Decolonising language policy: Towards an inclusive multilingual education

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40% of the global population do not have access to education in a language they speak or understand (UNESCO 2016:1). The causes of this are multi-faceted, however the role of colonialism in the emergence – and continued imposition – of exclusionary policies and practices cannot be overlooked.

In this talk, I examine the legacy of colonial monolingual-dominant language policies on education and language-in-education policies. The focus is Africa where multilingualism is a key aspect of the linguistic reality of many people, communities and countries. However, there is often a disconnect between language policy and the 'lived multilingual realities' (Reilly et al. 2022) of many people on the continent. Monolingual language policies which do not accurately reflect the linguistic realities of people's lives can inhibit access to health, education, political, legal and economic systems (Bamgboṣe 2000, Djite 2008, Williams 2011, Negash 2011).

The talk presents data from a collaborative international research project that examined multilingualism in primary education in Tanzania, Botswana and Zambia. It highlights the multilingual practices that are employed by teachers and learners in the classroom, as well as the disconnect between classroom practices and the official language-in-education policies in these three countries which continue to favour monolingual, English-dominant approaches. The talk considers the way in which colonial and imperialist histories continue to exert impact on individuals' access to resources and opportunities, and highlights ways in which multilingual policies can facilitate more inclusive, effective and decolonial educational experiences for all. In doing so, I call for a move from seeing language and linguistic diversity as a 'problem to be solved' to a resource (Lo Bianco 2001).

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