



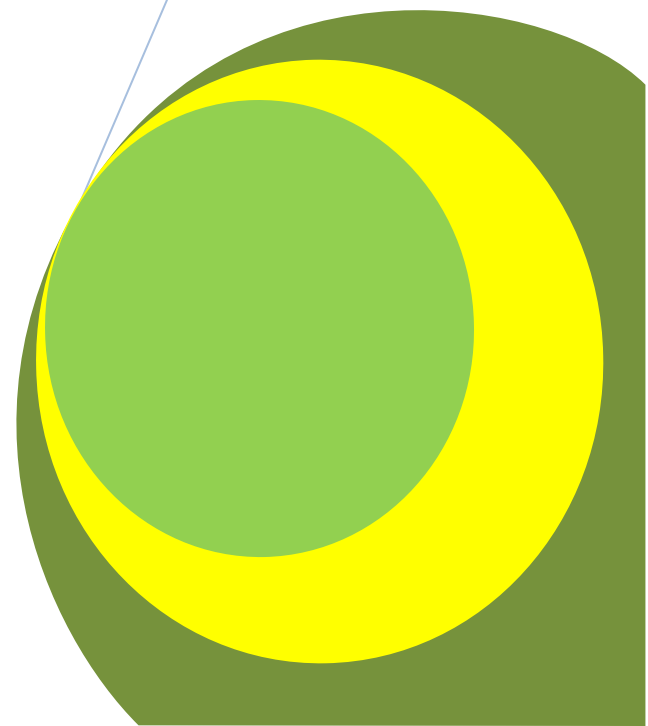
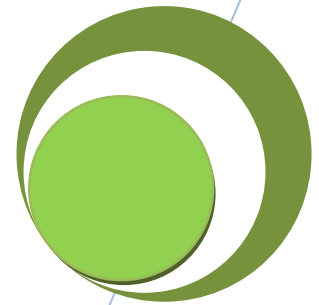
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Title: Language Policy and Linguistic Rights in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe: The Case of IsiNdebele

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Research Article

Language Policy and Linguistic Rights in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe: The Case of IsiNdebele

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Abstract

This article investigates and evaluates the position of IsiNdebele in post-colonial Zimbabwe as a subject in schools. It is the position of this article that language policy in Zimbabwe does not have a strong case for African languages in general and IsiNdebele in particular. The reliance on the Education Act of 1987 as a language policy document in the absence of a national language policy, leaves African languages open to neglect. African languages, particularly IsiNdebele which was born of unique circumstances, need a strong language policy which enunciates linguistic rights with the aim of protecting vulnerable languages. The article also argues that an abuse of linguistic rights is synonymous with abuse of human and cultural rights of speakers of a given language. The article will recommend the resuscitation of institutional bodies and organisations which once served as promoters of African languages. Government sponsorship for such institutions and organisations should be revived. The article also adds its voice to the call for the establishment of a National Language Council to be set up by an Act Parliament.

Keywords: Language policy; African languages; linguistic rights; linguistic pluralism; education.

1. Introduction

This article concerns itself with establishing the current status of policies on teaching of IsiNdebele of Zimbabwe in both primary and secondary schools in areas where the language is spoken and taught. An overview of the language situation in the education system reveals an undemocratic development where primary school children are taught by teachers who are not proficient in IsiNdebele. Hachipola (1998) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009), point out that Zimbabwe is a multilingual country where IsiNdebele is spoken by 20% of the Zimbabwean population who also speak other minority languages like Shangani, Sesotho, TjiKalanga, ChiNambiya and Tonga. The remaining 80% belong to ChiShona. It is therefore clear that the survival of isiNdebele is not only threatened by the English Language but also by ChiShona that is competing for space with it and has numbers on its side and classified as a major African language. The dominance of the two languages tends to push IsiNdebele to the periphery of the communication and education domains and is likely to render IsiNdebele unimportant and redundant. A language that is not actively used undergoes what the Wikipedia refers to as language attrition, which is "the loss of a first or second language or a portion of that language by individuals". This loss depends on which language is more dominant than the other in the lives of bilinguals. Once a language is classified as a major or majority, the tendency is for it to be viewed as superior; hence it dominates weaker and minor ones. It is therefore observed that this development in the Zimbabwean language landscape is likely to be interpreted as assimilation or a ploy to entrench Shona majoritarianism, particularly by the Ndebele speaking community. The point of reference is the school system because education is usually at the centre of any ideology or campaign and the promotion of a language is no exception. Finally, the article will endeavour to offer recommendations that aim to guide an all inclusive, democratic language policy that champion ethno-linguistic pluralism in Zimbabwe.

