

2012

# The Hegemony of English in South African Education

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## Recommended Citation

Figone, Kelsey E., "The Hegemony of English in South African Education" (2012). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 43.  
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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to all my readers, Professors Tony Crowley, David Roselli and Carmen Fought, for reading through this and giving me suggestions. Special thanks to Professor Tony Crowley for reading many drafts, providing me with detailed and attentive feedback, clarifying theory that I struggled with, and helping me to say what I really mean. The inspiration for this thesis came from students I met while studying abroad in South Africa, so thank you to the students and their teachers and parents for helping me understand a serious problem that merits greater attention.

## **Introduction**

My main interest as a Humanities major has always been the interdisciplinary study of human rights, and throughout college I had expected my thesis would examine a well-known human rights issue, such as the genocide in Rwanda or the use of child soldiers in Uganda. Instead, this thesis emerged from my experience studying abroad in Durban, South Africa. My study abroad program visited various public schools to examine the struggles and improvements in public education since the end of apartheid in 1994. Our follow-up discussions almost always centered on race and ethnicity, and how a legacy of racial oppression remains today. Yet, what I observed in the schools was not always racial oppression, but rather linguistic oppression.

The students I met were struggling, and teachers told me over and over again about their students' poor performance on the annual matriculation exam. They attributed the poor scores to a lack of resources, poor administrative support for teachers, disparities between historic "white" schools and "black" schools, and even the stupidity of their students. I observed that the majority of classes were taught in English, but when I tried to talk to the students in English few could understand what I was saying. When I asked students to tell me what they had learned at the end of a class, I received blank stares. When I reiterated the question in broken isiZulu, their faces brightened and they responded in complex isiZulu that exceeded my meager conversational skills. They were not shy and they were not stupid. They simply couldn't understand what I was saying in English. How could these students endure six hours of school a day without understanding what was going on? How did teachers not realize that their students could not understand them? Or did they realize and choose to ignore it? Was the problem too

difficult to fix? This language difficulty seemed to be an overlooked human rights issue because it was preventing certain students from learning and unfairly advantaging mother-tongue English speakers.

I have grown up in the U.S. and my direct knowledge of South Africa is limited to the four months I spent in the country, including the one month I spent conducting field research on this topic. Therefore, my observations and opinions come from the perspective of an outsider. My experience deals primarily with the language difficulties encountered by one ethnic group, the Zulu, while there remain 10 other official (and many other unofficial) language communities which encounter similar issues. My removed perspective can be viewed as both an aid and a hindrance – my foreign position might provide me with a fresh, less-biased perspective, or it may limit my understanding of the issues. This thesis is not intended to advise South Africans on what is best for them – they know what they want and what is best for their situation, and I can only draw attention to a pressing problem.

The hegemony of English in South African education is a new form of oppression that has not yet received adequate or focused attention in South Africa. In an effort to distance itself from a brutal apartheid past, the country has tried to uphold human rights and advocate for language equality and educational opportunity; however, these efforts too often fall short. In order to truly give each South African the freedom to determine their own lives, the role of English in education must be addressed.

## **Chapter 1: Complicating the Concept of Language**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, an exiled Kenyan author who has written in English but also in his native Gĩkũyũ, argues that, “the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces [indigenous and imperialist] in the Africa of the twentieth century” (*Decolonizing the Mind* 4). Language is an integral part of identity and dignity and, as such, the manipulation of language policy and education involves dynamics of power (5). For example, the widespread use of English in South African public education has encouraged its cultural domination, despite the fact that the majority of the population does not speak English as their mother-tongue (Marback 362). The use of English has emerged from a specific history of oppression, and within various understandings of what language is and what it can do. To examine and analyze the South African language situation, we must begin with a definition and analysis of language itself.

### **What is Language?**

“Language” is a term that is tossed around loosely under the assumption that everyone knows what it means; it seems so fundamental to our existence that we rarely question it. Everyone uses language in some sense, for a myriad of purposes and in a variety of ways. It is more than just a collection of words in a dictionary, as new words are formed and old words evolve. It is not bound by nation-states, as people of different ethnicities and nationalities can use the same language. There are different accents and styles of speech, and it is possible to be a native speaker, a fluent speaker, or just a

learner of a language. We know that language is not something we are born with but rather something we absorb and learn as we grow (Saville-Troike 7; 14). We know that it is something which can be translated, but imperfectly. Language can be spoken, written, and, as with sign language, signaled through a variety of gestures. Additionally, “it is not true that languages simply develop ‘naturally,’ as it were. They are formed and manipulated within definite limits to suit the interests of different groups of people” (Alexander, “After Apartheid” 12). The manipulation of language is a clear theme in South African history, as English, Afrikaans, and indigenous African languages were alternately imposed as official languages and supported through public education and missionary research, purposefully contributing to the growth and repression of certain languages. All of these factors complicate the definition of language, and make it difficult to place boundaries on what precisely language, and a specific language, is. Complicating the definition of language is not only a matter of theoretical importance, but also of practical importance to explain how languages can be used to advantage certain communities of people at the expense of others, as is the case in South Africa.

### **Definitions**

Pierre Bourdieu, the 20<sup>th</sup> century French sociologist, suggests that one definition of language is “official language,” or the dialect which is taught and endorsed by a nation-state as the legitimate language (45). Many people assume that language *is* “official language.” Yet it is important to note that official language is not a preexisting form that everyone inherently comes to speak; rather we are *taught* the official language – it is not natural. Formal education grooms us in the official language. Thus, there is no “natural” distinction between a dialect and a language; the latter has simply “benefited

from the institutional conditions necessary for its generalized codification and imposition” (Bourdieu 45). This can be further understood through the phrase popularized by Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich: “language is a dialect with an army and a navy” (qtd. in Hill 41). What we commonly think of as “language” is in fact Bourdieu’s “official language,” or that which has been recognized by a nation-state’s political authority and reinforced through education, the media, and popular culture. Our actual everyday language practice incorporates slang and “incorrect” grammar. This misconception has worked to thwart those languages which have not received official state recognition, but which contain similarly complex linguistic structures and usage and are thus in no way inherently inferior to the official language.

Language also has “a suggestive power beyond the immediate and lexical meaning” because it is intimately tied to culture(s), another hard-to-define concept (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 11). For the purposes of this paper “culture” will be broadly defined as everything that constitutes a way of life for a particular group of people. And, like culture, language is fluid and changing, adapting to the creation of new words and nuances and seeking to encompass further realms of experience over time (Ngũgĩ, *Moving the Centre* xv). For example, computers were not a widespread part of American culture until recently but they have initiated an entirely new vocabulary which includes new words like “emailing,” or even emoticons as new signifiers of meaning.

Ngũgĩ clarifies what he calls the “dual character” of language, and the first aspect of this dual character is language’s ability to communicate (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 13). Language enables us to communicate our thoughts, emotions, ideas, and actions to one another using the same system of “linguistic signs”. Imagine how difficult

it would be to interact with other people without language; how would one explain a need, or depict a dream, or express love? Our consciousness is structured by our language, and most of our thoughts would remain trapped inside our head. But a vital part of what it means to be human is sharing our humanity with other people. Our lives have an impact on each other, and the communicative aspects of language enable living to be a collective experience. Communication through language records history and enables participation in broader society (Williams 18). The communicative aspect is a vital component of language, but it is not its only aspect.

The second aspect of Ngũgĩ's dual character of language is its ability to act as a cultural carrier. By cultural carrier, Ngũgĩ means language operates as the "collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 15). While I agree with his overall concept of language as a cultural carrier, I diverge from his opinion that it acts as a "collective," homogenous memory bank. A people's experience in history is complex and often divisive, depending on one's perspective and place within a culture. Many people can share a culture, but it doesn't mean they share the same perspective or experience within that culture. For example, the "N word" carries different weight and meaning in American culture depending on who says it. Its use is accepted in popular music by black American artists, and it is not commonly considered offensive if used between two black American people, although this is debated. However, it is considered extremely offensive and racist if used by a white American to refer to a black American because of its pejorative use in American history as a tool of black oppression in the United States. The word "native" carries a similar weight in South Africa. It was used as a blanket term for all indigenous black Africans by the Afrikaner government to demean

and demarcate them as inferior and uncivilized (G. Boyce). For this reason, the term “mother-tongue” will be used throughout this paper instead of “native language.” These two examples show that language is not neutral and carries a specific cultural meaning that can vary even within a single culture.

### **The Power of Language as Cultural Capital**

Through these dual aspects of language, Bourdieu suggests that language acts as “cultural capital,” or more specifically “linguistic capital.” He uses the specific term “capital” to suggest that nonmaterial factors, such as mastery of and relation to a language, grants an individual not only power, but it also material wealth. For example, if a South African individual in Durban can only speak isiZulu, they hold little linguistic capital – the kind of employment that individual can find is limited and there is no higher education available exclusively in their language. However, if an individual is also a fluent English speaker in Durban, they are eligible for more (and higher paid) employment and can avail themselves of higher education. English has more linguistic capital and is presumably able to “buy” greater prosperity. It is important to note that linguistic capital is not inherent to a language but is societally endowed in a language through a variety of factors. Máiréad Nic Craith paraphrases Bourdieu to define linguistic cultural capital as, “fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, worldwide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural, and political power and status in local and global society” (“Languages and Power” 2). Thus, not every language has the same linguistic capital; some languages wield more economic, social, cultural, and political power and status than others. In South Africa, English has attained greater

linguistic capital through its dominance in the global economy and as the language of British colonialists.

“Official languages” are examples of languages with great cultural capital. Once a language has been granted official status by a nation-state it will likely be taught in public schools, used in the market as the means for economic exchange, and eventually used predominantly in the private sphere. Official language is usually seen as the “collective property of the whole group,” universally encompassing the nation, chosen because it is presumably already the language of many within the nation (Bourdieu 44). This argument fails to realize the productive power an official language has, in that it is constantly reproduced as the legitimate language of the population rather than allowing for the constant change of culture and language which may push for a shift away from the official language (45). The official status of a language grants a stamp of legitimacy which is only granted to one (or several) language(s) and not others. The official language is granted cultural and linguistic capital which exerts dominance and oppression over other languages and, ultimately, other cultures (46). In post-apartheid South Africa there are 11 official languages, and Bourdieu’s concept of official language does not operate in quite the same way. There are too many official South African languages for all of them to exert dominance and oppression. Although isiZulu is an official language with equal Constitutional status to English, it is not hegemonic throughout South Africa in the same way as English. Official status is not enough to be a significant determinant of cultural capital in South Africa.

