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Making absences present: Language policy from below

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INTRODUCTION

The papers in this special issue '*Voicing participation: Linguistic citizenship beyond educational policy*' focus on the processes and practices of community engagement in rural schools in Maputo province, Mozambique. They show the ways in which voices and knowledges largely excluded from educational policy-making can be validated and legitimated.

Key to this task is the issue of language. Language worldwide is used as a mechanism of exclusion, tied into raciolinguistic hierarchies of value where speakers of certain languages or language varieties are marked as 'Other' 'ignorant, backward, inferior, local or particular, and unproductive or sterile' (Santos 2012: 52; Veronelli 2015). Often, their languages are considered incapable of carrying scientific knowledge. In post-colonial countries such as Mozambique, colonial ideologies of linguistic value have often been perpetuated in the interests of nation-building and national unity (Alexander 1997; Chimbutane 2018). Interestingly, this has led to a situation where African languages are constructed as vessels of the past (Houtondji 1997) or of the future, in the sense that promises are made to 'develop' these languages when resources are available, but, with the exception of KiSwahili perhaps, never of the present (see Stroud and Guissemo 2017). In contrast, colonial languages retain their potency as indexes of modernity and routes into global circuits of knowledge and resources.

A focus on educational transformation taking place in local languages beyond the gaze of education authorities, or considered by them to fall outside the frame of policy relevance, is thus essential to identifying and reconstituting absences in contemporary understandings of language planning and policy. This Special Issue continues the decolonial task of making such absences present: of bringing into the frame the linguistic and other knowledges traditionally excluded from educational policy and curricula, and pointing the way to more ethical and equitable forms of knowledge exchange among community members[1], learners, teachers, researchers, and state actors.

As Chimbutane (2018, this issue) points out, such processes bring into being forms of *linguistic citizenship* (e.g. Stroud 2001, 2018), a southern concept which offers a more equitable and inclusive framework than Linguistic Human Rights. Linguistic citizenship

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recognizes that speakers exert agency through a variety of semiotic means which go beyond those normatively considered appropriate for political or educational participation. It further promotes forms of engagement which 'open doors for respectful and deconstructive negotiations around language forms and practices' (Stroud 2018, 37).

POLICY FROM BELOW

The papers in this special issue illustrate several of the dilemmas posed by participatory policy processes, namely, the difficulties of reconciling multiple voices and interests and of challenging embedded ideologies of language and learning. As in any participatory process, collective potential is shot through with cultural, sociopolitical, historical and ideological factors which shape the boundaries of what is possible. Entrenched hierarchies that structure whose knowledge counts in schools affects the production of textbooks (Magona) as well as attempts to introduce constructivist pedagogies (Machalele) and to draw on community funds of knowledge (Cumbane). Chimbutane (2011) shows how similar initiatives in other parts of Mozambique had more positive outcomes owing to different entanglements of ideologies, histories, and resources.

In the same way, competing ideologies of language and multilingualism affect the degree to which transformation is possible. Ideologies of linguistic purity, of 'standard' language, and language authority which tend to be reflected in state educational provision and in the work of many NGOs, exclude forms that articulate alternative voices and interests (cf. Stroud 2001, 2018; Stroud & Heugh 2004). Such ideological positions are especially counter-productive when community members speak named languages or language varieties better than teachers, as in some of the schools investigated here. The absence of recognition of local speakers as bearers of linguistic and other knowledge means that communities are called upon for building infrastructure, school snacks, and the management of school resources, but not as agents in the conception and implementation of language-in-education policies. They may contribute technical terms in a particular language but are not widely consulted on language policy or curriculum and materials development.

Nevertheless, research findings show greater involvement of parents as epistemic resources and enhanced understandings of the value of local languages in education. As Silvestre Cumbane points out, this is not yet transformative in the sense of a redistribution of epistemic power between the community and the school. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that the community has and produces relevant knowledge for teaching and that the use of local languages strengthens the relationship between school and community.

