

# The Effect of Using Local Languages as A Medium of Instruction on Academic Performance of Learners: A Case of Selected Primary Schools in Solwezi District of North-Western Province, Zambia

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**Abstract: Overview:** The study examined the effects of using local languages as a medium of instruction on academic performance of learners: a case of selected primary schools in Solwezi district.

**Body of Knowledge:** Using local languages as a medium of instruction can significantly impact the academic performance of learners in a positive manner. This approach not only facilitates better understanding of subject matter but also fosters a sense of cultural identity and pride among learners. Moreover, it helps bridge the gap between home and school environments, leading to increased parental involvement in education. By utilizing local languages, educators can create a supportive learning environment where students feel empowered to express themselves confidently, ultimately enhancing their overall academic achievement and promoting inclusive education practices.

**Methods:** The study employed a mixed paradigm and descriptive survey design that sampled head teachers, teachers and pupils. The total target population was 555. The sample size involved a total of 55 respondents, which was 10% of the target population. This study used descriptive analysis to analyze the data. Qualitative and Quantitative techniques of data analysis were used, and data was presented on the analytical tools such as SPSS, tables, figures and charts.

**Results:** The findings indicated that using local languages as medium of instruction improved the academic performance of learners in the sense that learners were able to learn how to read and write early in their primary school grades. Additionally, the study revealed that schools and teachers faced a number of challenges in implementing the policy of teaching in local languages and these were: lack of suitable teaching and learning materials, negative attitude of some teachers towards teaching in local language, incompetence of teachers and lack of capacity to handle learners coming from homes where the medium of instruction is not the native language.

**Recommendation:** The government to decentralize educational planning and budgeting to allow provinces and districts to develop their own local language materials and that teacher recruitment be aligned with language and instructional approach in such a way that teachers should be recruited and deployed to schools where their language proficiency aligns with those of the learners.

**Keywords:** Academic Performance, Cultural Relevance, Curriculum Development, Education, and Local Languages.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction

The role of languages as a medium of instruction in promoting an effective teaching and learning is an issue that has to be tackled with the seriousness it deserves. Zambia's education system has undergone some changes which have roots in the pre-colonial era. It was envisaged that the changes would bring about effective teaching and learning. Zambia is a linguistically heterogeneous and diverse country with many indigenous (mother tongues) and exogenous languages. Jere et al (2024) added that the combination of monolingualism and networks of global trade languages that are increasingly technologized have led to over half of the world's population speaking one of only 13 languages. The estimate number of African languages, which some say they are too conservative, center around 2000 distinct languages. Zambia has over 72 native languages and English is one of the exogenous languages. The other popular exogenic languages include: French, Hindu, Arabic and Chinese, all of Zambia's major indigenous languages by native speaker population are closely related to one another. Seven native languages are officially recognized as regional languages and these are Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, Tonga, Kaonde, Luvale and Lunda. These seven languages are currently used in lower primary schools.

The use of English has a long history in Zambia. It has been used in all important government sectors including education as a medium of instruction and it is important to note that a country's choice of a medium of instruction is an important language policy issue. In African countries that were previously colonized by European countries, a second language (L2) such as English, French or Portuguese have been used to teach other subjects across the curriculum from an early age (Chitondo et al, 2024). Such policies have had an impact on the entire educational process since mastering the ex-colonial L2 becomes a prerequisite for also mastering content material in all other subjects. In Zambia, during the colonial times and the federal period (1953-1963), the language of instruction was English serve a few exceptions. Most children were coming from homes where English was the only language spoken and so it was not difficult to learn a language for working purposes. Kelly (1999) states that "in primary schools for African children, the language of instruction until the fifth year was one of the vernaculars. In lower primary schools, teaching could begin in the pupil's mother tongue in areas where this was not the main vernacular; in these circumstances one of the official vernaculars was introduced not later than the third year. On the other hand, English was introduced as a subject in first grade.

From independence in 1964 onwards, Zambia used English as a medium of instruction from grade 1 through to the higher grades. After independence however, there was a drastic turn in as far as language policy was concerned as political and national unity was prioritized by new African political leaders. The 1966 Education Act pronounced English as the sole official language in Zambia. Kelly (1999) reports that English was used as medium of instruction to children in all grades who hardly used it at home and if they did it was imperfect. The outcome of this language policy shift was quite predictable because there was minimum improvement in pupil performance in numeracy. According to *Educating our Future* (1996), in the past 30 years of Zambia's self-rule, school going children who had little contact outside of school were required to learn how to read and write through English which was an alien language to them. Additionally, all learners were expected to learn content subjects using English. This had a number of consequences on the learners which included but not limited to poor reading and comprehension skills, dependence on rote learning, poor writing skills and overall low academic achievement in examinations at various levels.

The 1996 policy on education was not in support of the idea of introducing another language as a medium of instruction other than English. The argument that changing the language of instruction from English to a local language was going to be expensive in that it would entail enormous costs on developing and producing materials and training teachers to use them (*Educating our Future*, 1996). Therefore, the policy allowed for pupils to learn basic skills of reading and writing in a local language but that English was to be maintained as the official medium of instruction from grade 1. In 2013, the government made significant changes in the curriculum which included changing the language policy. The language of instruction from grades 1 to 4 in all learning areas was changed from English to a familiar Zambian language (MoE, 2013). However, English was maintained as an official language of instruction from grade 5 upwards. The curriculum we have been using in our schools is what our political freedom fighters had put in place after the attainment of independence in 1964 and it was based on the 1966 Education Act. Due to the passage of time and changes in social economic political and technological life, the school curriculum had become archaic and required serious attention (Chanda et al, 2024). The above quote provides the rationale for the emergence of the 2013 New Language policy (NLP) in Zambia, advocating for the use of local

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languages as medium of instruction (MOI) from grades 1-4. While all government schools applied the Primary Reading Program (PRP) towards enhancing the use of a familiar language for initial literacy in grade one, private schools continued using English as the medium of instruction from pre-school to tertiary education.