Another example of the way language can be endowed with cultural capital is its use in cultural artifacts, such as books. Books transmit knowledge and culture, with the

power to spread ideas in a concrete form which may endure over time easier than oral remembrance. Thus, the greater a language's use in books, the greater cultural capital it has because the language can be sold and traded and spread through the book. We believe, inaccurately, that written languages are more complex and sophisticated than unwritten languages (Saville-Troike 25). The Zulus have a rich culture of oral storytelling, rather than written literature (until recently), and the writer Saul Bellow infamously stated that, "when the Zulus produce a Tolstoy we will read him," assuming that "excellence has to take forms familiar to us," such as in written books (qtd. in Taylor 42; 71). These kinds of assumptions have contributed to isiZulu's lesser cultural capital. In contrast, most South African textbooks are written in English, and part of the reason that English is perceived as a unifying and valuable language by modern South Africans is because it has been the language of technology and innovation: the invention of computers and other technology first occurred in places where English is dominant, and consequently technology vocabulary is derived from English and technical books are in English (G. Boyce). Additionally, many isiZulu speakers, such as Dokodweni Primary School teacher, Mr. Mthula, consider their number-counting system to be excessively complex and prefer to use English numbers.<sup>1</sup> He feels that South African indigenous languages can't convey concepts such as math and science effectively (personal interview).

English is the language of technology neither because English-speakers are inherently smarter nor because the English language is more complex; rather, it is because English-speaking nations have asserted their dominance largely through

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper for individuals I interviewed as part of my research in South Africa.

colonization and the continuing oppression of other cultures, amassing the wealth and power which fosters innovation (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 36). Thus, the culture of technology and innovation is not inherent to English, but has been produced. English has more linguistic capital than other languages in South Africa not only because it will presumably enable the speaker to interact with more people as a lingua franca, but also because it enables the speaker to engage in lucrative and innovative fields (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 96; Nic Craith, “Languages and Power” 2). Learning English (or any other dominant language) is rarely seen as simply an opportunity to learn a second language and expand one’s horizons of the world; instead, it is frequently seen as the only path to success and fortune later in life (Reagan 62; Vusi and Babalwa, personal interviews).

Colonialism and, later, apartheid have been the primary contributors to reducing the cultural capital of indigenous languages in South Africa. Those periods included economic and political oppression as well as mental and cultural oppression by controlling indigenous “tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 16). That is, the colonial metropolis, and later the apartheid government, began to dominate African culture, understanding that absolute economic and political control would be impossible without controlling the hearts and minds of Africans. Ngũgĩ calls this a two-part approach to cultural control: first, destroy and undervalue the indigenous culture (including artistic expression, education, literature, history, etc.) and second, simultaneously elevate the culture of the colonizer (*Decolonizing the Mind* 16; Desai 21). While his example applies specifically to Kenya, it is applicable to the language policies of apartheid Bantu Education and colonial

missionary education as well (Murray 435).<sup>2</sup> These policies devalued indigenous African languages while elevating English and Afrikaans, making indigenous African languages inferior. This mindset continues today.

Many ex-colonial societies still struggle with widespread poverty and political and economic corruption, leaning on their previous empires for aid. Thus, many ex-colonized people continue to see the avenues to success through these Western countries. This accounts for the “brain drain” that many African countries experience (in which youth either leave their respective countries for educational opportunities in Europe and the U.S., or have been educated in their respective countries and leave for Europe and the U.S. in pursuit of job opportunities) as well as the lack of internal infrastructure within Africa itself (Jones; Guttenplan). African countries are even categorized in relation to the European languages they speak: West Africa as “French-speaking,” South Africa as “English-speaking,” and so on, instead of recognizing that the majority of their populations speak other languages as mother-tongues. This is no longer a result of direct Western domination. There is no longer an external colonial or oppressive force telling black South Africans that their language and culture are inferior; rather, many South Africans have now internalized some of this inferiority and reproduce it by encouraging the growth and spread of English (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 18; Marback 356). They contribute to the diminishing linguistic capital of their own mother tongues by encouraging their children to learn exclusively in English and by accepting its dominant usage in government and in the media (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 96). These attitudes exemplify the legacy of prior domination in South Africa.

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<sup>2</sup> This history will be elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

Why should we care that some languages are defined as “official”, legitimate, or endowed with cultural capital? If culture and language are fluid and constantly changing, then on the surface the recent preferences for languages like English can be seen as just another development in the constant process of change. Such indifference fails to grasp the wider scope of what is happening to languages and why a more nuanced perspective is required. The recent shifts towards dominant languages are not a part of a “natural” progression, but rather a subversive oppression which actively marginalizes and extinguishes certain languages.<sup>3</sup> And since language acts as a cultural carrier, it is not necessarily just the languages themselves which will be lost but perhaps also the cultures of certain communities. Oppressing and marginalizing a language oppresses and marginalizes people, their identities, and their communities:

Language is valuable intrinsically because we live our lives and experience our cultural heritage through it. The sense of self and heritage that we derive from our languages may be important to us, but for others to respect our right to our own language they must come to accept that the lives we live through our languages and heritages are indeed meaningful, satisfying, and worthwhile, and that our languages enable our contributions to broader culture, politics, and society. (Marback 360)

Language is not neutral, static or simple, and endowed with cultural capital it can inflict harm as powerfully as physical violence (Taylor 25). The cultural capital of English obscures the intrinsic value of the indigenous South African languages, and to understand how this has come about requires an examination of South Africa’s history.

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<sup>3</sup> This argument will be explored further in Chapters 3 and 4.

## **Chapter 2: A History of South Africa**

South Africa's current language situation emerges from a complex history of oppression and division. Examining this history can explain why certain languages, like English, have come to be hegemonic within South Africa while others, like isiZulu, have come to be viewed as inferior. However, understanding the history isn't only important in explaining the trajectory of certain languages; it also shows how division and inequality have been embedded in South African society, larger themes of which language has been one important manifestation. The inequality and injustices that South Africans live with today are not the same as those experienced during apartheid or colonialism; some academics, such as Zubeida Desai, go so far as to call the current situation "linguistic apartheid," in which the criterion for access to rights and resources has changed from race to language (21). Understanding the way previous South Africans were divided can illuminate what is new and different about the way current South Africans interact and think about one another.

Divisions between various groups of South Africans didn't begin with apartheid; rather, white (Afrikaner and British) dominance took place gradually during the centuries prior to apartheid. The oppression and segregation of black indigenous Africans moved from being societal norms during colonialism to part of a government-established system under apartheid. Over this period, language progressed from being a marker of social difference to being a tool of division. It is necessary to begin this history before white European involvement in southern Africa in order to establish a firm foundation for later discussion of language and education in modern South Africa. This will show how European colonial dominance took place over a long period of time amidst resistance

from the indigenous population. Thus, this is part of why the legacy of inequality and division (of which current language policy is a central part) is still so hard to eradicate: it is not just 50 years of apartheid oppression that must be overcome, but also the 300 years that came before apartheid.

The current South African population is comprised of a multitude of ethnicities, usually separated into 3 major groups: black Africans (75% of the population), Whites (13%), and Coloured (9%) (Thompson 6). These groups generally align with certain languages. The black African group includes Xhosa- and Zulu-speakers (the largest language groups in South Africa) among other indigenous African language-speakers. Whites include people of both Dutch (Afrikaner) and British descent. Afrikaners speak Afrikaans (a language which emerged from the Dutch dialects spoken by colonial Dutch settlers), while British-descent South Africans speak English. Coloured is used to designate those of mixed-race, usually Afrikaans-speaking and largely located in the Western Cape. It can be difficult for Americans to imagine this third category, since our dominant racial terms are “black” and “white,” and the word “Coloured” has a pejorative meaning for black Americans. However, in South Africa, “Coloured” is considered its own legitimate ethnic category and does not carry a negative connotation (Daniel). The lines between these groups are not rigid or intrinsic, but have been created over time as different communities have interacted.

It is important to remember that all histories come from a specific perspective, and most of South Africa’s history has been recorded by white colonialists and oppressors since few indigenous South Africans wrote about themselves until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson 2). The emergence of the current South African groups as distinct

identities speaking different languages has developed within a larger system of control and inequality which divided people along geographical and racial lines as well. My account of South Africa's history intentionally focuses on language and education, but will also discuss broader instances of division and control because language operated within a larger concept of "divide and rule" (Heugh, "Recovering Multilingualism" 468). While I will include certain general events I consider important for an overall understanding of South Africa, I have certainly left out important events and details.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Earliest South Africans**

The foundation of the current South African situation begins before the start of apartheid in 1948 or the beginning of colonialism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest known South Africans were the ancestors of the Khoesan hunter-gatherers (Mesthrie, "South Africa" 13; Thompson 6). Our modern vantage point views hunter-gathering as a preindustrial, unskilled and desperate way of life; however this is not necessarily the case (Segal). Early South Africans worked approximately 15 hours per week to provide 2,140 calories per capita per day (in comparison to our modern-day 40 hour work week). They engaged in a "philosophy of limited wants," and practiced cultural pursuits which included rock art and music (Thompson 9). Hunter-gatherers were still present in the 1500s in the drier areas of southern Africa in addition to pastoralists (those who herded sheep and cattle) in the west near the Cape peninsula. The languages of the pastoralists and hunter-gatherers were characterized by "clicks," consonant sounds made by obstructing airflow in various ways. There was also a third group of mixed-farmers (those who herded sheep and cattle, but also farmed cereal crops, used iron tools and hunted).

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<sup>4</sup> For a deeper and comprehensive understanding of South African history, see Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa*. He presents the history through a self-proclaimed "radical, liberal historiography," and I believe he effectively presents the history from a nuanced perspective.

