



From Unlearning to Relearning: Practitioners' Integration of Children's Indigenous Knowledge for Language Development in Contemporary Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been a part of South African culture for generations. However, due to Eurocentric views that deemed them inferior to Western knowledge, the education system has largely overlooked them. As a result, literacy was primarily associated with formal schooling, while home-based literacy practices were marginalized. This study set out to explore how early childhood practitioners incorporate children's IKS which depend heavily on oral and hands-on transmission into language development in preschools. The research involved three multilingual preschools in a Gauteng township, with fifty children and six practitioners participating. Using site visits, observations, field notes, audio recordings, and informal conversations, the study gathered qualitative data, guided by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. Analysis revealed inconsistent and informal use of children's IKS, with educators selectively drawing on cultural knowledge and predominantly recognizing only the most widely spoken languages. This sidelined children from minority linguistic backgrounds. The study concluded that purposeful integration of IKS is an effective teaching strategy in preschools, helping children engage in multiple languages, revitalize marginalized tongues, and embrace their dynamic multilingual identities. The research coincided with a period of major reform in South Africa's early childhood education sector, which is moving toward greater professionalization. As universities now offer training modules like Resource Development for Early Childhood Educators, practitioners are becoming better equipped to integrate IKS into multilingual teaching by creating and using culturally relevant materials.

Keywords: Early childhood education; Indigenous knowledge skills; Practitioners; Preschools; Teaching strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to alleged linguistic disparities, there has long been overt racial and ethnic segregation in South Africa (Nkadimeng & Makalela, 2015). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to debate language

without bringing up this aspect of the country's past and the ongoing effects it has on South Africa today.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the Cape Colony in 1652, children of indigenous peoples learned in various methods. Early on, the child's education was primarily in the hands of the child's biological mother and the community. The mother and the extended family were the primary sources of language learning. For the most part, language learning happened orally through folklore-like folktales, songs, rhymes, riddles, proverbs, legends and myths, which were of cultural, educational and entertainment value (Letseka, Wiebesiek-Pienaar & Meyiwa, 2013).

Furthermore, even later on, under the apartheid regime, that is, pre-1994 democracy, South African indigenous languages were relegated to a lower status, while Afrikaans and English were elevated to a higher status. Kamusella and Ndhlovu (2018) argue that the ultimate goal of this was to use language as a political tool, to liquidate the indigenous peoples' own religions and beliefs, to deprive them of their heritage to make them pliable to white dominance.

Preschoolers are at a critical juncture in their language development, and early childhood educators have a big part to play in helping them become more linguistically competent. (Hélot & Fialais, 2014). Research has also proven that, since all children only learn the language they hear, the learner's environment has a direct impact on language acquisition. (Chaparro-Moreno et al., 2019).

Obiweluozo & Melefa (2014), claim that only the first seven years of life are suitable for the effective acquisition of some learning skills, such as language. They continue by saying that practitioners would be smart to take use of the unique chance that comes only once in a child's life and for a brief period of time when the child has an extraordinary capacity for language acquisition.

Kirsch (2021) suggests that practitioners establish a dynamic, linguistically and culturally sensitive learning environment that gives children a variety of opportunities to be exposed to language and encourages them to speak, in order to support language development. Practitioners can achieve this through activities such as storytelling, shared book reading and fantasy play (Charlesworth, 2016; McGee & Richgels, 2012).

As a part of a larger study into practitioners' experiences of supporting language development of multilingual children, the purpose of this article was to respond to the following enquiry: In what ways are practitioners using children's indigenous knowledge skills to support language development in contemporary preschool classrooms?

Msila & Gumbo (2017) believe that a child's early language development and the acquisition of cognitive, linguistic, and social abilities that underpin later development are greatly influenced by both parents. The authors continue by emphasizing the importance of parental language input, urging parents to converse with their young children, encourage talkativeness, and offer targeted language stimulation and feedback. This suggests that parental influences on language development are important, so practitioners should be aware of this and collaborate with parents to assist language development in the classroom. One way this can be achieved, is to apply Epstein's (2001) parental involvement theory, which offers strategies for practicing shared responsibility between the home and the school. The author argues that shared responsibilities are possible through coordination, cooperation and complementarity of schools and families (Epstein, 2001). Furthermore, practitioners can tap into funds of knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems that the children bring with them into the preschools from home.

To effectively support children's cognitive and first language development, practitioners must be trained and skilled in techniques such as storytelling, using rhymes, and singing songs. Research highlights the crucial role of language development during the early years (Mphahlele, 2019; Law, 2015; DBE, 2015).