Mottee (2008:32) argues that "... the right to education is a basic right". It is clear that education is a basic human right. Every human being has the right to a meaningful education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that education ought to be free and compulsory at the elementary level. Tulasiewicz and Brock - Utne (1998) also point out that "... education is seen as essential in leading the child through the mother-tongue into cultural and national life of his own people. Hence, one finds separate schools ..." The foregoing argument demonstrates the importance of the mother-tongue in education and the importance of education in initiating a child into his or her

culture. Miti (2008) argues that even if it is made free and compulsory, where the learning is conducted in an unfamiliar language, it is not possible to achieve universal primary education let alone achieve Education For All (EFA).

Language and education are dependent on each other. If education is to be attained, language has to be used and for language to endure, survive and be respected, it has to be taught in schools and in a familiar language, it does not matter whether it is an African or European one. It is for this reason that Ekkehard Wolff (2005:3), argues that "... language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education". It is therefore clear that education and language are like Siamese twins. They need each other for continuity's sake. It is the duty of government to see to it that African languages are integrated into their education systems. Chiato (2005:6) argues that:

... African governments need to integrate political, socio-cultural and educational motivations into their language policy designs ... It needs to be clear that so long as African languages are restricted to oral use while children learn in foreign tongues, underdevelopment on the continent will remain a living reality.

Political leaders need to stop paying lip service to the promotion of African languages and come up with language and education policies that can restore the dignity of Africans, their languages and cultures. There must not be a situation where some local language takes over from a European language in terms of oppressing and sidelining other languages because that will be tantamount to jumping from a frying pan into the fire for those minor languages. The Zimbabwean government is expected to be in control of what happens in schools through the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. In an interview conducted on 14 April 2010 at the Curriculum Development Unit Offices, Ms R. Chinyenze, the head of the ChiShona section of the *National Languages Department* which comprises ChiShona and IsiNdebele in the CDU, revealed that policy comes from the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. She explained that the CDU only produces syllabi for different subjects as directed by the Ministry of Education. According to Mr. J. Zondo, a former member of the *National Ndebele Language Committee* (NNLC), circulars come from the Ministry of Education through the Secretary of Education who is guided by the *Education Act of 1987* (Interview on 31 May 2010 at the University of Zimbabwe's Department of African Languages and Literature).

It emerged that there is no convergence on what people view as language policy. Mr. J. Zondo, an IsiNdebele language expert and lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe's Department of African Languages and Literature views the 1987 *Education Act* as the policy document that can be relied on to guide activities in the education sector, because it has 'legal authority'. On the other hand, Ms. Chizenye, the officer representing Shona referred this researcher to the *Nzirasanga Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999* when asked about the current language policy in Zimbabwe. When two people who are in positions of promoting languages refer to different documents as policy documents, it indicates that there is no clear policy on languages in Zimbabwe, let alone a document.

2. Research Designs

Two research designs were employed in this study, the historical design and phenomenology. To analyse the 1987 Education Act as amended in 2006, the historical research method was used. Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) define the historical research design as a process of systematically searching for data to answer questions about a phenomenon for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the present practices, trends and issues in education. The 1987 Education Act is viewed by this researcher as the source of present practices in Zimbabwean education, including the study and teaching of languages. The historical research design also subscribes to the centrality of interpretation of a phenomenon according to one's understanding and experience of it. The *Nzirasanga Presidential Commission on Education Report of 1999* came out as a document which has become quite influential in shaping educational activities in Zimbabwe, especially the promotion of African languages. It is the document that authenticated and made concrete the need for the promotion of the so called minority languages.