This group spoke Bantu languages (precursors to the modern Bantu languages, isiZulu and isiXhosa), as did groups further north in Africa (Thompson 10; Mesthrie, “South Africa” 11). The mixing and migration of all these groups is difficult to trace, but they came to be culturally understood as three distinct groups by European colonialists.<sup>5</sup> The hunter-gatherers were termed “Bushmen,” the pastoralists were known as “Hottentots,” and the mixed-farmers became known as “Kaffirs” by the later white South Africans (Thompson 7). These were derogatory terms, and the more modern ethnic terms for these groups are San, Khoikhoi, and black Africans respectively.<sup>6</sup> The Bantu-language speaking Africans are the ancestors of the majority of modern-day South Africans, and the San and Khoikhoi have contributed largely to this group as well as to the Coloured population.

Mixed-farming society was hierarchical and the political system comprised of fluid autonomous hereditary chiefdoms that varied in size and accommodated aliens and those from different hereditary clans (Thompson 22). Formal education was typically limited to initiation school, when young boys were isolated for several months to be circumcised and instructed in the beliefs and practices of their people as a rite of passage from puberty to adulthood (Murray 435). Mixed-farming spread both through cooperation with the hunter-gatherers it encountered (forming alliances with the hunting-gathering bands, and incorporating these bands into mixed-farming chiefdoms) or

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<sup>5</sup> It is unclear whether pastoralism and mixed farming in southern Africa emerged from within southern Africa much earlier than previously presumed, or as a result of continuous migration in which northern groups integrated their knowledge with southern groups slowly over time. The three groups of early South Africans are not as distinct as European colonialism made them out to be (Thompson 10-13; Bailey and Herbert 51; 59).

<sup>6</sup> Thompson uses “African” throughout his book to signify black South Africans of Bantu descent. However, this is problematic because white Afrikaners and British descendants are Africans as well. They have lived in South Africa for many generations and practice a culture unique to their experience in South Africa. For the purposes of this paper, I will use “black Africans” instead of Thompson’s “Africans.”

through warfare (when the hunter-gatherers attacked mixed-farmers' livestock out of desperation and the mixed-farmers retaliated) (Thompson 28). As mixed-farming spread, the Bantu languages incorporated loan words and influences from the hunter-gatherers, including the click sounds which had previously been only a part of the San languages (30). It is estimated that approximately 15% of Xhosa and Zulu originated from Khoesan languages; most Khoesan languages are endangered and several are now extinct (Herbert 299; "Languages of South Africa"; Gilmore 10).

By the time of white European settlement (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), southern Africa was divided between the areas east of the twenty-inch rainfall zone (where mixed-farming had become dominant) and west of it (where pastoralism and hunter-gathering continued). Thus, the twenty-inch rainfall zone became a sort of frontier zone between the two sections, especially when mixed-farming had dominated all the available land to the east (Gilmore 18; O'Rourke)

### **The Influx of Europeans**

The first known Europeans to land in southern Africa were the Portuguese in 1487, as fleets began to switch trading routes with Southeast Asia from the ancient routes through the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to an oceanic route around the Cape of Good Hope. By the 1600s, other European mariners also regularly used this new route. In 1652 Jan van Riebeeck and an expedition of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) arrived in Table Bay to build a fort and provide supplies for Dutch fleets (Mesthrie, "South Africa" 14). The intent was not to annex a new area or exploit it for profit, but rather to create an outpost along the trade routes that could provide fresh food and a place to pause on long journeys (Gilmour 29). Some Company employees, usually lower-class Dutch, were

released as “free burghers” to become farmers who would sell their produce to the Company (Thompson 37). Despite the colony’s limited purpose as an outpost, it would soon expand and gain relative autonomy. The arrival of Europeans, therefore, had quite a different effect on southern Africa than it did in other areas of Africa; intended as an outpost with few permanent settlers, a relatively large number of European-descendants would come to consider South Africa their home.

Cape society throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century imagined itself hierarchically: the senior urban Dutch Company officials were at the top, then the successful settlers, next the less successful rural burghers, and finally slaves at the bottom. Yet the lines between these groups were not hard and fast. Occasionally European men married freed slave women, “and there was also a great deal of extramarital sexual activity across the status and color lines, nearly all of it between white men and slave women” (Thompson 45). This resulted in a “lightening” of the “black” (all non-Europeans) population and a “darkening” of the white population, mixing which would provide a foundation for the future Coloured ethnicity. This postulated hierarchy, in the midst of a reality in which the hierarchy is regularly breached, is a trope of South African history and is utilized regularly later during the apartheid era. It is used to justify the power of one group at the expense of another; in this case, the European settlers imagined themselves as superior to the slave women they employed, even as they took part in extramarital sexual activity that contradicted their superiority.

Tensions soon developed between the burghers and the Khoikhoi pastoralist inhabitants of the western zone. Upon Riebeeck’s arrival, relations were initially peaceful and cooperative; however, as they witnessed the building of the fort and the

encroachment on the land, the Khoikhoi began raiding farms and war broke out intermittently between 1673 and 1677. The Europeans had superior weapons and effectively crushed Khoikhoi opposition, finally pushing the population to near extinction when smallpox broke out in 1713 (South African History Online (SAHO), “The Second KhoiKhoi”). Thompson quotes an unnamed Khoikhoi man, who said in 1775 that the Dutch were “unjust invaders of the Hottentot territories. For want of strength and powers, (he said) these latter were now no longer in a condition to withstand their encroachments; almost every day some Hottentot or other was being obliged to remove with his cattle, whenever the pasture he was in possession of, happened to suit a colonist” (qtd. in Thompson 49).

Tensions also developed between the Xhosa and the trekboers (semi-migrant Dutch-descendent farmers who practiced pastoral farming and hunting, as opposed to agricultural farming) as the VOC sought to expand. Warfare between these two groups broke out on the frontier zone at the end of the eighteenth century. This strained relations between the trekboers and their government because the government provided little support against the Xhosa (Thompson 50-51). The Dutch colonists began to imagine themselves as victims of the Khoikhoi, the Xhosa, and their own colonial government, and this planted a seed of solidarity which would provide the basis for the later Afrikaner nationalist movement.

### **The Transition from Dutch Colonialism to British Colonialism**

In 1795, the British captured the Cape colony from the Dutch in a period when British maritime power was dominant (Gilmour 29). In 1803, the Dutch regained the colony temporarily in the Treaty of Amiens, however they lost it to the British again in

1806. A peace settlement in 1814 firmly established it as a British colony, although the history of conflict and resulting resentment between the British and the Dutch had profound ramifications that would determine the shape of ethnic relations and encourage the growth of Afrikaans in apartheid South Africa (SAHO, "VOC is formed").

Unlike the Dutch colonial government, the British began taking a greater interest in the eastern frontier zone with the Xhosa. Their official policy in 1809 was to keep the colony and the Xhosa "absolutely separate from one another until the Whites were powerful enough to dominate the region." Troops were used to expel the Xhosa to beyond the Fish River and the Keiskamma in 1811-1812 and 1817-1819, firmly cementing colonial control on the west side (Thompson 54). This absolute separation of the "Whites" from the indigenous groups exemplifies the fact that racial division was not solely a creation of apartheid, but actually occurred much earlier in South African history.

After the British seized control of southern Africa, problems arose within the colonists. The British settlers did not assimilate with the other white settlers, and termed the previous settlers "boers" ("farmer" in Afrikaans, later a derogatory term for Afrikaners). Thompson compares the distinction between British- and Dutch-descent South Africans to the Anglo-French distinction in Canada, both occupying the same space but practicing and adhering firmly to their own cultures (56). Language was a key marker of difference because it allowed the two white groups to imagine themselves separately, rather than as united colonists. The Dutch-speakers referred to themselves as "Afrikaners," meaning "Africans" in Afrikaans because they viewed themselves as

distinct, independent Africans, not Europeans.<sup>7</sup> However, this term is used only to denote the ethnic group of Dutch-ancestry white South Africans whose mother-tongue is now Afrikaans. While the term itself means “Africans,” its use is not extended to black Africans. This distinction, and the Afrikaner insistence on being native to Africa, undergirded the apartheid movement and granted it legitimacy in the minds of apartheid advocates. Afrikaners imagined themselves as entitled to rule over the land because they were Africans, as opposed to the British settler “foreigners” who were unjustly encroaching on land that was not rightfully theirs (Daniel). Of course, the Afrikaners didn’t consider that they, too, were encroaching on indigenous land. Language didn’t serve to distinguish between black African groups with regards to rights and treatment: all indigenous groups were treated as inferior regardless of the language they spoke.

The Afrikaner settlers had many complaints about British colonial rule, including the ban on slavery, decreased farmer autonomy, loss of land, and dislike of the increasing evangelical influence on the British government (Thompson 57). In the 1830s some eastern Afrikaners decided to migrate further east in search of a “Promised Land” where they could live free from British restraint. During the twentieth century, this migration came to be known as “The Great Trek” and was celebrated as a great Afrikaner achievement by the apartheid government, especially by the Afrikaner Broederbond (an Afrikaner nationalist secret society with great political influence) (Daniel; SAHO, “Afrikaner Broederbond”). It became part of an Afrikaner nationalist history, as a way of showing the world the solidarity, determination, and superiority of Afrikaners. While the trek was important – it led to the future Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free

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<sup>7</sup> In this period the Dutch settlers are still considered Dutch-speaking. Afrikaans evolved into its own language (categorized as linguistically distinct) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mesthrie 17).

State which expanded white control of southern Africa – it was by no means as widespread or as peaceful a migration as portrayed. Only 9% of the total white population took part in the Great Trek (25% of the eastern Cape Afrikaners), and they seized occupied land (Thompson 69; SAHO, “Great Trek 1835-1846”). At the same time, great upheaval had been taking place in the eastern zone,; the Mfecane (“great wandering, dispersion of people” in Zulu) was a series of wars and forced migration from the Zulu empire’s rapid expansion and acquisition of smaller chiefdoms (Mesthrie, “South Africa” 15). The influx of the Afrikaner voortrekkers (“pioneers”) contributed to the instability, displacement, and killing caused by the Mfecane. Small wars between the Xhosa and the whites, and the Zulu and the whites also made it possible for the white population to gain deeper and deeper entry into the eastern zone.