Teachers in private schools have a record of citing the fluency of their pupils in English as a sign of good education and much of this perceived achievement has been attributed to the policy of using English as the MOI from early grades. The four main common types of schools that offer initial literacy in Zambia (source: Adapted from Mwanakatwe, 1974) Private schools (on which this study is not focusing on) are defined as education institutions which are established by voluntary agencies or individuals in accordance with the regulations but which receive no grants from the central government. For this reason, private schools are sometimes referred to as non-grant aided schools. To meet their costs, private schools, command the highest fees but also promise the best facilities for quality education. These institutions, hence, respond to the needs of those with the ability to pay and are mostly found in urban areas. In comparison with the other two types of education providers i.e. Government and Community, private schools seem to record higher performances in national examinations starting from grade seven to grade 12 and the command of English by pupils from this sector, 3 even at preschool stage, has been used as the main barometer that many people use to measure the success of these schools as opposed to the situation pertaining in government schools.

Before Zambia's independence, both pre-school and early childhood education was run by the government. It was mandatory for every child to undergo preschool before getting into standard 1 (the current grade 1) as it was called then. Substandard A and B were therefore the two levels offered at preschool where one common curriculum was running. However, the restructuring of the education system in the 1960's saw the removal of preschool education in the primary schools as formal schooling started at Grade 1 (ECF, 2013). Thereafter, the responsibility of early childhood education was decentralized into local governments under the social welfare centers, olofeya, as they were commonly known. The decentralized system of education at preschool level did not bring out the intended results. Some of the shortcomings cited were the lack of coordination among councils resulting into a substandard system of education in Zambia. The decentralization of the country's economy, which was most pronounced in the third republic, brought about major changes in Zambia's economic, social and political realms. For instance, the education policy of "Educating our Future", introduced in 1996, emphasized education development which included the liberalization and decentralization of the education system. The education policy encouraged the private sector to manage schools, with the notion that liberalization of school management would bring about the expansion of education opportunities (MoE, 1996). Additionally, Phiri et al (2023) alluded that English language is also commonly used as a means for socialization. This position the English language enjoys demands that an average primary/secondary school pupil should be competent with the language skills. These are the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing. All learners need to have the skills in the use of English required for effective communication both while they are in school and once they leave secondary school.

As noted by Matafwali (2010), Zambia experienced a major political change from 27 years of one party rule under President Kenneth Kaunda to multiparty state led by President Frederick Chiluba. Notable among them was the transformation of Zambia's socio-political structure and economic developments in the direction of trade and liberalization which have had their impact on the education sector (Chanda & Chitondo, 2024). Generally speaking, the political transition was characterized by major structural changes in economic, social and political policies. These economic changes had adverse effects on the provision and financing of education. At the level of financing, for instance, there was a departure from the concept of free education to the concept of cost sharing which has since seen the introduction of user fees, tuition and examination fees at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. As a result, schools were forced to raise funds through the cost sharing measures (Chanda, 2024). It can be stated that Zambia's decentralization of the economy greatly contributed to the rapid emerging of urban and good built schools.

It is also important to note that this liberalization and privatization have created an environment in which individuals and other private agencies could participate as equal partners in various sectors of society including education. One of the factors that the principle is based on is its promotion of educational relationships among the various agents of development in particular between the people concerned and those intervening from the outside. The government schools in Zambia are not given most complete autonomy with power to establish management boards with full responsibilities for policies, staffing, admissions and the choice of a curriculum to implement. One prominent policy in these schools is the language policy

where local language has always been used as the medium of instruction. Since local language is not being perceived as the language of education by many urban schools, private schools has now attracted a lot of parents who are taking their children to these schools for better education (Sampa, 2003). However, with the 2013 new language policy of using local languages as medium of instruction from grades 1- 4, little is documented on the effects of using local language as medium of instruction from grades 1 - 4.

### 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Lower primary school education is important as it forms the bedrock of development. It is in primary school that children learn foundational skills that prepare them for life, work and active citizenship. The value attached to this level of education is reflected in the attention and investment it receives from government, parents and the general public. According to Chanda (2024), education should ensure that pupils acquire essential literacy, numeracy and communication skills. Hence, lower primary education is meant to prepare learners for upper primary schooling. MoE (1996) states that “the levels of achievement to be attained should be such that those who leave school must be able to function effectively in society, while those who continue in school have an adequate basis for further education”. A language of instruction is the language in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to the population and the medium in which the production and the reproduction of knowledge take place. Using local language as medium of instruction has been re-introduced in Zambia Primary Schools with a different approach and this has helped in improving literacy levels. However, the teachers and pupils face many challenges in the process. Madoda et al (2024) noted that language of instruction has been identified as the key factor that influences academic success or failure of learners in primary school. In Zambia, literacy skills and performance of learners had been so poor over the last decade. This underperformance was attributed to the fact that learner in early primary education were taught in unfamiliar language. It is for this reason that government approved the teaching of learners in grade 1-4 in a familiar local language. Since the implementation of this policy, there has been reports of some challenges being experienced by teachers and learners. The policy by government to change the medium of instruction from English to local languages has been in effect for over 7 years now. The question that many might be asking is whether this policy is a success or failure. It is important to determine whether children in lower grades are now able to write and read without difficulties. It is also important to determine if this policy is now producing better academic results since the change was implemented. This information is not yet available in Zambia. It was for this reason that this study sought to assess the effect of using local language as a medium of instruction on academic performance of learners in primary schools in Solwezi district.

### 1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the effects of using local language as a medium of instruction on academic performance of learners in primary schools.

### 1.4. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Examine the extent to using local languages as medium of instruction contributes to learner’s academic success or failure of pupils in primary schools in Solwezi district.
- Establish the challenges teachers encounter in delivering subject content to learners in local languages in primary schools in Solwezi district.

### 1.5. Conceptual Framework

In the field of education, the status given to English was such that one who did not know the language was considered illiterate (Africa, 1980). However, over the years, there had been a continued visitation of the, straight for English” approach as well as the introduction of local languages as medium of instruction in schools. For instance, the 1977 final report allowed teachers to explain concepts that might otherwise not be understood through the medium of English, in one of the seven official local languages, provided a majority of pupils in a class could understand this vernacular language. It can be stated that the 1977 policy introduced code switching as medium of instruction in schools to cater for the difficulties that learners were encountering in understanding English.

