue medium of instruction policy would be in line with the Asmara pan-African resolution.

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