As the voortrekkers spread throughout the area they termed “Natal” (also known as KwaZulu, or “Zulu place” in isiZulu), some indigenous chiefs appealed to the British for protection (Thompson 41). The initial “protection” provided by the British ultimately became an annexation of Natal in 1843, and as the voortrekkers fled once again (this time to the highveld of modern-day Gauteng province) British settlers flooded in at the same time as a large influx of Zulus entered the colony to escape continuing problems in the Zulu kingdom (Gilmour 129). Black Africans came to far outnumber the white population in Natal as they had in the Cape colony. British policy changed from “protection” to control of the African population, foreshadowing a later policy of “indirect rule” throughout Africa (Daniel; Gilmour 127). Hereditary chiefs were granted limited power through roles as subordinate officials (Thompson 98). The British provided “locations” specifically for black African habitation and separated them from the white

population; these “locations” were the basis for the segregated reserves and, later, “homelands” of apartheid (Gilmour 127). Prior to this period, colonial dominance was largely asserted through physically violent means, such as warring with the indigenous groups. During this period the British began to include cultural control through missionary education as a new means of asserting dominance: “the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* 9). Missionary activity was a means of control and surveillance, as missionary education and the study of indigenous languages were used to naturalize indigenous black Africans as inferior while elevating British culture, an example of Ngũgĩ’s two-part cultural control.

### **Missionary Education**

Missionaries had been in southern Africa since 1799. They recognized that evangelizing required the ability to communicate with one’s “flock,” and missionaries became deeply involved in African language study, first to be able to preach in their language and second to translate the Bible. Once these initial steps were achieved, missionaries made efforts to catalog and record the African languages to prepare new missionaries prior to their arrival and to aid Scriptural translation (62). Many African languages were thus appropriated, as missionaries tried to make them “vehicles for Christian meaning (Gilmour 54; 57-58; 64).

After the annexation of Natal by the British, the study of Zulu became a focus for many missionaries. Language had become a marker of social cohesion within the Zulu empire after the Mfecane, and a particular form of the language was associated with the Zulu elite (Gilmour 121). This prestige appealed to missionaries as the ideal vehicle for

spreading Christianity. The elite isiZulu variant came to be perceived as “prestigious, pure, and stable” in comparison to other variants or other smaller African languages that came to be measured against isiZulu (though, of course, not in comparison to English or Afrikaans) (122). Speakers of isiZulu came to be homogenously known as Zulus, even if they were from different ethnic groups which had been conquered by the Zulu in the Mfecane. Rachael Gilmour suggests that this “justified Britain’s control of Natal – the Africans in the colony could be regarded as victims of Shaka’s violence or as displaced refugees being protected by the just rule of the British, rather than as colonized people who had been deprived of land to which they had prior claim” (124). As a result, “Zulu-speakers within Natal were considered as contained, colonized subjects, from the 1840s onwards” (128). Social constructions of inferiority were placed on the language and extended to the Zulu people. The legacy of this perspective continues today, as Zulu students try to escape a presumed inferiority by pursuing success through learning English (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 96). They fail to realize that the manner in which they pursue this success, via English-medium education rather than isiZulu-medium education, can be another means of constraint.

### **Expansion and Increasing Racial Tensions**

The function and structure of the colonies began to change as they grew. The British annexed Natal in 1843 and then Lesotho (named “Basutoland” by the British) in 1868, and the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were recognized officially as independent Afrikaner republics (Thompson xx). The discovery of diamonds in Kimberley, gold in Johannesburg, and the creation of an intensive mining industry all along the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal (the northeast of South Africa) transformed the

economy of the entire British colony in the period from 1870 to 1899. All the remaining independent black Africans were incorporated as a part of the increasingly capitalist colony, conquering the Zulu kingdom in 1879 and the Venda population in the Transvaal in 1898 (Daniel; Thompson xx).

It was during this period, particularly within the large Afrikaner population in the Cape Colony and the Transvaal, that Afrikaner nationalism began to flourish (Mesthrie, “South Africa 18). Afrikaans first emerged as a literary language in the 1870s in opposition to the postulated elitist “High Dutch” traditionally used in literature (17). S.J. Du Toit wrote the first book in Afrikaans to detail the distinctiveness of Afrikaners and their origins in South Africa, weaving a nationalist narrative in which he argued Afrikaners’ destiny to rule Southern Africa and its “heathens” (Thompson 135). In the Transvaal, Afrikaners resisted British domination in the region by circumventing Britain to trade with Germany. As a result, Britain sought control of the Transvaal to solidify control of the entire region, especially as other European nations industrialized and began to threaten Britain’s imperialist dominance (139).

The simmering tensions between the many ethnic groups, combined with the ambitions of the British Empire, lead to the South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War) in 1899-1902. The British adopted a scorched-earth policy to destroy Afrikaner crops and farms and put Afrikaner civilians in concentration camps, 28,000 Afrikaner civilians dying (mostly children).<sup>8</sup> While this war has been perceived and remembered as a war primarily between the two white South African populations, black

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<sup>8</sup> While the term “concentration camps” evokes the Holocaust, these camps precede the Holocaust and did not utilize the same methods. They began as refugee camps which overflowed with Afrikaner civilians as a result of the scorched-earth policy. They then evolved into concentration camps which the British made little effort to maintain.

Africans were used extensively on both sides and many died, suffering from the British scorched-earth policy as well (SAHO, “The Second Anglo-Boer War”). Afrikaners successfully resisted for the first two and a half years of the war, but ultimately the British defeated them through the concentration camps, scorched earth policy, and by cutting off their arms supply through naval dominance (Thompson 143).

While the British won the war, the outcome was not what they had expected. They had hoped to crush Afrikaner nationalism, but instead they fueled it further – Afrikaners in the previously independent republics were bitter about the number of their people killed in concentration camps, and they rallied around Du Toit’s narrative of Afrikaner distinctiveness and entitled dominance. After the war, Afrikaans became a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism and resistance as the British tried to anglicize the Afrikaners through English-medium education (Mesthrie, “South Africa” 18). Africans had hoped that their lives would improve after the war because the British had criticized the treatment of Africans by the republican Afrikaners; instead, freedom of movement was restricted further as the British tried to force African labor into the mining industries (O’Rourke; SAHO, “The Second Anglo-Boer War”). Throughout the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black Africans staged several unsuccessful rebellions which were largely suppressed.

### **Unification of a Divided People**

Unification of the South African colonies had been a goal of the British, but Afrikaners also rallied behind unification because they saw its potential for weakening British imperial influence (Thompson 148). In 1910, the British imperial government approved the unification of the Transvaal Colony and the Orange River Colony (acquired

in the Anglo-Boer War) with the Cape and Natal colonies to form a united South Africa. English and Dutch (not Afrikaans) became the official languages of the country (Mesthrie, "South Africa" 18). No indigenous African languages were considered because indigenous speakers were not considered members of the colony. The mission-educated black elite appealed to the metropolis for the removal of the color bar from the new constitution, but the imperial government felt that it could not and would not go against the stated wishes of the colonies. Louis Botha became the Prime Minister of a country comprised of 4 million Africans, 500,000 Coloureds, 150,000 Indians (mostly in Natal), and 1,275,000 Whites (Afrikaners outnumbering British descendants) (Thompson 153). Botha supported a "one stream policy" (to merge the two white ethnic groups into one), but was opposed by J.B.M Hertzog (who founded the Afrikaner National Party in 1914) who supported a "two stream policy" (maintaining separate concurrent development of Dutch- and English- speaking South Africans) (SAHO, "Louis Botha"). Black Africans were not considered part of these "streams," as the race issues of this period were seen primarily between the two white groups.

Animosity remained between Afrikaner and British South Africans, but both agreed that black South Africans should remain inferior. The government failed to provide an education for them, leaving missionary education to continue to fill in the gaps, and repressive legislation was enacted such as the Native Land Act of 1913. This act preserved 87% of the land for the white minority and a mere 13% of the land for the black population (80% of the entire population) (B. Boyce). Africans were prevented from owning land except in their designated reserves, or Bantustans, which were precursors to the segregated apartheid "homelands" (SAHO, "The Natives Land Act and

WWI”). In 1912, the organization that would come to be known as the African National Congress (ANC) was founded and sent a delegation to London in 1914 to denounce the Land Act. They were told that nothing could be done, but the ANC continued to grow into the leading political party of the anti-apartheid struggle until it was pushed underground. The ANC continued to operate underground until President de Klerk unbanned the ANC in 1990 as the beginning of the transition out of apartheid, and today it remains the largest political party in South Africa (“A Brief History of the ANC”). The Land Act continues to have profound repercussions today, as the majority of land (~90%) continues to be owned the white South African population and attempts to re-appropriate land have stalled (B. Boyce).

Class and race during this time period were often conflated, as British-descendent whites held the skilled leadership positions, Afrikaners were seen as “Poor Whites,” and the black African population remained at the bottom struggling to survive. However, Afrikaners outnumbered British South Africans, and the increased Afrikaner nationalism created national solidarity against policies they felt threatened their independence. For example, South Africa allied with Britain in both World Wars, an action which the Afrikaners felt furthered the imperialism to which they were opposed. In protest, Afrikaners staged small, suppressed rebellions throughout the beginning of the 1900s. However, under a Hertzog administration in the 20s and 30s, further pro-White, pro-Afrikaner legislation was passed (Thompson 160). For example, Afrikaans finally replaced Dutch as an official language in 1925 (English remained a second official language) (Mesthrie, “South Africa” 18). As White life improved, the Afrikaners gained further control of the government. Black participation in government was eventually

completely destroyed through the Natives Representation Act of 1936, which removed them from the general voters' rolls once and for all and permitted them to elect just three white people to represent them in the principal house of Parliament. A Natives Representative Council was created, but it was purely advisory – blacks had lost all political power (SAHO, “Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s”). Even though South Africa was now a unified entity, there was not a sense of a common South African identity; Afrikaners imagined themselves as a struggling and previously oppressed group, and saw dominance through the oppression of the other non-white communities.