### 1.6. Significance of the Study

The study is significant as it acknowledges and respects the linguistic diversity within a community, fostering a sense of cultural identity and inclusivity. By leveraging familiar languages, educators can enhance comprehension and engagement among students, potentially leading to improved academic outcomes. Additionally, employing local languages as a medium of instruction can bridge the gap between home and school environments, facilitating smoother transitions into formal education and fostering parental involvement. Furthermore, research in this area provides valuable insights into effective teaching methodologies and curriculum development tailored to the linguistic and cultural contexts of learners. Ultimately, understanding the impact of local languages on academic performance not only enriches educational practices but also promotes social equity and empowerment within diverse communities. Besides, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the field of education in relation to language policy especially due to the fact Zambia is a developing nation with high levels of illiteracy.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Study Design

The research design was descriptive survey with both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in order to attain the comprehensive results. Qualitative methods were appropriate to this investigation as it produced detailed data from a small group of participants, while exploring feelings, impressions and judgments. On the other hand, quantitative method made the use of questionnaires, and surveys to gather data that is revised and tabulated in numbers, which allowed the data to be characterized by use of statistical analysis.

### 2.2. Research Site

The research was conducted in the selected five selected schools situated in Solwezi District. The schools include Francis primary school, Kikombe primary school, Solwezi Urban primary school, Kyalalankuba primary school and Mushitala primary school

### 2.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study was purposefully drawn from North-western province of Zambia where all the respondents are found. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select schools (5) while the simple random sampling procedure was used to select the teachers (20); four from each school, Head teachers (5); one from each school, and Learners (30); six from each school. The sample size comprised of 55 respondents, which was 10% of the total target population 555. Similarly, the primary data was complimented by the secondary data which was derived from government policy documents, ministerial reports and relevant literature on language use. In the sampling of province and schools, the study adopted the stratified cluster random sampling technique. Sampling of the province was done on the basis of concentration of respondents and schools were then done zone by zone.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed qualitatively as in-depth interviews, questionnaires and focused group discussions were used as data collection instruments. Thematic approach was used, where data analysis started with the categorization of themes from the structured interviews, and questionnaires. Charts and graphs were used to analyze data. The data gathered was analyzed according to the themes of the study and per the order of the research objectives. Data generated from the interview guide was analyzed manually and also, a combination of software MS Access, SPSS and MS Excel was used to analyze data. Analysis was mainly descriptive, that is, mean, median, mode, range, and standard deviation. Related statistics were applied where possible.

### 2.5. Ethical Issues

The study got permission from DEBS office Solwezi to interview the respondents. The study avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, permission consents, assents were obtained from respondents involved in the research and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. In this research, the study was fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research. In the same way, all the respondents of the research

were to remain unidentified to the public as all their valuable views, opinions and perceptions were only known by the researchers for use only in the research and participant's identities will forever remain hidden.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

#### 3.1. The Extent to Using Local Languages as Medium of Instruction Contributes to Learner's Academic Success or Failure of Pupils in Primary Schools

The study revealed that local language has contributed to the academic success of learners in the sense that it makes them understand concepts easily and clearly being their mother tongue. Teaching becomes more meaningful because learners are familiar with the language. Additionally, Chitondo et al (2024) explained that knowledge is based on what learners already know, which is teaching from known to unknown. Also, learning becomes interesting and interactive. Head teachers noted that cognitive development in the context of using local languages as a medium of instruction in Zambian primary schools is a multifaceted issue with significant implications for academic success or failure among pupils. The choice of language as a medium of instruction plays a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive processes, academic performance, and overall learning outcomes. One key aspect to consider is the relationship between language and cognitive development. Civan & Coskun (2016) suggested that children's cognitive development is closely intertwined with their language acquisition and proficiency. When students are taught in their native language or a language they are familiar with, they are more likely to understand concepts, engage actively in learning activities, and demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement. This is because language serves as a tool for thought, and cognitive processes such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and information processing are facilitated when students can comprehend the language of instruction effortlessly.

Moreover, using local languages as a medium of instruction can enhance students' cultural identity and pride, fostering a positive learning environment where pupils feel valued and connected to their heritage. This sense of belonging can have a profound impact on students' motivation, engagement, and academic self-concept, ultimately contributing to their academic success. Chanda & Chitondo (2023) defines culture as a collaboration of shared meanings or common beliefs among an organization's members. Conversely, the failure to utilize local languages effectively in primary school instruction can hinder cognitive development and academic progress. When students are taught in a language they do not understand well, they may experience difficulties comprehending instructional materials, expressing themselves effectively, and engaging meaningfully in classroom activities. This language barrier can impede the development of essential cognitive skills and undermine students' confidence and enthusiasm for learning, leading to academic underachievement and disengagement. Additionally, the lack of alignment between students' home language and the language of instruction can contribute to a disconnect between school and community, potentially exacerbating educational inequalities and widening the achievement gap. When students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are not acknowledged and integrated into the educational process, they may feel marginalized or excluded, hindering their cognitive development and academic success. The extent to which using local languages as a medium of instruction contributes to the academic success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools is a complex issue influenced by various factors. Recognizing the importance of language in cognitive development, fostering inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments, and promoting the use of students' native languages can enhance educational outcomes and support the holistic development of learners.

The study also noted that the utilization of local languages as the medium of instruction plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic success or failure of pupils. Linguistic competence, or the ability to effectively use language, is deeply intertwined with this educational approach. Employing local languages as the medium of instruction enhances linguistic competence among pupils. Madoda et al (2024) says that when children are taught in languages they are familiar with, they can better grasp concepts, express themselves, and engage in meaningful discourse. This fosters a solid foundation in language skills, essential for academic progression. Moreover, using local languages facilitates cultural understanding and appreciation. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it embodies the cultural heritage and identity of a community. By learning in their mother tongue, pupils connect more deeply with their cultural roots, which can positively influence their self-esteem and motivation to learn.

Conversely, neglecting local languages in education can hinder academic success. When pupils are forced to learn in a language that is foreign to them, they face significant barriers to comprehension and expression (Phiri et al, 2023). This can

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lead to frustration, disengagement, and ultimately, academic underachievement. Without a strong linguistic foundation, students may struggle to grasp core concepts across subjects, impeding their overall academic progress. Furthermore, the exclusion of local languages can perpetuate inequalities in education. Marginalized communities, whose languages are often sidelined in formal schooling, face additional obstacles in accessing quality education. This exacerbates existing disparities and widens the achievement gap between different socioeconomic groups. In light of these considerations, the effective integration of local languages into primary education is crucial for fostering academic success among Zambian pupils. It not only promotes linguistic competence but also cultivates cultural pride, enhances learning outcomes, and promotes equity in education. As such, educational policies and practices should prioritize the recognition and utilization of local languages to create inclusive and effective learning environments for all learners.

