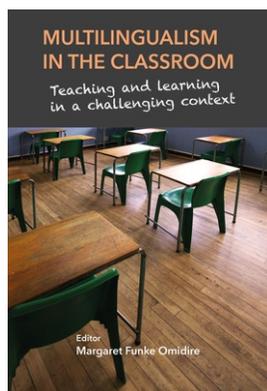


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Multilingualism in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning in a Challenging Context

Margaret Funke Omidire (Ed.), Cape Town, South Africa: UCT Press, 2019. 256pp. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-1775822691

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Multilingualism in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning in a Challenging Context holistically explores the linguistic landscape in the educational context of South Africa. The authors ask the reader to rethink and reimagine what is possible for South African classrooms across nine provinces. Central to the book is the idea that existing policies and instructional practices do not reflect language realities and stand in stark contrast to research and literature in the field of multilingual education. The edited volume includes original qualitative and quantitative research that furthers an understanding of the importance of language in the co-construction of knowledge.

The book is divided into three sections. Section I focuses on language teaching and learning challenges in multilingual contexts, outlining the historical legacy and policy challenges in South Africa. Section II discusses proactive interventions and support for learning and learner development in multilingual settings, including a myriad of pedagogical approaches and resources to address articulated complexities in multilingual classrooms, mostly at the primary school level. Section III parses legislative and policy frameworks guiding multilingualism in education settings, examining South Africa's language identity in light of a historical context of colonialism and related Othering. Overall, the book both recognizes how language is a site of evolving contestation for many, while at the same time offering ways to advocate for change.

The contributors are professionally affiliated with or were educated at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. All but two of the authors, who hold appointments at Pennsylvania State University, are from African-based educational organizations, the University of Namibia or the University of Zambia, grounding the book in the lived realities of South Africans. The book includes a list of acronyms to help readers not familiar with the educational context on the African continent and a map to navigate the linguistic landscape of Africa.

The book grounds a contextualized analysis through a lens of colonialism and critiques national educational policies that do not acknowledge the lived realities of many students. There are 11 official languages in South Africa, which creates linguistically diverse classrooms. Yet, while English is widely used in education, under 10% of the South African population use English at home. Further compounding the diversity is the grouping of internationally mobile workers and immigrants who speak a language other than the one used for instruction.

Policies shape practice. The research and writing throughout *Multilingualism in the Classroom* delves into issues around the historical confluence of language, colonialism, and power relations to determine how policies shape practice. Situated in debates around the value of multilingualism and monolingual bias in classrooms, the authors advocate for challenging the deficit view of language variance in education and adopting a positive view—that the rich diversity of linguistic identities and language competencies construct an inclusive, creative, and collaborative space that recognizes expanded terrains of possibility through the social co-construction of knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Multilingualism in the Classroom overwhelmingly advocates for using multilingual skills as resources and explores the integration of translanguaging into a pedagogical framework aimed at inclusivity. However, the authors do not obscure the real obstacles that educators may face by affirming linguistic identities and adopting a multilingual perspective. Schools and educators face a variety of challenges, evidenced by the sheer number of languages spoken, literacy rates, the established role of English in South African society, a shortage of multilingual educators, students who are not proficient in either the home language or language of instruction, and limited resources in home languages. Yet, the contributors offer insights into ways of rethinking the role of language in education and in identity development, which in turn can reshape the possibilities and boundaries imposed on educators and students. The authors inherently recognize that students come from varying cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds that color an understanding of the world, and therefore, envision schooling as preparation for democratic citizenship, the development of realistic cultural empathy, and sustained open-mindedness for civic engagement.

Key topics tackled in this book include assessments, differential instruction, teacher education, school culture, parental support, and funding, all of which are related to linguistic diversity. It is important to acknowledge that the authors not only tackle multilingualism in the classroom, but also do so with a holistic approach to language learning, including chapters that address the range of language abilities of students, including students with dyslexia or special needs.

While most authors advocate for not just bilingualism but also multilingualism, the chapters in the text outline the ongoing debate about whether instruction should be in the mother tongue, English, or another language. While some advocate for the use of native languages and the idea that the “curriculum should be used as a storage facility for national heritage” (p. 178), others contend that English, due to its ability to situate students as global citizens and to create opportunities for social mobility, should be the dominant language of instruction throughout the country.

When Dr. Margaret Funke Omidire, the book’s editor, was asked to share her vision for the book and why it was important to elaborate in such a multifaceted way on the issues that situate multilingualism in South African education, she responded by stating,

The complexities of issues surrounding language in education across sub-Saharan Africa continuously generates debates...While not denying that more research is required, I believe stakeholders should approach the use of multilingual strategies with open-mindedness and see the languages as assets/resources that can be used to enhance learning, given that the pupils/students benefit from this many ways.

It is evident from the collection of perspectives throughout the book that the authors recognize the challenges and complexities of multilingual classrooms, but more importantly acknowledge the adoption and adaptation of teaching approaches, technologies, and resources that drive and support the need for crafting inclusive learning spaces where students thrive. There are lessons learned that can be extrapolated from the book to help inform the ways in which educators around the globe rethink what is possible in multilingual classrooms.

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