Black life in the reserves was marked by poverty – vast overpopulation caused farming to collapse and, unable to feed themselves and pay the taxes expected by the government, the quality of life steadily deteriorated. The prosperity of whites was dependent on the poverty of black Africans and bolstered by discriminatory employment laws. By 1939, less than 30% of black African children were attending school and 20% died before their first birthday (Thompson 164). The reserves were made into a source of cheap, unskilled male black labor for the whites, which ironically pulled more and more black Africans to the cities in search of work at the same time as whites were trying to push them into the reserves (178). When they realized the influx of black Africans to cities could not be stemmed, locations (later known as townships) were set aside on the edges of the city, however they were not serviced: there were no paved roads, and taps and latrines were not maintained (170). Pass laws began to be strictly enforced in the 1930s, trying to control the movements of black Africans in urban areas and limiting their ability to quit the farms where they worked without a pass provided by the white farmer. Jailing or expulsion from the city were frequent punishments if a black African was

unable to produce a pass on demand by a police officer. Coloured people, who had not been subject to legal discrimination before the Union, suddenly found themselves the subject of discrimination as well. Instead of partnering with black Africans to resist, however, they shared white fears (Daniel).

### **Apartheid and “Separate Development”**

During World War II, race relations worsened and Afrikaners called for a change to a more stringent separation through the “Purified” National Party led by D.F. Malan, who was elected as Prime Minister in 1948 and instituted formal apartheid (meaning “separateness” in Afrikaans). Apartheid was government-mandated physical, social, cultural, and linguistic segregation on the basis of race. The population was divided into four distinct racial groups: White, Coloured, Indian, and African (in descending order of freedoms). It was a brutal form of racial domination, authorized through legislation such as the Population Registration Act, Pass Laws Act, Group Areas Act, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (SAHO, “Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s”). The Natives Representative Council was abolished and black Africans were relegated to ten “homelands” ruled by hereditary chiefs subject to white control, “free” to develop along the lines of their own culture (which was determined by the government). These homelands were eventually granted “independence” from South Africa in the 1970s, although they were not internationally recognized (Thompson 190). Black Africans were forcibly removed from their homes in the newly-designated white areas – bulldozers razed towns, often without warning, and people fled to the homelands that were unable to support them due to overpopulation. The stagnant homeland economies forced black Africans to commute to wage labor in the cities (B. Boyce). The South African economy

boomed during the 1950s and 1960s at the expense of these desperate black African laborers.

Education under apartheid was transformed. Public education became compulsory for white children, using Afrikaans or English. The government became fearful of missionary education for blacks because it could impart “dangerous” ideas. The Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953, which allowed the central government to take over control of black African education (later extended to Coloured and Indian education) and place constraints on syllabi and the language of instruction (Mesthrie. “South Africa” 18). The black African schools were far inferior to the white schools: they received less funding for resources such as textbooks, had less qualified teachers who were paid poorly and large class sizes, and required instruction in the government’s racial views for the purpose of preparing blacks for the cheap, trained labor needed by the white South Africans (SAHO, “Bantu Education Policy”).

As part of the idea of “separate development” along “cultural” lines, Bantu education was taught in the indigenous African language of the students for up to eight years of primary school, permitting the concurrent teaching of Afrikaans and English as second languages in secondary school (Mesthrie, “South Africa” 19). Few students actually made it to secondary school. The Afrikaner National Party tried to defend the imposed mother-tongue schooling by using the UNESCO declarations on the importance of vernacular language use in schools (Alexander, “English Unassailable but Unattainable” 5). Ironically, Afrikaners had fought for their own mother-tongue schooling when faced with anglicization prior to the unification of South Africa; however, in their own case they saw mother-tongue schooling as enabling a nationalist

opposition to British imperial oppression, while Bantu Education was part of a “divide and rule” agenda (T. Reagan 55; T.G. Reagan 422). Teaching each mother-tongue was an effective way of fracturing black African unity against the apartheid government, and had now become an intentional tool of cultural control.

Language boards were created to monitor and “standardize” each homeland language, writing rules and curricula to teach black Africans the “correct way” to speak their own mother-tongues (Herbert and Bailey 66-67). This allowed the apartheid government to exert control over how languages evolved and what kinds of ideas they were permitted to communicate. For example, isiZulu is now perceived by some mother-tongue speakers as incapable of communicating modern technological innovation; as a language of the homelands, where there were few jobs and opportunities, it was removed from use in technology where it might develop the capacity to communicate such concepts. As a result, isiZulu’s linguistic capital diminished. To get a job outside of the homeland, and to obtain a pass from a government official, it was necessary to speak either Afrikaans or English, which was limited to secondary education and above (Roberts). Making Afrikaans and English the exclusive property of the white elite gave the languages more linguistic capital through their association with prosperity. This is another example of Ngũgĩ’s two-part model of cultural control: indigenous African languages were relegated to a sphere of poverty and segregation, while Afrikaans and English were elevated through association with the elite and escape from the homelands.

The apartheid project of cultural control was reformed in the 1970s, when Afrikaans was imposed as the medium of instruction in Soweto schools (a township of Johannesburg). The apartheid government found that control might be better maintained

by forcing schoolchildren to learn Afrikaans, alienating them from their culture by separating the private, social sphere (the home) from the formal, public sphere (school and the workplace). This worked to devalue indigenous mother-tongues in a different way. Relegating indigenous mother-tongues to the private sphere was intended to send the message that their languages were “traditional” and “cultural,” unable to adequately communicate public discourse or modernity. In contrast, Afrikaans was the language of the public sphere, used for communication in education and participation in government. The Soweto students rejected these imposed categories, and thousands of students marched in protest. Local police opened fire on the crowd of students in what became known as the Soweto Uprising of 1976; 566 children died (SAHO, “The Soweto Uprising of June 1976”). A photo of Hector Pieterse, one of the initial students killed in the massacre, became the iconic image of the event and signified to the international community the wrong being done by the apartheid government.

The ANC sought to resist these and other injustices but initially limited itself to “Constitutional means,” supporting nonviolent resistance and sending delegations to protest discriminative policies (Thompson 175). At first, the ANC arranged boycotts of Bantu schools, but the government maintained enough control during the first twenty years of apartheid to effectively quash these rebellions. In 1960, the government violently crushed a peaceful anti-pass demonstration in Sharpeville, later known as the Sharpeville Massacre, and as a result banned the ANC and other similar organizations. In response, leaders like Nelson Mandela felt that nonviolence had ceased to be effective and the ANC formed a military wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK, meaning “Spear of the Nation” in Zulu and Xhosa), to take on sabotage campaigns of key government targets (Mandela,

“The Black Pimpernel”). The ANC went underground and set up alternative schools, especially in exile, to train youth in revolutionary and communist thought. However, the violent resistance stagnated after this initial phase with the arrests and imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu at Robben Island in 1964.

Yet, the apartheid system began weakening in the 1970s and 80s due to mounting international pressure (including an arms embargo by the United Nations) and the increasing difficulty and costliness of retaining a lid on internal resistance. The switch to Afrikaans instruction in some black African schools is an example of an attempt to reform apartheid to solidify control in this period. Other reform attempts included rescinding legislation like the pass laws and some segregation laws, although this was largely rhetoric and black Africans remained excluded from participating as equals in South African society (Daniel). The Soweto Uprising sparked serious violent resistance once again, which continued and grew over the 1980s through school boycotts, protests, worker stayaways, and violent chaos in the streets, even within the black community as certain members were seen as conspiring with the apartheid government (Mesthrie, “South Africa” 22). In the mid-1980s, the government instituted a state of emergency, but the cost of maintaining control grew too large and became impossible (Thompson 235). The economy was unstable, the rebelling black Africans comprised an overwhelming majority of the population (whites were only 15% of the population in 1985), international events eroded justifications the government had used for apartheid, and secret negotiations began between top ANC leaders like Mandela and the heads of the apartheid government (242). Both sides recognized that a decisive victory for either was unlikely, and further widespread bloodshed would be inevitable and extreme if

negotiations were not reached. In 1990, the new Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk lifted the bans on the ANC and other opposition organizations, leading to the transition out of apartheid with the democratic election of Nelson Mandela as the first president of the new South Africa. The post-apartheid period of South African history has been plagued by the legacies of this turbulent history.

### **Chapter 3: Problems in Two South African Primary Schools**

The current South African situation is shaped by its history. 1994 marked the beginning of a new united South Africa, in which *all* South Africans were finally granted civil and political participation, and yet even the second President Thabo Mbeki feared, “are we merely a collection of communities which happen to inhabit one geopolitical space” (qtd. in Alexander, “An Ordinary Country” 82)? Language, as a cultural carrier, continues to influence how those communities are imagined. In the current South African context, issues of language are intimately tied to issues of education, since education is the primary means of promoting and teaching a language and its “linguistic capital” (Murray 435). My analysis of two South African primary schools centers on my observations and research during my semester abroad in Durban, South Africa, which culminated in an Independent Study Project (ISP) entitled, “A Comparison of Zulu-Speaking Youth in English-Only Education: The Struggles of Zulu Learners at Spearman Road and Dokodweni Primary Schools.” While that research carefully examines the language difficulties of mother-tongue Zulu speakers in the primarily mother-tongue Zulu-speaking province of KwaZulu-Natal, similar difficulties are experienced by other non-English mother-tongue speakers throughout South Africa.

#### **The Current State of South Africa**

Unlike many other African countries, modern South Africa isn't commonly considered part of the “third world” or “Global South”. It ranked 50 of 142 countries on the World Economic Forum's Global Competitive Index, the highest ranking in all of sub-Saharan Africa (Schwab). It has a stable economy, though at the cost of widespread unemployment, and was formally accepted as a member of BRICS (a group of emerging

economies capable of supplanting the G7 countries by 2050, including Brazil, Russia, India and China) (“New era as South Africa joins BRICS”). Yet despite South Africa’s relative economic success, it lags behind in several important aspects which undercut its gains. South Africa’s GINI coefficient (a measure of inequality by examining income distribution) was 63.1, (100 being maximum inequality and 0 being perfect equality) (*Gini Index*). This inequality is evident in the economic structure, since the second most problematic factor for doing business in South Africa is its “inadequately educated workforce.” The quality of primary education is ranked at 127, and the quality of the educational system overall is ranked at 133, both rankings measured against 141 other countries (Schwab). One study showed that 80% of learners were already behind the richest 20% of learners by the age of eight, and another revealed that South Africa ranked 14<sup>th</sup> out of 15 in reading when compared to the performance of the poorest 25% of learners in nearby African countries (qtd. in Spuall and Van der Berg). For a country that has successfully navigated four free and fair elections and built an economy despite crippling inequality, it is startling to see such statistics. In comparison with Rwanda, a nation that experienced a genocide the same year that South Africa emerged from apartheid, the statistics are even more startling: Rwanda’s quality of primary education and of its overall educational system rank in the mid-50s of 142 countries (Schwab).