Teachers on the other hand observed that cultural relevance, particularly in the context of education, plays a crucial role in shaping the academic success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools. One significant aspect of cultural relevance is the extent to which local languages are utilized as the medium of instruction. In Zambia, where there is a rich diversity of languages spoken across different regions, the choice of language for instruction can deeply impact a student's learning experience. Chitondo & Chanda (2023) says that diversity is about what makes each of us unique and includes our backgrounds, personality, life experiences and beliefs, all of the things that make us who we are. When pupils are taught in their mother tongue or a language they are familiar with, they are more likely to engage actively in the learning process. Using local languages fosters a sense of cultural identity and belonging among students, which can positively influence their attitudes towards education.

Moreover, Mubanga (2012) says that learning in one's native language enhances comprehension and retention of academic content. When pupils understand the language of instruction, they are better equipped to grasp complex concepts and express themselves effectively. This leads to improved academic performance and overall success in school. Conversely, when students are taught in languages they do not understand fluently, it can hinder their learning progress. Language barriers may lead to confusion, frustration, and disengagement in the classroom. Pupils may struggle to follow instructions, participate in discussions, or complete assignments, ultimately impacting their academic outcomes. Furthermore, the use of foreign languages as the medium of instruction can perpetuate inequalities in education. Students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds may face additional challenges in accessing quality education compared to their peers who are fluent in the language of instruction. This can contribute to disparities in academic achievement and perpetuate cycles of poverty and social exclusion. The extent to which local languages are utilized as the medium of instruction significantly influences the academic success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools. Embracing linguistic diversity and incorporating native languages into the educational system can promote inclusive learning environments, empower students, and contribute to their overall academic success.

The respondents further alluded that access to education is a fundamental right, crucial for individual development and societal progress. In Zambia, like many other countries, the medium of instruction plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic success or failure of pupils, particularly in primary schools. The extent to which local languages are utilized as a medium of instruction greatly influences this outcome. Using local languages as the medium of instruction can significantly contribute to learner success and reduce their absenteeism (Chanda & Mutepuka, 2023). It fosters better understanding and comprehension, especially for young children who are more familiar with their mother tongue. When learners are taught in a language they understand, they are more engaged, motivated, and able to grasp concepts effectively. This approach promotes inclusivity and cultural relevance, as it allows pupils to connect with their heritage and community. Furthermore, employing local languages facilitates smoother transitions from home to school, easing the learning process and reducing dropout rates. It creates a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and seeking clarification when needed. Additionally, using familiar languages as the medium of instruction encourages parental involvement in their children's education, strengthening the home-school partnership and overall educational outcomes.

However, the failure to prioritize local languages in education can hinder academic success. When pupils are taught in languages they do not understand fluently, it creates barriers to learning and impedes cognitive development. This language barrier can lead to frustration, disengagement, and ultimately, academic underachievement. Moreover, it perpetuates inequalities, as students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds face additional obstacles in accessing quality education. Chanda (2023) says that education helps to remedy many of the other issues that can keep people, families, and even whole communities vulnerable to the cycle of poverty. At its core, a quality education supports a child's developing social,

emotional, cognitive, and communication skills. They also gain knowledge and skills, and often at a higher level than those who don't attend school. In Zambia, where a multitude of languages are spoken, neglecting indigenous languages as mediums of instruction can exacerbate educational disparities and perpetuate a cycle of poverty. It undermines the richness of linguistic diversity and neglects the cultural heritage of communities. Therefore, promoting multilingual education and recognizing the importance of local languages is essential for fostering equitable access to education and enhancing learner outcomes in Zambian primary schools. The extent to which local languages are used as the medium of instruction significantly impacts the academic success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools. Embracing indigenous languages promotes inclusivity, cultural relevance, and effective learning, while neglecting them perpetuates educational inequalities and impedes academic progress. Sampa et al (2022) says that in acquiring the English language, learners need to master four macro language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading skills, which involve receiving messages, are categorized as receptive skills while speaking and writing skills, which involve language production, are considered to be productive. Grammar is one of the language aspects that play a significant role in the language learning process. Therefore, policies and practices that prioritize multilingual education are crucial for ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners in Zambia (Musonda et al, 2023).

Moving on, the study discovered that the utilization of local languages as a medium of instruction in Zambian primary schools intersects with various policy and socioeconomic factors, which collectively influence the academic outcomes of pupils. Firstly, policy frameworks play a pivotal role in shaping language-in-education policies within the country. Zambia's official language policy may either endorse multilingual education, where local languages are used alongside English, or promote English as the sole medium of instruction. The policy's clarity, implementation, and flexibility significantly impact the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Mudenda & Nankamba, 2017). Socioeconomic factors also heavily influence the extent to which local languages are utilized in classrooms. In Zambia, disparities in access to resources such as textbooks, trained teachers proficient in local languages, and educational infrastructure persist between urban and rural areas. Additionally, socioeconomic status often correlates with the perceived value of English proficiency for socioeconomic mobility, potentially overshadowing the importance of local languages in education.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards indigenous languages play a crucial role. In contexts where local languages are stigmatized or considered inferior to English, learners may feel marginalized or disengaged from their education. Conversely, in environments that promote cultural and linguistic diversity, students may exhibit higher levels of confidence and academic performance when instructed in their mother tongue. Moreover, curriculum development should align with the linguistic and cultural context of learners to enhance their understanding and retention of academic content. Ultimately, the academic success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools concerning the use of local languages as a medium of instruction is a complex interplay of policy decisions, socioeconomic realities, societal attitudes, and pedagogical practices. A holistic approach that addresses these interconnected factors is necessary to ensure equitable and effective education for all learners (Mwanza, 2012). The other critical finding presented the utilization of local languages as a medium of instruction in primary schools is a subject intertwined with both standardization and assessment practices. The decision to adopt local languages as a medium of instruction is often rooted in the pursuit of enhancing academic success among learners. However, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent upon several factors, including standardization and assessment methods. Standardization plays a crucial role in determining the consistency and quality of education across different regions and schools within Zambia. When it comes to using local languages as a medium of instruction, standardization involves establishing uniform guidelines for curriculum development, teacher training, and instructional materials. Consistency in these areas ensures that learners receive a standardized educational experience regardless of their geographical location. Without proper standardization, variations in teaching methods and content may hinder the academic success of pupils, particularly in areas where resources and support for local language instruction are lacking. Assessment practices are integral to evaluating the effectiveness of using local languages as a medium of instruction and gauging learners' academic progress. Assessments should be designed to align with the objectives of language-based instruction and measure students' proficiency in both the language and the subject matter. This requires the development of culturally relevant assessment tools that accurately reflect the linguistic and cultural contexts of Zambian pupils. Additionally, assessments should be conducted in a manner that minimizes biases against learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, ensuring fair and equitable evaluations.