Phenomenology is a research design that studies how individuals construct, or are constructed by social reality. "The researcher should select a topic that will engage her intellectually and emotionally. It is important for a researcher to be invested in the topic in this way because she will be collecting data on her own experience of the phenomenon and that of her participants" (Gall, Gall and Borg: 41). The promotion of IsiNdebele, respect for it as a language and school subject, and its survival, are issues which strongly concern these researchers. Having communicated in this language since birth and taught it for the past thirteen years, seeing students being punished for communicating in it during school hours, really touches on these researchers' emotions. Equally touched emotionally on the subject of promoting or suppressing, as the case may be, the use and development of IsiNdebele

were Mr. J. Zondo and Dr. T. M. Ndlovu. The three hours that were spent talking to them revealed how emotionally engaging the subject was to them. Both the researchers and the participants are intimately connected with the issue of the promotion and development of IsiNdebele, both as a school subject and a language. In addition to the analysis of the documents mentioned above, some data came from newspapers and interviews of relevant office-bearers and some interested parties like Dr. T. M. Ndlovu and Mr. J. Zondo. It emerged from the research that both researchers and those who were interviewed view the prevailing situation as unfair and a violation of linguistic rights of the speakers of IsiNdebele.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section of the article presents and analyses the document which was considered key to this research because it is generally viewed as a language policy document yet it is, in actual fact, just an education act hence it addresses language issues indirectly. Also being presented and analysed is evidence from newspapers and interviews as part of the research findings.

4. The Education Act as Amended in 2006

12 New section substituted for section 62 of Cap 25:04

Section 62 of the principal Act is repealed and the following is substituted –
“Languages to be taught in schools”

1. Subject to this section, all the three main languages of Zimbabwe, namely Shona, Ndebele and English, shall be taught on an equal-time basis in all schools up to form two level.
2. In areas where indigenous languages other than those mentioned in subsection (1) are spoken, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages in schools in addition to those specified in section (1).
3. The Minister may authorise the teaching of foreign languages in schools.
4. Prior to Form one, any one of the languages referred to in section (1) and (2) may be used as the medium of instruction, depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
5. Sign language shall be the priority medium of instruction for the deaf and hard of hearing.”

The 1987 *Education Act* is a typical top-down policy which is queried by Makoni, Makoni and Nyika (2008:1) who argue that, “Language projects in Africa are characterised by top-down and authoritarian approaches” The *Education Act* of 1987 as amended in 2006 typically empowers the minister to unilaterally declare what language is to be taught in an area without consulting the concerned community. The Act legally and officially hinders the promotion of African languages by confining them to a particular level of study. What it means is that it becomes illegal to use IsiNdebele as a medium of instruction at any level that is beyond primary education. Worse still, the Act does not mention that English is a foreign language, giving it an equal footing with languages that were not only marginalised for about ninety years but also had their cultures demonised as pagan cultures by the speakers and imposers of the English language on Africans.

The 1987 *Education Act* is silent on who should teach these languages. Acts are not enough because they are not detailed. Worse still, they can be misinterpreted. They should be complemented by policies which should give a detailed programme of action to be followed in the promotion and development of African languages. A law like the 1987 *Education Act* can easily be misinterpreted in the absence of a detailed policy document. As a coherent plan or course of action (Walker 1990), the importance of a policy document of language need not be over emphasised. Its importance in schools is further pointed out by Walker (1990: 3) when he says, “The most basic function of a policy is to co-ordinate the curricular of schools and classrooms...” In Zimbabwe, schools rely on circulars that are disseminated by the Ministry of Education through the Secretary for Education. Circulars are usually a reaction to some political need and come out at the behest of politicians. This scenario, where a problem should be encountered then a circular is sent out, demonstrates a piecemeal approach to the issue of language promotion and will not help the case of IsiNdebele and other African languages.

It came out clearly during this research that Zimbabwe has no document that guides the language activities in the school system. No office that was visited could produce a policy document on languages and their functions in Zimbabwe. The absence of this important document was revealed by the comments of the minister of Higher and Tertiary Education. Dr. Samuel Mudenge in the *Sunday News* issue of 16 – 22 August 2009 on page 3 when he said “... in a report that was presented to the government by Chimhundu, the panel advised the government to set up a National Language Council, through an Act of Parliament, with a mandate to produce a clear language policy.” The

statement by the minister demonstrates clearly the inadequacy of the *Education Act* of 1987 as a document which guides linguistic activity in Zimbabwe. It confirms the absence of such a crucial document and one wonders what really is going on in the offices of the Ministry of Education and how the Secretary for Education arrives at the decision to write a circular on how languages should be handled in schools.