So why does South Africa’s education rank so poorly while, in other ways, it is perceived as a successful nation? Many South Africans assume it is a lack of money and funding, however Simkins and Patterson state that,

on the assumption that in a properly functioning educational system, a 90% pass rate would be reasonable, we have been wasting approximately

R3 billion annually on paying the salaries of the teachers employed in Grades 10-12 who produce the average 50% failure rate we have experienced in the matriculation examination in the period 1987-2002.

(qtd. in Alexander, "After Apartheid" 324)

While this statement mistakenly places the blame primarily on teachers, it clarifies that there is no lack of funds – education expenditures comprise approximately 5.4% of the country's GDP, or roughly 18% of total state expenditures, comparable to public spending in the United States ("South Africa" and "United States," *The World Factbook*).

Neither can poor education be attributed to ignorance of the problem. Education performance has been the subject of serious policy research and the South African Department of Basic Education has stepped in with initiatives like fee-free schools and the "Action Plan to 2014," which includes a series of goals and steps to achieve them by 2014 ("Education in South Africa"). However, the possibility that language may lay at the heart of educational underperformance appears not to have been seriously considered by South Africans or their government.

On the eve of democracy in 1994, the ANC supported English as the medium of education and as the lingua franca for the country because it "appeared to the black elite to hold out the promise of liberation, unification, and empowerment" (Alexander, "After Apartheid" 318). The other contender, Afrikaans, was linked too closely to apartheid and oppression to be seriously considered as a lingua franca. However, through negotiations and an effort to speedily and peacefully coordinate an exchange of power between the apartheid government and the future democratically-elected government, it was necessary to concede equal status to Afrikaans. This step provoked the question, if Afrikaans and

English could be official languages why couldn't the numerous indigenous African languages have similar status? What made them less worthy of recognition? For as Charles Taylor has argued, in a multicultural society it is necessary to nurture a politics of recognition: "Our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (25). In fact, the ANC eventually recognized that denying recognition to indigenous African languages could perpetuate "contemptible pictures" of indigenous Africans, just as apartheid had done. The 1994 exchange of power granted the country the opportunity to present a new tolerant and multicultural South African culture; failing to recognize certain identities within the overall culture could jeopardize their desired stable future. Therefore, the South African Constitution of 1996 guarantees equal linguistic rights to English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana, Sesotho, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele and Northern Sotho.

The Constitution extends beyond recognition of these languages. "Languages" is the sixth "Founding Provision" of the Constitution, recognizing that due to "the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" (ss. 6). Note that the state is not only to recognize and permit the widespread use of all 11 languages, but that it is called to actively "advance" each language. To support this aim, the Constitution provides for the creation of a Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), which protects and develops policy to comply

with the stated goals. Languages are protected further within the Bill of Rights under the Education section; students are granted the right to receive public education in the official language(s) of their choice where “reasonably practicable”, and it is explicitly stated that the state must take into account “the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices” (ss. 29, 2c). Finally, the section entitled “Cultural, religious and linguistic communities” protects language speakers’ rights to use their language and form associations and organizations on the basis of language (ss. 31, 1ab). The right to “use a language” is probably the most difficult for the state to monitor and ensure, since factors other than overt language hostility may prevent a speaker from using a language. For example, a Zulu parent may speak isiZulu fluently and have an intermediate grasp of English. While they have the right to “use their language,” isiZulu, to communicate with their children, they may feel pressure to speak to them in English and improve their English skills because of the linguistic capital it contains (McCormick 225). It is difficult for the state to advance the use of isiZulu in this kind of situation. While the Constitution makes clear efforts to protect the multiplicity of languages spoken in South Africa (including non-official languages such as sign language, languages used in religious ceremonies, languages of large immigrant communities such as Hindi and Tamil, and the Khoi, Nam and San languages), the government encounters difficulties in fully providing all of these rights (ss 6, 5ab).

These difficulties are become clear when we examine the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in schools, which is almost entirely English. 80% of schools use it as the medium of instruction while Afrikaans follows distantly at 16%. A mere 6% of schools use Zulu (Alexander, “After Apartheid” 9; Olivier). These figures are surprising

if we examine the number of mother-tongue speakers in the country: Zulu is the largest language community in South Africa, with 9,980,000 mother-tongue speakers comprising 23% of the total South African population. Xhosa, the other dominant African language, has 7,790,000 mother-tongue speakers, while in contrast, Afrikaans has 4,740,000 and English has only 3,670,000 (“Languages of South Africa,” *Ethnologue*). Thus, the predominance of English in education does not follow from a predominance of mother-tongue speakers. Additionally, in a sociolinguistic survey by PanSALB in 2002, it was found that only 22% of South Africans “fully understand political, policy and administrative related speeches and statements made in English” (Olivier). There are Zulu- and other African-language newspapers and television programs that publicize political news in their languages, and yet many of the speeches and statements are made in English. This necessitates translation, and, clearly, there is a choice and bias to what is published in any media source. Thus, since the government operates predominantly in English, the lack of understanding by the population can be seen as a potential hindrance to the democratic process since citizens are effectively unable to participate from a knowledgeable perspective (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 92).

And it is not just an issue of being able to participate in society, but also a matter of securing reliable employment. According to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), there is no other middle-income country in the world with such a high rate of unemployment (23.9% overall, but nearly 50% for youth aged 18-25) (qtd. in Price). Part of this is due to high secondary and tertiary school dropout rates, resulting in the under-educated workforce which hinders the growth of South Africa’s economy (John, “Employers Dismayed;” Macfarlane and Seekoei). President Zuma has proposed

an aggressive job creation plan, however it is undergirded by a desire to expand and update infrastructure rather than trying to understand what could be causing the problem in the first place (Price).

Much blame is placed on the failure of public high schools and universities to prepare students for the workplace (John, “Employers Dismayed”). Only 37% of individuals aged 19-25 had successfully graduated high school by completing matriculation exams (often shorted to “matric”), some because they had dropped out, but more often because students can repeat grades until the age of 25. Half of Grade 12 students are older than 18. Not only is public education failing to give them the education they need to succeed, it is failing to do so in an efficient time frame. Black learners are six times more likely to repeat a grade than white learners, especially because only 11% of black learners attend top-tier schools (in contrast to 80% of white learners) (Meny-Gibert). Many lament these unfortunate facts and point fingers at teachers, parents, and unmotivated students, ignoring the facts that 96% of schools teach in the mother-tongues of white students, while only 4% teach in the mother-tongues of black students (Olivier). It is time to look to language as a possible determinant of educational success and failure.

### **My Research and the Role of Language in Hindering Education**

The first and most glaring issue with South African education is that few policymakers, teachers, parents and learners can envision a common achievable goal: “Many people can say little about what democratic education is other than that it must be the opposite of Apartheid education” (Wally 28). 18 years later, there remains a focus on past ills and their continued impact today, such as negative associations with forced African language education under apartheid. As described earlier, black South Africans

were forced into autonomous homelands where their lives were carefully regulated and their culture was reinvented through language and cultural boards which determined “correct” practices and language rules for the indigenous communities. Simultaneously, Afrikaans was imposed on some schools and was famously resisted in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. Thus, Afrikaans came to be seen as the language of oppression, while the imposition and reinvention of indigenous mother-tongues made mother-tongue education oppressive and synonymous with apartheid as well. English came to be seen as a language of liberation and equality, a lingua franca between speakers of different backgrounds that carried less baggage than the others (Alexander, “English Unassailable but Unattainable” 17). Apartheid and colonial oppression no longer exist in South Africa, but their legacy continues to have an impact through a backward focus on past ills. This results in a valorization of English in education which now also oppresses current South Africans as they fail to achieve full competence in English or their mother-tongue.

The problem is not simply the hegemony of English in itself, but the fact that hegemony of English has come to disadvantage students who do not and, sometimes, cannot achieve full competence in the language, or even in their own language, in order to operate as an effective and self-sustaining member of society. The reasons behind this include a lack of resources; lack of a context for effective English learning; a focus on fixing resources rather than creating efficient teachers; the different cultural backgrounds of teachers and their students; the difficulty of teaching English in conjunction with teaching other subjects through a LOLT of English; and the demonization of code-switching.<sup>9</sup> The schools where I researched, Spearman Road Primary School and

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<sup>9</sup> There is debate about what constitutes code-switching, but it is generally when a speaker switches between languages within the same conversation or the same sentence. It can be used for many

Dokodweni Primary School, are situated in different language contexts, with different student and teacher backgrounds and resources, however they both faced these problems to more or less the same extent.

### *Background*

Before analyzing these schools and the problems they face, it is necessary to give a brief background on the situations of both elementary schools. Spearman Road is a primary school in the suburb of Sydenham, located approximately 30 minutes by car from downtown Durban. Nearly 99% of the learners are categorized as ethnically Zulu, the vast majority of whom speak Zulu as their mother-tongue. Prior to 1994, the majority of the learners were Coloured and Indian, as Durban is home to a large migrant Indian population. However, with the end of apartheid and the desegregation of schools, Spearman Road experienced a sudden influx of Zulu learners, and due to residual racism many of the previous white and Indian students relocated to other schools, resulting in a majority Zulu population. However, the ethnic background of the teachers did not drastically change – the majority of the teaching staff is Indian or Coloured, and there is only one fluent isiZulu teacher in the entire school who works with a Grade R class (the equivalent of kindergarten in the United States)(Mr. Adams and Mrs. Smith, personal interviews). The Spearman Road Primary School Language Policy states that the LOLT for all subject areas, except Afrikaans as a second language, is English. All tests, teaching, assemblies, and communication with parents are to be conducted in English. The Policy even states that, “As English is the Lingua Franca of the country, greater time will be allocated to it.” Notice that the policy states that English *is* the South African

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purposes, but in the classroom it is most often used to clarify a concept for learners who are not fluent in the LOLT (Finlayson and Slabbert 235).

lingua franca, rather than recognizing that English is being created and reproduced as the lingua franca through that sentence in the policy (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 96).