The extent to which using local languages as a medium of instruction contributes to learners' academic success or failure in Zambian primary schools is multifaceted. On one hand, Chanda et al (2024) suggests that instruction in learners' mother tongues can facilitate better comprehension, engagement, and overall academic achievement. However, challenges such as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient standardization may undermine the potential benefits of local language instruction. Furthermore, the effectiveness of this approach may vary depending on the linguistic diversity within Zambian communities and the availability of educational materials in local languages. The success or failure of pupils in Zambian primary schools regarding the use of local languages as a medium of instruction is influenced by standardization and assessment practices. Establishing standardized guidelines for curriculum development and teacher training, along with culturally relevant assessment methods, is essential for maximizing the educational benefits of language-based instruction. By addressing these factors, Zambia can create an inclusive and effective educational environment that promotes academic success for all learners.

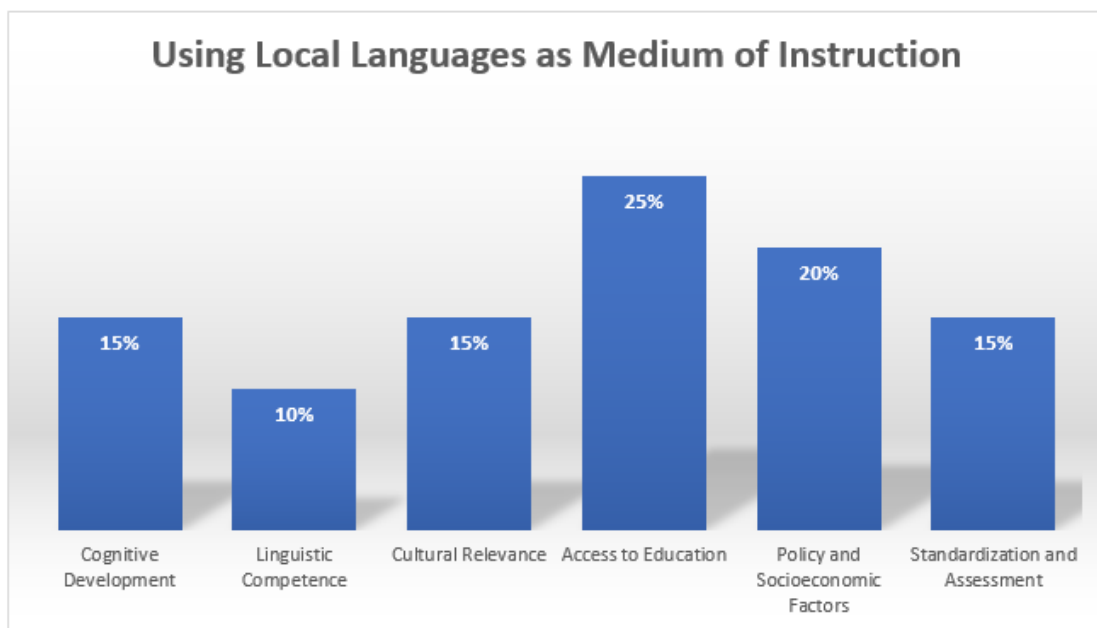


Figure 1: Using Local Languages as Medium of Instruction

### 3.2 Challenges Teachers Encounter in Delivering Subject Content to Learners in Local Languages in Primary Schools

#### 3.2.1 Lack of Suitable Teaching and learning materials

The study revealed that schools in Solwezi district lacked appropriate teaching and learning materials in the local language. The implementation of the language policy (i.e. Use of local language a medium of instruction) requires the learning materials such as supplementary are provided for learners and teaching materials (teacher’s guide) are made available in local. The study revealed that schools lacked appropriate teaching and learning materials that are translated in local languages. It was discovered that schools lacked supplementary readers for pupils and teacher’s books that are prepared in local languages. This situation is not unique to the schools in Zambia alone, many classrooms in developing countries, especially in poor and rural areas, lack teaching and learning materials, some possess one textbook, typically in the hands of the teacher. According to UNESCO (2008), pupils spend most of their time copying the content from chalkboards to notebooks, and then memorizing it. The lack of suitable teaching and learning materials for local languages in primary schools in Zambia poses significant challenges to education quality and inclusivity. This deficiency hampers effective learning outcomes and perpetuates disparities within the educational system. Firstly, the absence of adequate teaching materials inhibits the development of foundational language skills among students (Chanda & Siyunda, 2023). Local languages serve as the medium through which children grasp fundamental concepts and express themselves fluently. Without appropriate materials, educators struggle to engage students effectively, hindering their linguistic and cognitive development.

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Moreover, the dearth of localized educational resources undermines cultural relevance and identity preservation. Local languages are carriers of indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values. By neglecting these languages in the curriculum, educational institutions risk marginalizing indigenous cultures and eroding the sense of belonging among students, particularly those from ethnic minority groups. Additionally, the lack of suitable materials perpetuates linguistic inequalities and exacerbates disparities in access to quality education. Students proficient in local languages often face barriers when transitioning to instruction in official languages like English. Without adequate support in their mother tongue, these learners may struggle to comprehend academic content, leading to academic underachievement and dropout rates. Chanda (2023) defines a dropout as a pupil who was enrolled in the beginning of the school year and has left before the end of the school year, and was not enrolled elsewhere. Furthermore, the absence of localized materials hinders teacher effectiveness and professional development. Educators are often ill-equipped to teach in local languages due to limited instructional resources and training opportunities. As a result, they may resort to rote memorization or direct translation, impeding pedagogical innovation and student engagement.