5. Problems Facing IsiNdebele

A look at the history of language teaching in Zimbabwe tells a sad story for IsiNdebele. The language has been lagging behind English and Shona. According to Roy-Campbell and Gwete (1998), the standardised forms of African languages were introduced in schools through the teaching of these languages as subjects. Shona was introduced as a subject at O-Level in 1957 for African schools and Ndebele was introduced in 1967. In European schools, Shona was introduced in 1964 and Zulu, instead of Ndebele, was offered in 1977 and Ndebele in 1979. A-Level Shona was introduced in 1977 and Ndebele in 1979. The first group of Shona graduates enrolled at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1963, and Ndebele in 1968 (Campbell and Gwete, 1998). Developments such as those pointed out above indicate that IsiNdebele comes second to Shona in as far as development is concerned. IsiNdebele faces the problem of having lagged behind ChiShona in terms of introduction as a subject for study in schools. A deliberate effort is therefore called for, if IsiNdebele is to dictate its pace of development. The history of African language development demonstrates that IsiNdebele is a beleaguered language, not facing a threat from English alone but also from Shona.

The other problem is that the Ndebele is a nation that is made up of different ethnic groups. Ranger (1999: 100) argues: "Before 1893, I have argued, the Ndebele state was manifestly a machine for multi-ethnic assimilation of peoples... They were not ethnic 'Ndebele' but a conglomeration of peoples who were members of the Ndebele state." This coalition was forced into existence by the difficulties of that time which are no longer an issue and this coalition can disintegrate at any time. The foregoing scenario weakens the Ndebele nation and reduces its numbers. Unfortunately numbers are a factor in language policy formulation.

6. Shona Hegemony and its Threat to the IsiNdebele

There is a sad development that is taking place in primary schools that will seriously affect IsiNdebele in the long run. Reports in newspapers indicate that IsiNdebele is now facing a new threat from the Shona language. There are primary school teachers who can neither speak nor write IsiNdebele but are expected to teach the future leaders of this great group of people who are so proud of their language. According to an article in the *Umthunywa* issue of 16 – 22 kuMabasa (April) 2010 entitled "Lungatshabalala Ulimi LwesiNdebele" (The Ndebele Language can be destroyed), pupils at primary schools are taught by teachers who are not fluent in IsiNdebele. An article by reporters Nobuhle Mgwaqo and Sikhumbuzo Moyo on page 2 of the above mentioned issue states that:

Isikolo esifana leLukhanyiso Primary School elokitshini leMpopoma silababalisi abedlula ingxenye abakhuluma ulimi lwesiShona... (A school like Lukhanyiso in Mpopoma Township has more than half of its teachers who speak ChiShona...).

The foregoing statement reveals a really sad scenario. The primary level of education is a foundation for all the other levels and if it is badly affected, it means that the young pupils will struggle with the language for the rest of their learning lives. Brock-Utne and Skattum (2009:19) point out that; "When teachers who are not sufficiently proficient in English are required to teach in English, the effects can be damaging for students, not only for learning the subject matter, but for learning correct English as well". The above statement can be used to argue the case for IsiNdebele speaking pupils and their language. Such a situation will make IsiNdebele a difficult subject which students would like to drop at the slightest provocation.

The parents of these pupils are quite bitter about this development. They are asking questions but the answers are difficult to find. According to the above mentioned article, Mr Thabani Ncube revealed that parents are confused by the error ridden language that their children speak. According to the article in question, one parent had the following question to ask:

Pho kuyikwenza na (sic) ukuthi abantwana abaku Grade 2 babe yibo abafundisa umbalisi ulimi kulokuthi umbalisi abenguye oqondisa abantwana? (Is it fair for Grade 2 pupils to teach the teacher when the teacher is expected to correct them?)

The same article further reveals that conflict once erupted between a parent and a teacher when a teacher gave students homework on the young one of a dog and the parent gave the child the answer as umdlwane (a puppy).

The teacher who happened to be fluent in Shona rejected that answer (which was the correct one) and gave the 'correct answer' as *uguyuguyu* (an onomatopoeic sound of getting the attention of a puppy). There is great need for those in charge of deploying teachers to seriously address this anomaly.