Dokodweni Primary School is located in Amacambini, roughly 2 hours' drive from Durban in what is considered the "rural areas," areas in which traditional leaders still hold influence over local inhabitants and which experience high levels of poverty. The end of apartheid did not change the demographics of the school: nearly all of the students have historically been Zulu mother-tongue speakers. In contrast to Spearman Road, all of the teachers are Zulu mother-tongue speakers, too. However, since most higher education is taught in English, several of the teachers are also fluent in English. This bilingualism is necessary to achieve Dokodweni's Language Policy, which states that, "the school must use language preference of the majority of learners. Here at DOKODWENI [it] is IsiZulu." However, isiZulu is used as the LOLT for Grades 1 through 3; in Grade 3, English is introduced as a second-language class. After this brief transition phase, English becomes the LOLT. IsiZulu remains in the curriculum, but is relegated to a second-language class as Afrikaans is at Spearman Road. I mainly worked with Grade 6 learners at both schools, and thus they had already been learning primarily in English for at least 3 years.

#### *Lack of Resources*

I observed a variety of problems impeding language learning (in English, Afrikaans, and Zulu) during my time researching and teaching at the Grade 6 classrooms of these two schools. The first was the problem common to underfunded schools all around the world – a lack of basic resources. At Spearman Road, there were approximately 45 students in each of the three Grade 6 classes I observed. There was a

desk shortage, often three students seated on a single bench, making it difficult to write and easy to copy. Most students at Spearman Road had their own pen and a designated notebook in which they took notes and completed tests (they were not permitted to take this notebook home to study for fear that the students would lose it and be unable to replace it). However, Mrs. Smith said that pen stealing was a recent problem among a band of Grade 6 boys (personal interview). Students shared erasers and rulers depending on the assignment, delaying teaching as everyone vied to prepare themselves for the lesson. The single dysfunctional copier in the school was prized and teachers didn't often use it to make copies for the entire class – rather they made a copy of the desired information, wrote it on the chalkboard, and then had the students write it down in their notebooks. This was the way the majority of learning took place: lecturing while writing notes on the chalkboard, which students then copied down. Other means, such as an overhead projector, TV or classroom computer, were not available. I never saw a textbook used. The dusty library, which I used as an interview space, had few books (most relics of the apartheid era and, therefore, difficult for the students to relate to or learn from) and was closed as the school waited for funding for new books to fill the library.

At Dokodweni, even fewer resources were available. The single Grade 6 class was not as crowded as the later high school grades, but students still had to share substantial resources such as pens, rulers and a few colored pencils. I loaned multiple pens to students. All textbooks were kept in the classroom and had to be shared, and I did not see a textbook or learning material in a language other than English.<sup>10</sup> The school's

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<sup>10</sup> Even the lone Zulu textbook seemed to have the purpose of teaching Zulu to English-speakers – most instructions were in English.

single copier was no longer functioning, and a recently funded computer lab had all its computers stolen several months before and was thus nonfunctional. Due to limited resources, students were not often assigned homework and could not usually bring their notebooks home. Learning took place in a similar way to Spearman Road – the teacher taught with the aid of a textbook or a created lesson plan, writing notes on the board for the students to copy into their notebooks.

This lack of resources greatly inhibits language learning (of any language) because it limits the way the way the learning is reinforced (Saville-Troike 57; 65). There is no way to read or watch the news of an English-speaking country, and the mad scramble to share resources in class waste time that could be better spent on more repetition or encouraging students to speak aloud. Additionally, are very rarely expected to produce any kind of lengthy writing in the language they are learning because they cannot take their notebooks home.

#### *Lack of Support for Teachers*

The second problem I observed is the focus on remedying the lack of resources rather than creating efficient and creative teachers who want to be in the classroom and can relate to their students' backgrounds. The government recognizes that public schools are struggling and, as stated earlier, pumps substantial funds into the educational system. The current South African language policies focus on improving the outcomes of the students and their experiences in the classroom while failing to realize that teachers need more support and training in order to realize those other goals. Attention is given to increasing the education budget, training *more* teachers (rather than improving existing teachers), and providing better classroom supplies rather than focusing on how

effectively knowledge is transferred from teacher to student. Of course, it is difficult for teachers to be effective without resources. But they often lack further training and support after they enter the classroom. They, too, can face similar struggles to those faced by their students, such as living in impoverished conditions which make it difficult to focus while at school. The new education plan, called the “Action Plan 2014,” hopes to produce 12,000 new teachers per year by 2014 and encourages teachers “to have at least a personal computer at home and for principals to have an email address” (SAPA, “New Education Plan Will Ensure Quality Teachers”). Instead of providing extra training or workshops for teachers, these unrealistic and unrealizable goals are put in place. Just as there is a “dual economy of schooling” for students (well-resourced schools with middle-class students on the one hand, and under-resourced schools with impoverished students from rural areas on the other), the teachers are also divided economically (Morgan and Dale-Jones).

While there are many variables that are outside their realm of control due to these inherent circumstances, I witnessed many issues that teachers *could* remedy. For example, a major limitation to my research was the number of school holidays during my month allotted to research. While many of these were nationally-sanctioned (national school vacations and Easter holidays), some were not. For example, at Dokodweni, the Grade 7 boys’ soccer team and girls’ netball team had away games on a Wednesday. The entire school was given the option to attend if they were able to pay the taxi fare, and approximately 100 learners of all different grade levels stayed behind. I was left in charge of these learners with the help of only one other educator (this was my third day of research at Dokodweni). The other educator decided to close the school at 11 am, and

no class took place from 9 am to 11 am since there were no educators to teach class. I was able to deduce that the other educator had decided to keep the school open until 11 am so that the poorest students could receive their free lunch at 10:30 before going home. The next day (a Thursday), school once again ended early *in anticipation of* Good Friday, assuming that many students would be leaving early to travel to visit family. According to the principal, Mr. Msizi, this policy of ending early was common in rural schools since students were likely to skip more frequently due to cultural and familial duties (such as holidays like Good Friday) (personal interview). Since teachers would often have to re-teach curriculum to these absent students, it was decided that it was better to simply cancel classes for all students. Additionally, even when school was in session, teachers frequently failed to show up without explanation. I experienced this at both schools. In these circumstances, I was thrown into the classroom and expected to improvise a lesson. I often taught Spanish (the only subject I had experience teaching) when I lacked a textbook or lesson plan to fall back on; the students were surprisingly enthusiastic about learning Spanish because it gave us a lens through which to compare and contrast different cultures and to discuss my own experience learning a second language in the U.S. However, normally when teachers failed to show up the students were expected to entertain themselves until the next period. The image that this conveyed to the learners was that education was clearly not very important. Thus, the problem of holidays and teacher absenteeism are two aspects of the same problem – a lack of prioritization (by the students and the teachers) of education in poorer schools, where school needs to be even more prioritized.

### *Contextual Reinforcement*

A third problem is the inability to reinforce concepts and vocabulary. Repetition and reinforcement should take place both within the school as well as at home in order to learn a language: “Pupils whose home language is an African language is an African language are at a considerable disadvantage in the language of instruction by the time they reach Grade 11 if the language of instruction is never spoken at home” (Alexander, “After Apartheid” 11). Many of the students’ parents, at both schools, are not proficient in English. Those whose parents (or elder siblings) do have some command of English experience a significant advantage in English-learning since it can be reinforced outside of the classroom. Additionally, those students who own several English language books (or even books in Zulu) exhibited far better grades on tests and assignments.<sup>11</sup> The lack of a second site of acquisition in the home is a variable that is outside the control of teachers (Morgan and Dale-Jones). However, due to the large class sizes, students rarely even have the opportunity to read or practice aloud in the short hour-long class periods. Mrs. Vance, an English teacher, particularly lamented the fact that she lacked time to have her students practice aloud, which she saw as an essential part of developing the ability to speak a language (and an essential part of exhibiting mastery of English in South African society) (personal interview). Most of the language classes are spent reviewing and testing vocabulary or reading and analyzing short stories rather than speaking.

### *Diversity of Language Abilities*

The fourth problem I encountered in the classroom was the difficulty of accommodating a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and language abilities within a

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Mpumelelo (a successful Dokodweni learner) revealed in his interview that he owns five English language books, his parents are literate in isiZulu and have a working knowledge of English, and an elder brother who is fluent in English.

single classroom. This was most evident at Spearman Road, although it was evident to a smaller extent at Dokodweni. The teachers are unprepared to teach such a variety of learners, and learners (especially near urban areas like Spearman Road) may frequently change schools as their parents try to enroll them in increasingly better schools. At both schools I intentionally interviewed students of all different competencies in English and in general school subjects. One Spearman Road learner, Babalwa, almost cried in his interview – I was conducting the interview without a translator since my intent was to gauge the level of English ability in the students, and with each question he grew visibly more anxious to the point of tears because he was incapable of answering any of my questions in English.<sup>12</sup> Babalwa answered “Yes” to all my questions (even those that required a response beyond “Yes” or “No”). I encouraged him to respond to my interview questions in isiZulu if it was more comfortable for him (I was recording the interview so I could have someone translate it for me later), and he responded, laughing, with the longest English sentence of our conversation: “No, Miss not understand Zulu.” After this, I asked if he would like to have a friend translate and, as he was unable to consent in English, I asked another learner to act as translator after Babalwa’s permission had been ascertained in Zulu. When I asked him to read aloud a soccer poem that his English class had previously studied, he was unable to sound out the first words. Through the translator, I learned that Babalwa lived with people who “guide” him near the school, far from his Zulu-speaking parents who decided to send him to English-only school at the

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<sup>12</sup> If I was trying to observe how the hegemony of English effectively harms students and their perception of their own mother-tongue, why would I potentially inflict more harm by conducting interviews in English? First, because I do not speak fluent isiZulu and was unable to get the assistance of a translator in most cases; second, because I wanted to see if students were even effectively learning English as society dictated was necessary.

beginning of the term.<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Smith had seated him next to a student “translator” (a multilingual student fluent in both English and Zulu) to help him in class, although this clearly wasn’t providing enough help. Essentially, he was forced to pay attention to six lessons a day with very little understanding of what was going on. Mrs. Smith said he was floundering in school, and it was easy to understand his frustration and desperation (personal interview).