This finding is also in line with the finding by Tambulukani et al (2001) who found that in most schools there were not enough instructional materials translated in the local language as MOI. The study found that approximately 10 pupils were trying to read from one reader and so because they were not able to read, most learners recited from memory. There should have been enough resource books in place to facilitate the training and implementing of the local language policy. Ball (2011) also argued that availability of instructional materials in local languages needed to be considered as a long-term planning process. Ball suggests that decentralized educational planning and budgeting could help countries, provinces and districts to develop their own local language materials. Local communities could collaborate with government agencies and linguists to create mother-tongue materials. Teaching and learning resources play a critical role in the enhancement of teaching and learning activities. However, the findings of this study suggest that there was little to less teaching and learning materials based on the NLP. At the most, the study indicated that there was only one grade one English reader for the learners at the time of the study (2014) in schools where the policy had been endorsed. The findings suggest that the ministry of education hastily introduced the new language policy before certain logistics on policy implementation could be put in place. This should not, however, imply that the private schools expected the government to provide books for them. As per trend, the schools were ready to purchase these books, but as observed by some informants, teaching and learning material based on the new curriculum was not available in book shops. The response given by CDC on this matter that material was being produced in phases may tempt one to confirm the ministry's unpreparedness for this policy. There is always a preparation of schemes and lesson notes in schools that require the availability of teaching and learning material in advance. If books are delivered to schools in phases and at the end of the year when schools are on recess, then the preparations for schemes and lesson notes by the 70 teachers would have to be made during the term when they are supposed to be attending to the learners' needs. The findings in this study therefore do not foresee the policy as a success like in the Malawi education policy where Banda & Kabubi (2016) explains that the language policy made some impact on the education system in Malawi because pupils' as well as teacher's books were available and translated into Chichewa. The concern on the lack of teaching material led to the issue of lack of trained personnel to handle the grades 1-4 learners.

The study established that the workshops that the Ministry of Education offered as a way of sensitizing teachers on the new curriculum could not suffice for the skills needed to handle the classes. In response to this concern, head teachers stated that language teachers in all colleges are taught to handle any language class because the methodology they learn cuts across all language teaching and learning skills. To the contrary, the findings of this study were that teachers, regardless of their interest in teaching using Kiikaonde as MOI, lacked proper training with which to handle the new curriculum. Even though there were concerns over logistics about the curriculum, there were some schools, especially in the sub urban that expressed willingness to embrace the curriculum in their schools (Bwalya, 2017). Similar to this concern was the issue of different dialects between the Kiikaonde that is spoken in town and the one used in books. The study deemed this as the right time to standardize the orthography when the text books are still being translated from English to Vernacular. Standardization of the orthography would enhance easier grasping of concepts for children so that the language they meet verbally would be the same type they find in the text books. This would then create a potential baseline for a successful policy. A few incidences were however cited that some children had been transferred from these schools where the new curriculum had been introduced. Unlike the urban schools, the enrolment in some sub urban schools where the new curriculum had been introduced was negatively affected by low turn outs but the performance of pupils had greatly improved especially in the area of reading.

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This is in line with what scholars allude to that, effective communication leads to more successful learning opportunities in classrooms where languages familiar to both children and teachers are used as Language of instruction at least in the first three years of education. Chanda et al (2023) added that some African countries including Zambia introduced Re-entry policy as a strategy to enable teenage mothers to continue their education. It was assumed that teenage mothers would take advantage of the Re-entry policy to continue their education after childbirth. This has not been the case as teen mothers' re-entry across countries including Zambia established that significant number of teenage mothers are not re-entering. This implies that failure to re-enter at primary school level disadvantages the teen mothers to further their education. Moreover, they end up not acquiring the basic numeracy and literacy skills to function in society.

The other finding of this study was that CDC was no longer in charge of producing teaching and learning material. While there could be advantages to this move, it however poses a danger to a country's education curriculum especially if such a task is completely left to the private sector. The study suggested that while other organizations could be consistent in the production of books, the content could probably be compromised since the writers may be alien to the Zambian culture (Mwanza & Nankamba, 2017). This may eventually disadvantage the Zambian children. Lack of Trained personnel for the NLP. For the success of every program, the aspect of professionalism cannot be overemphasized. In the light of this study, it is common knowledge to infer the need for trained personnel to spearhead in the school deliberations as regards the NLP. However, the study discovered that the teachers in most primary schools had not been trained to handle classes using the NLP that was implemented. This is a source of concern due to the fact that sustainability of such a policy is placed into jeopardy. The study revealed that while the CDC's response may be viable, it may not, however, address this issue adequately since the methodology that teachers obtain from colleges focuses more on how to teach a subject and not on how to speak it. The repercussions on teachers' lack of knowledge and inability to speak a language of instruction may be seen in the avoidance of difficult topics in the syllabus, thereby disadvantaging the learners. This is consistent with findings revealed by UNESCO (2016) who posits that not knowing the MOI affects teachers and learners' morale. Nevertheless, the study revealed that some teachers benefited from the workshops that the ministry conducted in line with the NLP. Such a strategy from the ministry could be seen as one way of creating a standard approach towards the NLP. However, besides all sensitization, there is need for teachers to be trained in line with the curriculum in order to avoid a mismatch between policy and practice (Holmarsdottir, 2001). One other important revelation in the study was that in most schools, it was found that even if the grade seven pupils attempted Kiikaonde during the final examinations, the need for trained personnel who are competent in both spoken and written is a matter of urgency in schools where the policy was introduced. Teachers' perceptions on Pupil Performance.

The findings of this study also show that most urban schools had not implemented the policy and so had nothing new to show in terms of pupils' results. The results which were available were a reflection of the other policy where English was the MOI. In these results, it showed that there was excellent performance from the pupils. But findings of the study could not verify as to whether the good performance would continue even with the introduction of Kiikaonde as a medium of instruction. Findings of the study as regards sub urban schools revealed a lot of pupil participation accompanied with reduced absenteeism. More so, the excitement by some parents that they were now able to help their children with homework since it was in Kiikaonde was a sign that a bridge was been created between school and home, thereby enhancing the learners' education. These findings resonate with studies done by Dube & Mpolomoka (2018) who says that Language use and identity are entwined and much depends on many facets humans engage into and interface with. Hence, the study noted that a mother tongue is the language through which a person perceives the surrounding world and through which initial concept formation takes place. These findings indicate that, as a way of implementing the new curriculum, most teachers exhibited some creativity by putting the pupils into groups according to performance. This was done in order to know the amount of help that each child needed as they learnt to read, write or understand new concepts. The teachers in these schools used more of local language with a bit of English as they explained concepts to the children. The teacher's strategies are in line with other studies that advocate that initial literacy should begin from the learners' familiar world into the unfamiliar (Matafwali, 2006, Vygotsky 1979). This grouping of kids according to their performance was an improvised way of assessing their reading levels. Note, however, that even if this initiative seemed to have worked well, the trend to put the learners into groups does not follow the policy regulations of using local language as a medium of instruction.