POLICY FROM THE SOUTH

A second feature of the work represented in this issue is its location in contexts where multilingualism is unmarked, in contrast to most Northern sites where monolingualism is perceived as the default condition. Further, in postcolonial education systems which model themselves on colonial ones, multilingualism after the early grades is an absent presence, rendered illicit by hegemonic monolingual ideologies (e.g. Guzula et al. 2016; Probyn 2009, 2015).

A great value of these papers is their illumination of a context where

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multilingualism is made visible, a starting-point for reimagining education. Domingos Machalele's research, for example, supports emerging theories about how learning in multilingual contexts, where no-one learns languages in isolation from one another (Agnihotri 2014; Benson 2014; Heugh 2015, in press), differs from the understandings that underpin theories of language learning imported from the North. It also shows the challenges of importing pedagogies, even progressive ones, from other contexts without careful consideration of the factors that may work against it: lack of appropriate teacher education and in-service support, strong alternative ideologies of language and language-in-education, lack of multilingual resources (cf. Chimbutane and Benson 2012; Terra 2018). Similarly, Vasco Magona shows the need to break with traditional methods of textbook production and argues that textbook producers should incorporate local knowledge in the production of textbooks in African languages, especially through involvement of communities at different stages of book production, including design, terminology development, collection of local content and editing of the materials produced.

Both centring or 'unmarking multilingualism' (de Souza 2020) and reconfiguring processes of curriculum and textbook production to work from grassroots level begin the task of decolonizing education (cf. Bock 2020; Kerfoot 1993).

Further challenges facing this decolonial educational agenda include the need to extend bilingual education beyond Grade 3. It is now widely accepted that a solid foundation in a familiar language is an essential foundation for educational success (e.g. Ouane & Glanz 2011; Lo Bianco 2016). Moreover, the longer children are able to learn through a familiar language, the greater their chance of success (Bamgbose 2000; Heugh et al. 2011; Taylor & von Fintel 2016). Long experience in South Africa and elsewhere has shown the deleterious consequences of an abrupt transition to a language of learning in which neither students nor, often, their teachers are proficient (Brock-Utne 2007; Collier & Thomas 2004; Desai et al. 2010; MacDonald 1990). These consequences are exacerbated in poorly resourced contexts. Ending bilingual education at Grade 3 also perpetuates colonial ideologies of indigenous languages as incapable of carrying scientific discourses.

A second issue is that of standardisation. The history of colonial inventions and impositions make this a complex and sensitive debate (Banda 2009; Makoni & Pennycook 2007; Heugh & Stroud 2020; Stroud & Kerfoot 2020). While standardisation may be important at a certain point in a country's political and economic development, either for nation-building or due to economic constraints, it is an arbitrary process carried out by those in power and almost always excludes certain speakers from representation. The question now is: do we need standardisation? What would happen if we allowed learners to make meaning in any language or language variety in their repertoire? What would be the effects on learning and engagement? World-renowned writers such as Mia Couto experimented with non-standard forms of Portuguese.[2] Shakespeare invented new words. What price is paid in learning and creativity by excluding variation? If the emphasis is shifted from pure grammar to making meaning, what may flourish? It is important to note that this shift in the forms of language considered legitimate for learning does

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not exclude acquisition of the 'standard' form of a national or official language such as Portuguese in Mozambique. Both goals form part of an agenda driven by 'functional multilingualism' (Heugh 1995, 1999; Heugh & Stroud 2020; Van Avermaet et al. 2017)

Even ten years ago, such questions were unthinkable: learning materials or textbooks in every variety would have been economically and practically unfeasible. However technological advances may make this possible, even in very remote areas, very soon. Digital projects such as the African Storybook offer free online, multimodal, mobile- and teacher-friendly access to stories that speak to the experiences of young African children, particularly in rural and peri-urban contexts where the shortage of material for early reading in a familiar language is felt most acutely (https://www.africanstorybook.org/). This project currently offers 1399 stories in 209 languages with 6328 translations, including Xitswa in Mozambique. Teachers, parents or learners are free to download and translate stories into any language; the translation can then be uploaded for others. Stories can be printed or projected on to a wall from a mobile phone. A recent development is early literacy materials on the same site. This project demonstrates the potential for changing the paths along which knowledge flows, reversing the normalized North-South trajectory (Stranger-Johannessen et al. 2018; also Reed & Tembe 2016) and making all languages or varieties present in the literacy practices of their speakers. Other possibilities include working with Google to have more African languages present in the Translate function (Sesotho, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, KiSwahili, Somali, and Kinyarwanda are currently available) and bringing experts and community members together in virtual online spaces to develop scientific terms (Maseko et al. 2010).