Incidences of Shona speaking teachers who cannot construct a single acceptable sentence in IsiNdebele but teach at primary school level are quite prevalent. The *Sunday News* issue of 6 – 12 June 2010 carries an article on page 9 which is entitled: *Lupane Lags Behind in Development*. According to this article parents in the area "lamented the influx of teachers who cannot understand the local language, Ndebele...." *The Chronicle* issue of 23 March 2011 on page 3 in an article entitled *Parents Concerned over Poor Exam Results*, quotes a parent as having said; "I was shocked when I found the comment 'tsvina' (dirty) in my child's exercise book when I was assessing her performance and wondered what this teacher was trying to say when the exercise book was a Ndebele one". The above report is a clear indication of linguistic abuse due to lack of a clear language policy.

The problem of staffing schools in Matabeleland with Shona teachers is also discussed by Mumpande (2006) who reveals that the Tonga resorted to withdrawing their children from school for two months in 2003 when the government replaced untrained Tonga speaking teachers with trained Shona speaking teachers. "Consequently, the workings of the entire district came to a halt as parents protested against the behaviour of the government" (Mumpande 2006:47).

According to Mr. J. Zondo, his child who attends Baines Primary School complains that they are not learning, instead they teach or correct their Shona speaking teachers (Interview on 31 May 2010 at the University of Zimbabwe, Mount Pleasant, Harare). Dr. T. Matshakayile Ndlovu also revealed that the Gwanda community once voiced its displeasure, to the President, in having their children taught by Shona speaking teachers at primary schools.

The evidence at hand demonstrates that the Shona language has become a new threat to IsiNdebele. If children in schools are taught by Shona-speaking teachers, it means that there is no meaningful learning of IsiNdebele that is going on. The language will therefore die a slow but painful death. The government seems to be insensitive to the complaints of the affected communities. The Binga incident shows that government is responsible for correcting such anomalies. The problem seems to be that of putting political interests ahead of those of the people, their cultures and their languages. Politicians view linguistic rights as divisive. Mumpande (2006) argues that Zimbabwean politicians should, like those in South Africa, appreciate unity in diversity rather than try to promote unity by forced assimilation. The government must stop politicising linguistic rights because such behaviour can lead to conflict in the long run.

The screaming headline *Beaten for Not Talking Shona*, in the 10 – 16 March, 2011 issue of the *Zimbabwean* newspaper, on page two, tells a sad story of an open attack on both human and linguistic rights of the Ndebele. According to the above mentioned report, a Mr. Moyo was beaten for failing to speak Shona and told that everyone in Zimbabwe should be able to speak shona, failure to which they must relocate to South Africa. Generally the attitude towards IsiNdebele is that it is inferior to Shona and that line of thinking is evident in Dube (2008)'s argument that Shona seems to enjoy a higher status than IsiNdebele in practice. Dube goes on to state that on television and radio, the news in Shona come before those in IsiNdebele and that insinuates that Shona is superior to IsiNdebele. The attitude that is articulated by Dube and the above incident of violence against Mr. Moyo indicate that the Ndebele have a compromised right to speak their language in Zimbabwe. The above cited incidents may be politically motivated but they might be a tip of the iceberg in as far as the abuse of the linguistic rights of the Ndebele in Zimbabwe is concerned.

7. Possible Causes of Abuse of Linguistic Rights of IsiNdebele

Evidence gathered from interviews and documents revealed that circulars are derived from the Education Act of 1987 and findings and recommendations of the *Nzirasanga Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training*, 1999. It was discovered that the Education Act of 1987 is the one with legal authority and the commission report just made recommendations but it is not a legally binding document that pronounces the policy more clearly than the Education Act of 1987. The current language policy in Zimbabwe is described by Hadebe (2006:198) as a 'no policy approach' due to the absence of an authorising body. Mtenje (2008) argues that the overall language policy picture in the southern African region, which Zimbabwe is part of, is characterised by the problem of avoidance (the failure by government or any other relevant institution to issue a formal language policy statement) and that of declaration without implementation. According to the *Sunday News* issue (16 – 22 August 2009:3) "there is need to take advantage of the current constitution process to seek the urgent establishment of a comprehensive national language policy that will see languages being used as media of instruction in the field of education". The above statement summarises the great need for a national language policy. It indicates that, indeed there is no language policy document in Zimbabwe, if it is there (the 1987 Education Act), it is not comprehensive enough. The findings by this writer revealed that the 1987 *Education Act* cannot be relied on as a language policy