The findings, therefore, reveal that the misinterpretation of the policy by teaching and not using Kiikaonde as a subject extended further by employing incorrect methods of assessing performance. Evidence to this effect was the information that

teachers could write four syllable words for the learners to read. In this context, the study did not indicate any test administered in terms of understanding the concepts before they could learn to read. It is therefore safe to mention that the many policy errors revealed in this study have a bearing on the lack of trained personnel. If teachers knew exactly what to do with the new curriculum, there could be no doubt that they would spend more time on using local language to explain concepts and not teaching Kiikaonde as a subject.

Nevertheless, the fact that sub urban schools were already showing better pupil performance cannot be ignored. What was exhibited in these schools is the aim of the policy, to enhance initial literacy for every child (NLP, 2013). The Zambian curriculum needs to put up stiff measures to ensure continuity of local languages not as optional subjects but that a simultaneous arrangement should be created to ensure the continuity of the local language. This will perhaps improve the low status of local languages in primary schools and indeed other spheres of society as indicated by Sampa (2003). Further the improved status of local languages would promote thinking skills in the learners who would use their cognitively developed minds to solve problems and not to replicate answers (Luangala & Mulenga, 2010).

One other issue of great concern that this study revealed was that while the medium of instruction could have well been accepted in schools there seems to be two different dialects between the one used in the text books and the one that learners and teachers use as the medium of instruction. If not given due attention, this situation could result into poor reading skills by the learners who may equally fail to understand the deep Kiikaonde that is used in text books and finally in the grade seven examinations. The consequence to this would be learners' failure to transfer literacy skills from the local language into English as the policy purports (Muyebaa, 2000). From the point of view of the sub-urban schools, it is evident from the findings that pupil performance has begun to improve despite the several misgivings spotted in the new curriculum. This is an indication of the great potential for positive effects that the new curriculum has in these schools. The overwhelming response to the policy in the schools is a sign that initial literacy is indeed best achieved in one's familiar language.

Findings of this study further suggest that most of the teachers in schools where the policy had been implemented were not trained as teachers of literacy but were handling the lower grades out of interest of the language. While this could be a plus on the volunteers, such a situation poses a danger as the teachers had no mandate and would therefore drop the classes at any time. One other caution would be that such teachers would have the interest and not the skill to use in class. Nevertheless, one informant acknowledged that she needed skills besides her interest. The workshops that MEVSTEE offered were highly appreciated as an enhancement towards implementation of the NLP. It could therefore be right to conclude that the other teachers would not volunteer to teach in Kiikaonde as they may not know the language. In this view, Plonski (2013) points out that not knowing the MOI may affect the whole teaching and learning process.

The findings suggest the need to train teachers who will use local language as medium of instruction from Grades 1 -4. Besides the positive effects of the policy cited mostly schools, the study reveals other concerns on the NLP. The sentiments on the low status of the local languages cited in urban schools were one common factor throughout the study. The fear by urban schools that such a status of the MOI could affect the performance of the learners would be a topic for serious consideration. If the learners do not use the purported channel of communication, evaluating such a policy would prove difficult. In this view, MoE (2013) states that a deficit in communication skills results in negative consequences on the learners' performance and self-esteem. As suggested by the informants, there is need to revamp the status of local languages in Zambia. The schools would probably be the appropriate starting point where learners, who occupy a larger part of society, can be sensitized on the need to appreciate and value the local languages. Addressing the shortage of teaching and learning materials for local languages requires a multifaceted approach. Efforts should focus on curriculum development that incorporates indigenous languages, capacity building for educators, and the production of culturally relevant resources. Collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities is essential to ensure sustainable solutions that promote linguistic diversity and educational equity in Zambia's primary schools (Kalasa, et al, 2024).

### 3.2.2 Lack of Competence of Teachers in the Local Language

In Zambian primary schools, the lack of competence among teachers in the local language presents a significant challenge to effective education. Firstly, many teachers in Zambia may not have received adequate training or education in the local languages spoken by their students. This deficiency in language proficiency can impede communication between teachers and students, hindering the transfer of knowledge and understanding in the classroom (Oketcho, 2014). Furthermore, the inability of teachers to effectively communicate in the local language may lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations

of lesson materials. This can result in students struggling to grasp fundamental concepts and falling behind in their studies. Without a solid foundation in the local language, students may struggle to engage with the curriculum and develop essential literacy skills. Moreover, the lack of competence in the local language among teachers may contribute to a disconnect between educators and the communities they serve. Language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of culture and identity. When teachers cannot effectively communicate in the local language, they may struggle to connect with students on a cultural level, leading to feelings of alienation or disengagement among learners. Additionally, the absence of proficient local language instruction may perpetuate a cycle of language loss and erosion of cultural heritage. When children are not taught in their native language, they may become disconnected from their cultural roots, leading to a decline in the use and preservation of indigenous languages. Likewise, in the Zambian contexts, secondment of teachers continue to pose a challenge in the education system. Precisely, the secondment of teachers continues to be done in specialized subjects such as science, mathematics, technology and computer studies to fill up the teaching vacancies in the secondary school sections of the Zambian education system. The problem is rife in the rural secondary schools of Zambia. This has posed a challenge in the sense that the teachers will not have fully acquired the relevant knowledge and skills in key subject areas entrusted to them in the secondment arrangement (Mpolomoka, et al, 2022).

Addressing the lack of competence among teachers in the local language requires a multifaceted approach. This could include providing comprehensive language training programs for teachers, integrating local languages into teacher education curricula, and fostering partnerships between schools and local communities to support language revitalization efforts (Pinnock, 2009). Addressing this issue is essential for promoting effective communication, enhancing student learning outcomes, and preserving cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. The study revealed that some teachers are not fluent in the local language and so they find it so hard to translate and teach because the curriculum is written in English. This finding is consistent with Akello and Timmerman (2017) who carried a study in Uganda titled local language a medium of instruction: challenges and way forward. Akello and Timmerman (2017, p. 10) argued that: The curriculum for the lower primary classes in Uganda is written in English and yet the MOI in the rural areas is the local language. Each subject teacher is therefore tasked with the responsibility of translating the curriculum into the local language and preparing the scheme of work and lesson plan. This task is challenging to the teachers since not all teachers have the skills of interpreting and translating. The lack of skills has led to many teachers to misinterpret and abandon the use of local language as MOI. And even if they are proficient, there are some concepts that are not easily translated from English into the local language. The poor translation affects the subject content of what is finally taught to the children. Though some teachers worked in groups to do the translation, the quality of the translated text depended so much on their levels of proficiency. The finding of this study is consistent with Mwanza (2012) who argued his study that one of the challenges faced when using a local language for teaching initial literacy was that teachers lacked fluency and enough vocabulary relevant for delivering content to learners.