Translation is thus a key task in reconstituting absences in knowledges. Translation 'brings to view the epistemic borders where a politics of visibility is at play between erasure and visibility, disdain and recognition' (Vázquez 2011, 27). Under colonialism, translation rendered invisible everything that did not fit into the 'parameters of legibility' of modernity's epistemic territory, thereby laying the basis for claims to the universality of European knowledge (Vázquez 2011, 27). Only 'forms of indigenous knowledge that could be written down, lexicalized and articulated discursively in ways that made sense to missionary linguists, were accommodated in colonial languages' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2020, 25). For Vázquez, this form of translation as erasure can be contrasted with translation as plurality, a political strategy promoted by Santos (2006, 2014) to work towards mutual intelligibility and the recognition of knowledges that have been erased or excluded. The aim of translation between knowledges is thus to create cognitive justice (Santos 2014).

In this way, translation as plurality carries forward a process of 'transknowledging' or the two-way exchange of knowledge (Heugh in press, Heugh & Mohamed 2020) as part of an ethical relationship necessary in relating to epistemic difference (Stroud & Kerfoot 2020). To translate is thus 'to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocality—the essential similarity—between what the Other and what We are saying', even when total mutual illegibility is not possible (Vivieros de Castro 2004: 10).

Creating decolonial bi- or multilingual education is therefore not

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simply a policy or linguistic issue, but an epistemic one, requiring careful listening to negotiate the 'radically different conceptions of language and writing and their relationships to knowledge' (de Souza 2017, 192-93) on the part of indigenous communities, on one hand, and of mainstream policy-makers, researchers, NGOs, and other educational agents, on the other. In this regard, Liu (1995, 1) suggests consideration of 'in whose terms, for which linguistic constituency, and in the name of what kinds of knowledge or intellectual authority does one perform acts of translation between cultures?'

CONCLUSION

The process of knowledge production illustrated in this Special Issue is exemplary in its modelling of democratic participation in educational change: the wide range of stakeholders involved from the outset, the participatory processes of investigation, and the opening of findings and preliminary interpretations to interrogation by stakeholders. This process enables an interrogation of whose knowledges and whose definitions of language can count in constructing new paths of meaning-making.

Moreover in its southern, non-hegemonic location, it is able to initiate a critical strategy to interrupt coloniality, the racialized patterns of power and prescriptions of value that survive colonialism (Quijano 2000). In bringing together different 'kinds of present as experienced by different social actors' (Santos 2014, 234), the project enlarges our understanding of how research can contribute to changing the structures of the ownership and production of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize a critical stance that 'even as it subjects the present to the critical evaluation from past perspectives, retains in the evaluation of the past the critical perspectives afforded by modernity' (de Souza 2005, 725, following Dirlik 1996). Perspectives on knowledge as partial and constantly changing make space both for previously invisibilized or excluded knowledges and for plurality, dynamism, and transgression (see further Mkhize 2016; Nyamnjoh 2012).

The project which gave rise to this special issue emphasizes the crucial importance of 'policy from below', the need to actively involve communities in developing and administering the bilingual education programmes (Stroud 2002). Here too disciplinary innovation in research funding is critical (Openjuru 2015): the need for funders to look beyond established paradigms of language learning, language rights and citizenship to research which seeks to interrupt coloniality and build on emergent processes. These processes can begin to make absences in knowledge, representation, and theory present.

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(ENDNOTES)

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2. Gujit and Shah (1998), among others, have pointed out the importance of seeing 'community' as a living and contested entity rather than an unproblematic and clearly bounded social category. Makoni and Pennycook (2007) make the same point about 'language'.
3. I thank Chris Stroud for this reminder.

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