The focus of this paper is practitioners' use of indigenous knowledge skills to support the language development of children in the birth-to-five age group. In this age group, most of what the children are learning is still delivered orally by the practitioners. As indicated earlier, IKS are highly reliant on oral transmission. Following is a discussion of some of these strategies.

Folktales are traditional oral narratives in which legends, proverbs, music, jokes and stories about a particular culture or social group of people are captured (Shoniwa 2013). Folktales are interactive because they take place in a particular setting with an audience and a performer interacting. These

discourses, with several voices, provide a solid basis for critical literacy skills like reading, writing, creative thinking, meaning making, and voice expression. As children make sense of the stories, they also impart virtues like understanding, empathy, and appreciation. (Folk Tales: Definition, Characteristics, Types & Examples, 2015). In the preschool classroom, these same values can be strengthened by engaging in discussions, responding to reading activities, repeating concepts, analyzing the story's structure, solving problems, role-playing, and evaluating and summarizing stories. (Ntuli, 2013). According to Mweli (2018), the reason for telling stories is to equip siblings with skills and behaviours needed to survive and to sustain their lives within their environment. Using storytelling in the preschool setting is a valuable teaching and learning strategy that will help foster language development and in-depth comprehension.

Kalinde & Vermeulen (2016) posit that language acquisition is influenced by children's active engagement in musical activities, which they acquire in their own culture through enculturation and socialization from friends, family, and the wider society.

One of the main characteristics of songs is repetition. According to Cotton (2011), songs often feature repetitive, predictable, and memorable structures that play a key role in supporting language learning and enhancing literacy skills. Cotton continues by saying that singing songs offers a special kind of language immersion since it allows for repeated language practice without seeming taxing. This results in children learning in an enjoyable and casual manner. Singing is introduced to children long before they are born. It begins throughout the mother's pregnancy, during feeding, during lulling the kid to sleep, and when changing the nappy (Partanen, Kujala, Tervaniemi & Huotilainen, 2013). Furthermore, music and dance are part and parcel of black African culture (Madiba, 2013).

Mkhombo (2019) argues that education must be integrated with a child's real life if it is to be effective, and the curriculum must simultaneously be child-centred and reflect real-world circumstances. Practitioners narrating folktales with songs and inviting preschoolers to join in on repetitious verses, should be some of the common practices that support language development in children. Practitioners can also teach nursery rhymes to the children. Furthermore, Mkhombo (2019) argues that the singing of African indigenous music not only helps children appreciate and embrace the values of black consciousness but also helps them stand on their own and not feel inferior to anyone. It fosters self-identity, which is essential for understanding and valuing one's native tongue.

According to NAEYC (2018), play is a key method through which young children develop vital knowledge and skills. Critical thinking, mathematical abilities, physical growth, healthy living, and proficiency in the native language are all enhanced by the usage of indigenous games. (Mweli, 2018). This can be in the form of Diketo and Morababa which involves mathematical skills such as counting, and Khathu, which involves running and dodging a ball while stacking cans.



Picture 1: Children playing Diketo (Adapted from Jensen et.al, 2019)

Looking at the IKS strategies above, one can conclude that they worked in the past, and they can work in the present and still have relevance in the modern-day preschool classroom. Ntuli (2013) asserts that, when it comes to education, folktales and traditional songs, which are integral to folklore and

indigenous knowledge, serve as valuable tools for teaching and learning language and literacy skills.

Social engagement with others, especially those with greater skill, advances children's cognitive development is the central claim of Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, Vygotsky thought that children actively create knowledge, and that social learning precedes cognitive development. Vygotsky focuses on language because of the importance of language in learning. According to Rose, Feldman & Jankowski (2009), it has long been clear that language learning for children depends on social interactions. For the teaching and learning of language, Vygotsky's theory proposes that the importance of adult - teachers, caregivers and parents - involvement and support in the development of language concepts should be emphasised.

Parents and teachers must provide children with ample opportunities for language-learning activities. For instance, when feeding their children or singing nursery rhymes in the home language during bath time, parents can teach them language, without it seeming like a chore. According to Mphahlele (2019), learning occurs on two levels, first through social interaction and subsequent integration into the individual's mental framework. The author makes the case that when learners and teachers read aloud from a story book, they are doing so in a social setting with other learners. By talking with the children in their care during morning circle time, singing nursery rhymes and songs in the target language, telling stories and listening to them, reading books, and other activities, practitioners can help the development of language.