document. It is silent on what action is to be taken if speakers of a language face a situation like the one reported in *Umthunywa*, 16-22 kuMabasa 2010 and the *Sunday News*, 6-12 June 2010, where teachers who cannot speak IsiNdebele are deployed to teach in primary schools where pupils speak and understand IsiNdebele only. Also, the fact that the *Education Act* has been amended twice (in 1996 and 2006) indicates that it is not comprehensive enough. It was crafted before enough research had been carried out. There is no better, rather, worse combination of factors than the ones given above which can call for an urgent setting up of a National Languages Council that was recommended by Chimhundu, as revealed by Dr. Mudenge in the 16-22 August 2009 issue of the *Sunday News*, to attend to language issues in Zimbabwe.

According to Hadebe (2006), part of the justification for not promoting publishing in Ndebele in comparison with Shona was that the needs of the Ndebele speakers were fulfilled by Zulu publications; hence IsiNdebele was neglected in the area of research on the grounds that it was just a dialect of Zulu. The mistaken idea that IsiNdebele is one and the same as IsiZulu has been used as an excuse to sideline and abuse the Ndebele and their language, IsiNdebele. It is the same reason that causes some non-IsiNdebele speaking Zimbabweans to think and feel that the Ndebele have no right to remain Zimbabwe if they speak IsiNdebele as demonstrated by the earlier referred to report in the 10 – 16 March 2011 issue of the *Zimbabwean*.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has focused on the position of IsiNdebele in primary and secondary schools and it has been noted that, IsiNdebele as a language and a subject faces a problem of primary school teachers who cannot speak a single IsiNdebele word but are deployed to teach in areas where the only language the children know and understand is IsiNdebele. The issue of relying on the *Education Act* for the promotion of isiNdebele is not healthy. There needs to be a legal institution in the name of National Language Council to be set up by an Act of Parliament. The council will produce a clear national language policy since it will have legal authority to enforce its decisions. The government should take a leaf from South Africa where there are structures that were created to assist in language promotion and development such as provincial language committees, National Language Bodies and Lexicographic units (Mtenje 2008). The promotion and development of a language involves quite a number of stakeholders. Hadebe (2006:58) reveals this when he points out that:

More Africans were involved in orthographic issues after the formation of the National Ndebele Language Committee in the 1950s ... The NNLC consisted of two members from each interest group, namely: Zimbabwe Teachers Association, Education Officers, Publishers, Curriculum Development Unit, Writers and the University of Zimbabwe's Department of African Languages and Literature. The NNLC is responsible for all issues related to the Ndebele language, and advises the Secretary of Education who effects its recommendations.

The above argument serves to demonstrate the importance of the NNLC and the writers recommend that it be resuscitated as a matter of urgency. The government should fund organisations such as the NNLC if IsiNdebele is to develop and survive the threat of Shona hegemony and globalisation.

It is quite unfair, if not unreasonable for one who is not well versed in IsiNdebele spellings to be employed in schools dominated by isiNdebele speakers only to teach contaminated Ndebele. Those who want employment in such areas should be proficient in IsiNdebele. The issue of teachers who are employed to teach in primary schools in IsiNdebele speaking areas when they cannot speak a single IsiNdebele word should be stopped as a matter of urgency because it is a sign of disrespect to force children who speak IsiNdebele only to be taught grade one by a teacher who cannot speak their language. Politicians or the political elites should value the point that unity and progress are not necessarily achieved through the use of one language. They also know that people can only be empowered through their own languages (Hadebe2006).

It is hereby being recommended that the learning and passing of African languages be incentivised. They should be made to hold the key to securing employment especially in government departments. It is quite unfair, if not unreasonable for one who is not well versed in IsiNdebele spellings to be employed in the registrars' office in a district dominated by IsiNdebele speakers only to misspell their names. Those who want employment in such areas should be conversant with IsiNdebele spelling system. "If people believe that fluency in an indigenous language would ensure they work (sic), when they are finished studying, they would then have an incentive to learn these languages" (Kaschula et al 2007:43). People study and pass the English language because it is the key to employment in Zimbabwe. The same should apply to African languages in general and IsiNdebele particularly in areas where it is dominantly spoken.

Finally, mother tongue speakers of Ndebele language should demand that their children receive education in their language because IsiNdebele is the marker of identity, philosophy, worldview and all their achievements, hopes and impediments.

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