

## **Striving for quality education in South Africa: Strides and strolls on the language in education path**

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### **Abstract**

Preconceived ideas in South Africa about the unsuitability of languages other than English to ensure equitable and quality school education (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4) continue to elicit reluctance to apply policies dealing with language in education in South Africa in a way that benefits the majority of learners. This observation derives from a critical appraisal of documentation related to comprehensive studies commissioned by the Department of Basic Education and educational planning initiatives involving the issue of language in education over the past two decades. The appraisal also includes the 2019 voluntary national review that South Africa submitted to the UN as part of the global 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, to which South Africa is a signatory. The national review acknowledges the current literacy dilemma in the country and the national government expresses a commitment to rectifying this situation. Inasmuch as the UN review proposes increased use of the Sintu languages<sup>1</sup> in primary school as one appropriate recourse, it reverts back to focusing on further efforts to strengthen English as the language of learning and teaching in school education. However, attaining adequate proficiency in English for academic purposes remains problematic for both teachers and learners, and avenues to remedy this over the past 25 years have not led anywhere helpful. If anything, they have taken education on a detour away from the collaborative and progressive work put into the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) adopted by government in 1997 and the ideal to foster cultural diversity and multilingualism. After considering achievements and obstacles noted in the appraised documentation, we conclude that a return to the spirit and aims of the LiEP would be an appropriate starting point, together with a more nuanced implementation of policy in accordance with the unique context of each school. These small steps could contribute towards increasing the quality and equitability of education. In view of the diverse and complex nature of the fourth SDG, attaining quality education that is inclusive and equitable, we focus on developments pertaining to language in basic education (Grades 1 to 12). Separate scrutiny is required to deal with early childhood and higher education.

**Keywords:** language policy in education; basic education; United Nations 2030 Agenda

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<sup>1</sup> The Bantu languages of Southern Africa. Political correctness dictates the use of the inaccurate and rather nonsensical term *African languages*, as in fact one finds in government documents, some of them referred to in this paper.