Vygotsky's theory focuses on social interaction between a child and his/her peers, a child and older children, as well as a child and adults. Vocabulary is expanded when practitioners interact with learners and learners interact with one another. Charlesworth (2016) states that Vygotsky's view on education was that it is not only central to cognitive development but that it is also the core sociocultural activity of humans.

There are two main principles that underpin Vygotsky's theory on cognitive and language development: the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Following is a discussion of these two main principles that underpin Vygotsky's theory and the implications they have for practitioners' support of language development of children, through the use of IKS.

In Vygotsky's view, a child's social connection with more knowledgeable others - agents such as teachers, adults and peers - is a major source of learning. (Abtahi, Graven & Lerman, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). Through scaffolding - a teaching strategy that helps children learn more by collaborating with a teacher or a more experienced student to accomplish their learning objectives - the tutor may verbally advise the child and/or model behaviours. (Brunner, 1976). Teachers have been recognised as critical agents of effective educational change. In this study, the practitioners would be the more knowledgeable others (MKOs), using IKS to support the development of language of the children through scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Charlesworth, 2016).

Vygotsky's theory of language development focused on social learning and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is a level of development obtained when children engage in social interactions with others; it is the distance between a child's potential to learn and the actual learning that takes place" (Vygotsky, 1978; Charlesworth, 2016; Mahan, 2022: 68).

As teaching and learning in a preschool still occurs mostly orally, practitioners are presented with ample teachable moments through which they can support the language development of the learners by providing them with correct terminology and helping them with correct vocabulary. This can happen through a variety of activities such as getting learners to act out a fable that the practitioner would have read and discussed with them prior. According to the NCF (2015), children listen to the sounds of adults around them, and then copy and imitate the way in which the words are spoken or said. Practitioners as the knowledgeable others can also use indigenous knowledge skills as tools to promote the development of language skills of children.

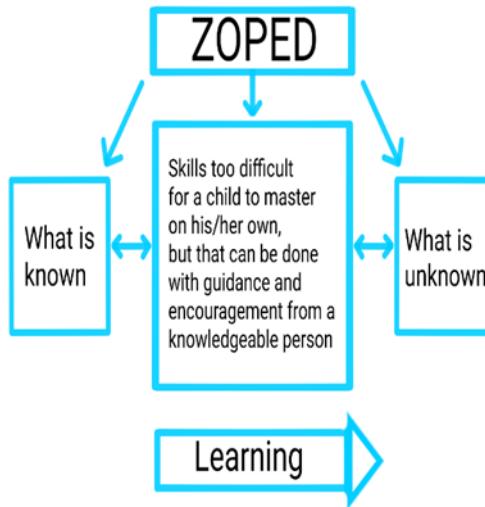


Figure 1: ZPD and scaffolding (adapted from Mcleod, 2019)

RESEARCH METHODS

This study sought to examine practitioners' utilization of children's indigenous knowledge skills as a tool for language development in contemporary preschool classrooms. This was done using a qualitative approach which was conducted using the social constructivism paradigm, where the researcher often addresses the "processes" of interaction among individuals, while also focusing on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants (Creswell & Poth 2018:24).

Research Target/Subject

Three preschools with two practitioners each and fifty preschoolers from multilingual backgrounds participated in the study. A total of Fifty-six participants, comprising of six practitioners and fifty preschoolers were selected. The target was a limited population, and hence not a representation of all multilingual preschools in the province of Gauteng province.

The participants were intentionally selected because I, as the researcher, having been exposed to and benefitting from IKS models of teaching in multilingual schooling in primary and high school, had an interest in finding out if IKS models would be a useful tool for practitioners, in their quest to develop the language of the children in their preschool classrooms. The contact persons at the sites were given a letter of consent from the institution, as well as a written declaration outlining the protocols for safeguarding the rights of human subjects.

According to Creswell (2014) purposeful sampling helps in identifying participants who might provide insights into the research question and contribute something to the analysis. It is for that reason that purposeful sampling was used in this study. The rationale for using purposeful sampling was to guarantee the credibility of the results by identifying and selecting participants that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). in this case, as well as to explore if practitioners leveraging preschoolers' IKS would be a helpful strategy in language development amongst multilingual children.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

Observations, casual conversations, recordings and field notes were the data collection tools employed to evaluate words, create a comprehensive, intricate image, and provide in-depth information on

the opinions of the participants. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the authors posit that viewing events from the viewpoint of the subjects - their thoughts and worldview - is the fundamental component of qualitative research.