### 3.2.3 Attitude of Teachers Towards Using Local Language as Medium of Instruction

In Zambian primary schools, the attitude of teachers towards using the local language as a medium of instruction plays a significant role in shaping the educational experience and outcomes of students. The utilization of the local language has been a subject of debate and consideration due to its potential impact on learning and cultural preservation. Many teachers exhibit a positive attitude towards incorporating the local language into their teaching practices. They recognize its importance in facilitating comprehension, especially among younger learners who may struggle with concepts taught in a foreign language. By using the local language, teachers aim to bridge the gap between students' home environments and the classroom, creating a more inclusive and culturally relevant learning atmosphere (Baker, 2006). Furthermore, some educators view the use of the local language as a means of preserving Zambia's rich cultural heritage. They believe that embracing indigenous languages in education not only enhances academic performance but also fosters a sense of identity and pride among students. By instilling a sense of cultural appreciation, teachers contribute to the preservation and promotion of Zambia's linguistic diversity.

However, there are also challenges and reservations among certain teachers regarding the use of the local language as a medium of instruction. Some educators may express concerns about the perceived limitations of local languages in conveying complex academic concepts, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and science. They fear that relying solely on the local language could hinder students' ability to compete globally and navigate higher education and employment opportunities effectively (Bamgbose, 2005). Additionally, the implementation of bilingual education policies may pose logistical challenges for teachers, including the availability of teaching materials and training opportunities to

effectively integrate the local language into their instruction (Jere, et al, 2024). Limited resources and support systems may hinder educators from fully embracing the use of indigenous languages in the classroom. The attitude of teachers towards using the local language as a medium of instruction in Zambian primary schools varies, reflecting a complex interplay of cultural, educational, and practical considerations. While many educators recognize the benefits of incorporating indigenous languages into teaching practices, challenges such as resource constraints and curriculum alignment may impact the extent to which this approach is implemented effectively. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort involving policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure that language diversity is celebrated and leveraged to enhance educational outcomes for all students.

This finding is supported by Brock-Utne (2001b) who stated that what teachers do in the classroom is fundamentally influenced by their personal views and beliefs. Teacher's attitudes are a major predictor of the use of new technologies in instructional settings (Mwanza, 2012). Consequently, the negative attitudes held by teachers about changes in the curriculum may negatively affect the use of instructional strategies which may in turn compromise the quality of teaching and learners' academic performance in literacy. In this study teachers were concerned about the use of Icibemba in a predominately lala speaking area and they seem to wonder why the Ministry of General Education was forcing a language on learners that was not familiar as a medium of teaching. In addition, Manchishi, (2004) noted that when a new curriculum is introduced, teachers are normally concerned with the following; the overwhelming work required in the implementation of the new curriculum, lack of proper training on the new curriculum and inadequacy of supporting material. Findings related to the availability of appropriate and adequate teaching and learning resources shows that they were not available at all. The findings indicated that there were no adequate text books for teachers to use and for learners to read during the process of teaching and learning. Additionally, teachers were finding it difficult to prepare teaching and learning aids for them to use in lessons. These findings were consistent with Kelly (1995) who also found that teachers in some selected schools of Lusaka urban faced the challenge of inadequate materials while implementing the use of Cinyanja as medium of teaching in the first four grades of primary schools. It was further revealed that materials were not only unavailable in schools but also in the entire country.

This analysis placed into perspective findings and data showing that the new language policy which the ministry of education introduced in 2013 had been implemented in schools though town schools seem to still have a challenge in implementing this policy. It should be noted from the outset that one of the findings which may help the reader to appreciate the study is that the study revealed a line divide between the urban and sub urban schools in the sense that the two types of schools are implementing this policy differently which needs quick attention before other schools are affected, it was revealed that Kiikaonde mostly is being used by the sub urban schools and English has still continued to be used by the urban schools which is not fare. This therefore entails that at present, we still have two mediums of instruction running in schools. Despite the genuine concerns on the use of local language as medium of instructions in primary lower grades, it may encounter some abuse by some schools and individuals whose aim of maintaining English as MOI may simply be for economic and prestigious gain at the expense of the local languages. This means that, local languages still maintain a low status not only in the education sector but in other sectors as well. Hence, the concern on the lack of teaching and learning material coupled with incompetent personnel cannot be overemphasized (Chanda, 2023). The study findings therefore emphasized that if not given due attention, this situation may pose a threat on the sustenance of the policy on language teaching in schools.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this study was to assess the effects of using local languages as a medium of instruction on academic performance of learners in primary schools in Solwezi district. The study had two main objectives which were as follows: extent to which using local languages as medium of instruction contributes to learner's academic success or failure in primary schools; and challenges teachers are encountering in delivering subject content to learners in local languages. On the first objective, it was found that using a local language as medium of instruction improved the performance of learners as they found it easy to understand the content. It was also discovered that learning in a familiar language boosted the confidence of the learners and captivated them to participate actively in all class activities. Concerning the challenges teachers encountered in delivering subject content to learners in local languages, the study found that schools and teachers faced numerous challenges including the following: lack of suitable teaching and learning materials in local languages, negative attitude by some to teaching lower primary grades due to the medium of instruction and incompetence among teachers in the local language as some are not native speakers of Kiikaonde.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The government through the ministry of education should decentralize educational planning and budgeting to allow provinces and districts to develop their own local language materials.
- Teacher recruitment should be aligned with language and instructional approach in such a way that teachers should be recruited and deployed to schools where their language proficiency aligns with those of the learners.
- Ministry of Education to ensure that all the materials required for teaching in Zambian local languages so that teachers deliver to the expected standard.
- Ministry of Education should revise the language policy by making local language and English as co-mediums of instruction so that learners could be able to understand both local languages and English at an early stage.
- The schools and district education board should conduct training workshops for teachers in the local language to sharpen their speaking and writing skills.
- Colleges and universities to decentralize some courses which can be taught in local languages, so that everyone will recognize local language to an important subject

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