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English-only Language-in-Education Policy in multilingual classrooms in Ghana

The paper draws on classroom observations, interviews and focus group discussion data with teachers, educational authorities and pupils to unveil the problems associated with the English-only language-in-education policy introduced in Ghana in 2002. The paper considers key issues which impinge on literacy development in multilingual classrooms in post colonial Africa, in particular, the difficulties in transforming education to include the use of a more appropriate (mother tongue) medium of instruction and adequate teaching techniques, and in developing culture-specific curriculum content. It discusses the ‘deficit’ hypothesis; the perception that being or becoming bilingual is a problem and a disadvantage to learning, and language and literacy development. The discussion focuses on uninformed attitudes towards mother tongue/bilingual education on the part of key stakeholders in Africa, western experts’ negative attitudes regarding African languages, and the misguided view that in a multilingual society such as Ghana, the safest way of achieving national unity is through the use of a neutral language. Further, the paper discusses the challenge of changing attitudes and practices, in particular, widening teachers’ knowledge base to appreciate the different frameworks for thinking about literacy, and to understand the relationships between the four core language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and learning. Finally, the paper examines the implications of these challenges and the prospects for teaching and learning literacy in multilingual classrooms in Ghana.