Data analysis technique

The qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyse the data, which was gathered using a variety of techniques, including observations, casual conversations, field notes and recordings. Content data analysis strategies were utilized in this article which, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is a method of systematically examining and interpreting textual data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within a body of text, often used to analyze documents, interviews, or other qualitative sources to understand the underlying concepts and perspectives present in the data.

The data was analysed using the approach of Macmillan & Schumacher (2014), which states that data analysis is rigorous and not separated from the data collection process, and that several analyses are done during data collection. An interim analysis, which serves the purposes of making data collection decisions and identifying recurring topics, was also performed. A coding system was developed from the data, whereby the data was divided into parts and the parts were studied to get a sense of the whole. Codes were generated from the data and then compared for duplication. After grouping related codes, the following themes emerged, forming the basis of this article:

1. Children's multiple home languages vs. practitioners' home languages; whose indigenous knowledge skills?
2. Marginalization of children from less prominent ethno-linguistic backgrounds.
3. Practitioners' perspectives on the importance of supporting children's language development, using their (children's) indigenous knowledge skills.

Cross-validation between the field notes, recordings, casual talks, and observations was done using the triangulation method to increase validity. This was accomplished by providing an explanation of the information gathered via observations and supporting it with information from informal discussions, field notes, and recordings. The target was a limited population, and hence not a representation of all multilingual preschools in the province of Gauteng province.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion presented in this section aim to illuminate the complex interplay between language, culture, and pedagogy in multilingual early childhood education settings in South Africa. Grounded in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, the findings reveal how practitioners and children navigate linguistic diversity within preschool environments shaped by historical segregation and contemporary migration. The analysis focuses on three interrelated themes: the alignment and mismatch between children's and practitioners' home languages and its influence on indigenous knowledge transmission; the marginalisation experienced by children from less dominant ethno-linguistic backgrounds; and the practitioners' perspectives on supporting children's language development through indigenous knowledge. Together, these findings demonstrate that language serves both as a bridge facilitating learning and as a barrier reinforcing inequality, depending on how it is mediated within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The subsequent discussion situates these dynamics within South Africa's evolving sociolinguistic landscape, drawing attention to the pedagogical implications, challenges, and opportunities that multilingualism presents for inclusive and culturally responsive early education.

Result

Children's multiple home languages vs. practitioners' home languages; whose indigenous knowledge skills?

These findings underscore the pivotal role of language as both a bridge and a barrier in early childhood education within multilingual contexts. In line with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, the practitioners' efforts to scaffold indigenous knowledge are shaped by their positions as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), who must adapt their strategies to each child's linguistic repertoire. The

variability in shared language competency directly impacts the effectiveness of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), complicating knowledge transfer and cultural identity formation. Rather than functioning within a stable linguistic environment, practitioners are compelled to act as linguistic negotiators, dynamically choosing or blending languages to maintain each child's cognitive engagement and access to indigenous knowledge. This reality illustrates not only the linguistic richness of the learning space, but also the urgent need for pedagogical frameworks that recognize and support the complex interplay between multilingualism, cultural preservation, and guided learning.

Marginalization of children from less prominent ethno-linguistic backgrounds

The findings of this study reveal a marked imbalance in social interactions among preschool children, where those speaking widely used local languages such as isiZulu, Sepedi, and Setswana tended to dominate peer dynamics. Children from less prevalent ethno-linguistic backgrounds were frequently sidelined in these social exchanges, primarily due to their limited linguistic capital. Interpreted through Vygotsky's socio-cultural framework, this dynamic significantly impedes the role of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), whether enacted by educators or more linguistically dominant peers. Instead of guiding all learners equitably within their respective Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), these MKOs inadvertently restricted access for certain children by relying exclusively on dominant languages. As a result, those from marginalized linguistic backgrounds were often excluded from crucial learning interactions that would have fostered cognitive growth through social mediation. This underscores the need for intentional, linguistically inclusive pedagogies that empower all children to engage meaningfully within their ZPDs, ensuring that language becomes a tool for learning rather than a barrier to it (Roth, 2019; Stroud, 2018).

Practitioners' perspectives on the importance of supporting children's language development, using their (children's) indigenous knowledge skills

The study found that while practitioners were committed to fostering the development of children's languages through indigenous knowledge skills, they encountered significant challenges due to the linguistic diversity in their classrooms. Children brought a range of home languages some of which differed from the practitioners' own—which complicated efforts to provide consistent and effective language support. Framed through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this challenge directly impacts the role of the practitioner as a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Although practitioners endeavoured to scaffold language development, their ability to do so was limited when the linguistic foundation of the learner fell outside their own proficiency (Cindi, 2021). This mismatch hindered the optimal interaction within each child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where language mediation is most effective. Consequently, the effort to support language development through the use of indigenous knowledge skills became a delicate balancing act between intent and capacity, reinforcing the need for institutional support structures, collaborative strategies, and inclusive pedagogies that empower practitioners to function as effective MKOs across diverse linguistic contexts.

Discussion

South Africa's history of apparent racial and ethnic segregation has long been intertwined with purported linguistic differences, creating a sociolinguistic landscape that is both politically charged and historically contingent (Mahan, 2021; Nkadiimeng & Makalela, 2015). During and after apartheid, language policies and social practices frequently functioned to demarcate social groups and to reproduce inequalities; these legacies continue to inform contemporary attitudes toward language use in public domains. Over the past three decades, patterns of labour migration—both from neighbouring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries and internally between provinces—have further complicated this linguistic terrain by introducing a wider range of languages and dialects into urban and peri-urban settings. Consequently, multilingualism in South Africa today is not merely a static demographic fact but a dynamic process shaped by historical stratification, migration flows, and evolving social needs.

The proliferation of preschools in peri-urban areas, villages, townships, and informal settlements emerged in part as a pragmatic response to changing labour patterns: as parents entered the workforce or

migrated for employment, the need for reliable childcare and early-education provision intensified. These grassroots educational spaces—often initiated by community members or small-scale entrepreneurs—have become critical sites where multilingual realities are negotiated on a daily basis. The arrival of families from neighbouring countries and other South African provinces injected additional linguistic diversity into these settings, creating both rich possibilities for intercultural exchange and considerable pedagogical complexity for early childhood practitioners (Ferreira-Meyers & Horne, 2017).

For children whose ethno-linguistic backgrounds are numerically or socially marginalised, the multilingual turn has not uniformly translated into advantage; rather, many of these children face concrete language and communication barriers in early educational contexts. Being taught in languages that are not their home language often limits access to cognitively demanding aspects of the curriculum and can diminish participation, comprehension, and confidence. Simultaneously, the relegation of less commonly spoken home languages to the private sphere—while promoting more widely used languages in school and community life produces an asymmetry in linguistic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of cultural capital, language functions as a resource that mediates access to social and economic opportunity; when children lack command of the socially privileged linguistic codes, their ability to benefit from educational provision is constrained.

In response to these realities, many practitioners in multilingual preschool settings have adopted pragmatic strategies such as code-switching, translanguaging, and the selective use of multiple African languages to scaffold instruction and to ensure conceptual access for learners (Daries, 2017; Hornberger & Link, 2012). These pedagogical practices are not merely instrumental; when thoughtfully applied, they can validate children's linguistic repertoires, support meaning-making, and create bridges between home and school knowledge systems. Moreover, when teachers actively learn about and incorporate children's home languages and cultural practices into the classroom, they create conditions for reciprocal learning: educators expand their linguistic and cultural repertoires while children experience recognition and pedagogical continuity that strengthens learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, the successful implementation of multilingual pedagogies depends on broader systemic supports, including teacher education, curriculum flexibility, material resources, and policy frameworks that recognise linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit. Professional development that equips practitioners with skills in translanguaging pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and community engagement is essential. At the policy level, acknowledging and resourcing the linguistic plurality of preschools especially in under-resourced peri-urban and rural contexts would help to redress historical inequities and to maximise the educational potential inherent in South Africa's multilingual realities.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that indigenous knowledge skills are a potent pedagogical resource for promoting emergent literacy, critical thinking, and learner engagement, particularly when children's home languages are respected and systematically incorporated into classroom practice (Ntuli, 2013). However, practitioners frequently lack the linguistic alignment and institutional support needed to mediate learning effectively for children whose home languages differ from their own. Accordingly, there is an urgent policy imperative to strengthen teacher preparation through language policy aligned modules, multilingual pedagogy certifications, and sustained in-service training—and to develop accessible, culturally grounded multilingual materials. Partnerships with community language mentors and elders should be formalised to ensure authenticity, while monitoring mechanisms and ongoing professional development can help sustain reflective, evidence-informed practice.

At the classroom level, pragmatic, culturally situated strategies can scaffold language development and bridge home school divides: storytelling with local folktales, songs and chants to build phonological awareness, cultural role-play for contextualised discourse, naming of local objects to expand descriptive vocabulary, elder-led oral traditions, and bilingual or multilingual literacy materials to link spoken and

written forms. Implemented together, these measures enable practitioners to act as effective More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) within each child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), making early learning both culturally resonant and more equitably accessible.

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