The Spearman Road teachers are expected to cater to students like Babalwa at the same time that they are expected to challenge students like Vusi (Babalwa’s student translator). Vusi is also a native Zulu speaker, but her parents are literate in English and encourage her to speak it at home. She has attended Spearman Road since Grade R and thus has always learned in English. There are more students who do not even come from a Zulu background, but are actually mother-tongue Sotho or Setswana speakers and are thus doubly alienated from their classmates and their teachers. How can educators reasonably accommodate all these disparate language backgrounds and levels of English ability in one classroom?

Further compounding this problem is the cultural background of the teachers, too. At Spearman Road, there is only one fluent Zulu-speaking teacher and all the rest are mother-tongue English or Afrikaans speakers. They come from a vastly different background than their students, which is not only culturally and linguistically different but also historically different – many of the teachers attended primary school during apartheid. Consequently, the teachers have difficulty understanding the experience of

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<sup>13</sup> Many students live in large groups with local families because their parents live in the rural areas and have sent their children to get a better education near the urban centers. The parents get to see their children during vacations, or each weekend if they are lucky enough to live within a couple hours of the school.

their students. Furthermore, the disparity in backgrounds makes discipline difficult. Many students (like their counterparts in the U.S.) have side conversations while the teacher is giving a lesson. However, the students talk in their mother-tongue during these side conversations. When the teacher tries to discipline them and encourage the students to pay attention, it's almost impossible to tell if the side conversation was constructive with regard to the lesson (for example, one student clarifying a concept to a fellow student) or distracting (students gossiping about the latest soccer game). When a conflict between students arises and they are verbally fighting in their mother-tongue, it is extremely difficult to discern which student is the bully and which is the victim in the situation. Teachers ultimately react very strongly and discipline severely to exert their authority in spite of their inability to understand the true nature of the conflict.

In a study for the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), Carole Bloch writes, “the kind of education they [the teachers] have themselves experienced to teach children who do not speak the same language as they do leaves them feeling ill-equipped” (4). Most teaching colleges and universities use English as the LOLT, so educators have been trained to teach in English. They thus find it difficult to adjust to learners’ diverse linguistic backgrounds and to even teach in their own mother-tongue (if it is not English) since the information has been learned and categorized in English (Council on Higher Education, “Language Policy Framework”; Mr. Mthula, personal interview). For example, some Dokodweni teachers utilized code-switching to reiterate a difficult point, but when I asked them about it in our interviews they all referred to code-switching as a last resort because they perceived it as impeding English acquisition and as incapable of fully conveying the concept being taught. These

conversations revealed code-switching to have a negative stigma in an English-medium classroom.

### *Learning English While Using It as a LOLT*

The fifth problem I observed was the expectation for students to learn English while concurrently learning other subjects *in* English. For this reason, I did not only observe English classes but I also observed science, math, Zulu, Afrikaans, Economic Management Science (EMS), and history classes. In a science class learners were expected to learn new scientific concepts while also trying to understand these new and difficult concepts through a language which they did not completely understand. Learning a new concept was double the amount of work – first, discerning the meaning of the language conveying the new concept, and then understanding the concept itself as an idea. This is a serious struggle for the learners. For example, at Spearman Road I observed an English class and then an EMS class immediately following with the same group of students. In the English class, students were given a vocabulary list and told to rearrange the words into alphabetical order. I watched as some students wrote out the entire alphabet to figure out where the words should go. Most of the vocabulary words were related to sports, the theme for the term. In the following EMS class, the learners were given a worksheet entitled “Growth and Development” and told to take notes on the important points of the worksheet. As I looked at the worksheet, I took notes of four complex words that were the main focus of the worksheet: economy, sanctions, investments, and patterns of consumption. In their previous English class, they had just learned the word “baseball” and suddenly they were expected to grasp patterns of consumption in South Africa’s economy in their EMS class. This contrast is extreme and

the expectations for the students are almost unattainable. If students do not yet have an understanding of the language they are being taught in, how can they be expected to learn complex new knowledge conveyed in that language?

The expectations for the teachers are also extreme: “Mathematics and science teachers...have a dual task. They face the major challenge of continuously needing to teach both the discipline and English at the same time” (Adler and Reed 79). This requires the teachers to correct and adjust for language difficulties at the same time that they are trying to anticipate students’ difficulties understanding the concept more generally.

### *Internalized Inferiority*

Finally, the most troubling problem I observed was what Alexander refers to as “Static Maintenance Syndrome” or “monolingual habitus” (Alexander, “After Apartheid” 6; “English Unassailable but Unattainable”). This “syndrome” is the belief that one’s mother-tongue can and should be confined to the home and community because it can’t/shouldn’t develop into a language of power (as English is perceived to be). As Tollefson says, “The hegemony of English...is not merely tolerated in the ‘developing’ world; it is considered a legitimate model for society” precisely because of the way it operates in terms of Bourdieu’s cultural capital (qtd. in Alexander, “After Apartheid” 4). The dominance of English in education is no longer an overt act of dominance by white South Africans over other South African groups; rather English dominance is strongly encouraged by black Africans (Marback 356). The degradation of indigenous African language has been internalized by mother-tongue speakers in a way that further complicates the situation. To encourage the growth of indigenous languages can thus

appear imperialistic because it can be perceived as a way of naturalizing differences and further alienating certain indigenous groups from participation in the global economy. This perspective remains entrenched in the legacy of historical inequality because rather than escaping the notion that indigenous African languages are inferior it reproduces their inferiority.

One of the methods by which I conducted my research was a short written survey about perspectives on English and Zulu. Zulu, the most numerically dominant language in South Africa, was “a traditional language that you spece [speak] to olds [old people],” according to one student’s anonymous response. On the survey, student responses almost always described Zulu and English as opposites: if Zulu was “hard” then English was “easy”; if Zulu was “bad” then English was “good”; if Zulu was “traditional” then English was “modern”. English was correlated with “important” several times, while isiZulu never was. 17 of 38 learners in Mrs. Smith’s Grade 6 class responded that Zulu was “traditional,” “cultural,” “African,” or “a language used by black people”. None of these responses were applied to English, except for “black people” three times (one of which specifically designated black Americans). These perspectives suggest that English is not the neutral lingua franca that the language policies of the school and that the government policies suggest, but that the growth and domination of English is tied to the relegation of Zulu to the private and traditional spheres.

English is perceived as essential for success later in life while isiZulu is not at both Spearman Road and Dokodweni. Zandiswa, a Dokodweni student, wants to be a doctor in town, where she knows she will need to know some English not only to attract a larger client base (particularly a client base that can afford to pay her) but also to get

through medical school “because most books are in English” (personal interview). Mr. Taylor, a Spearman Grade 6 educator, said, “A lot of parents are pushing English for their kids because it’s the language of opportunity, it’s opening doors – they’re moving away from Zulu” (personal interview). This mindset relates to Bourdieu’s cultural capital, because parents think that English fluency is going to “buy” their children more opportunity, particularly through a better high-paying job (which, in an era of such high unemployment, is seen as the ultimate goal). Mr. Mthuzi, a Dokodweni Grade 6 educator, agreed: “Parents think English is a sign of learning, a sign of knowing. That’s why even old people are learning after school, wanting to learn English because forms, documents and papers are in English” (personal interview). This statement suggests that if students had absorbed the same material through isiZulu, their parents might not consider them fully knowledgeable if they could not articulate the same information in English. And Dokodweni did have a large after-school adult literacy class because so many adults saw English as the key to their unemployment woes.

The difference between the two schools is how necessary they viewed literacy in the mother-tongue. Various South African studies have shown that acquiring literacy in the mother-tongue first aids literacy in a second or third language later, but Spearman Road educators largely saw mother-tongue literacy as irrelevant (Adler and Reed 75; Ashley 10; Murray 438). In contrast, Dokodweni’s Mr. Mthula saw Zulu literacy as profoundly important: “Here, we have to start learning the mother-tongue language first. Those in urban areas don’t see the need of learning Zulu language. See, it is done to speak it, that’s why at Model C [historically white] schools parents don’t think to read and write it is important. But those learners experience a huge problem in the workplace.

For example, educators are unable to write in Zulu but are only able to speak Zulu” (personal interview). Mr. Mthula’s role as an educator does require him to be fluent and literate in both English and Zulu because it allows him to help and understand his Zulu-speaking students. My teaching at Dokodweni was profoundly less effective than his, not only because I was a less-experienced teacher but because I was unable to help the students from a Zulu perspective. Mr. Mthula is able to see where and why students made mistakes with their English because he could trace it back to an aspect of isiZulu. And this is a profound problem in the rural, predominantly Zulu areas – educators often go through their education in English without ever becoming literate in Zulu and are unable to teach in the rural areas that most desperately need more teachers.

### **Language as another Means of Exclusion**

Spearman Road and Dokodweni have many problems which impede students’ ability to learn languages in school, whether the language is English or another official language. And these problems clearly have broader implications for overall success in school, exemplified by Babalwa and his inability to participate or succeed in any of his Spearman Road classes. There is so much pressure to teach and learn English, but there are so many problems in the classroom that students fail to learn it effectively and also fail to become literate in their own mother-tongue because indigenous African language literacy is neglected. This seriously disadvantages students whose mother-tongue is an indigenous African language and unfairly advantages the minority of students whose mother-tongue is English. Language has become another means of exclusion within South African society, perpetuating inequality that is a remnant of apartheid.

## **Chapter 4: Possibilities for the Future**

The problems that the students at Dokodweni and Spearman Road face are larger than their individual schools: historical, societal, and economic factors influence how these students are taught languages. And the success or failure of these students, as part of a greater student population and future South African citizenry, has an impact on the rest of the country as it attempts to move away from apartheid. But this begs the question, if South Africans want to move away from apartheid, what do they want to move towards? How can they move forward in a way that successfully avoids perpetuating the hatred and oppression of their difficult past? The decisions made with regards to South African languages in education play a powerful role in determining this future: “Other important variables such as a good meal once a day and a favourable home literacy environment are essential, of course, but for the first time in post-apartheid South Africa, the language medium issue has been demonstrated to be a central cause of success or failure” (Alexander, *After Apartheid* 12).

### **Accept English Dominance**

One possible way forward is to accept the hegemony of English and encourage its propagation. This reasoning is similar to that behind the language Esperanto: what can be bad about everyone being able to communicate with each other (Ngũgĩ, *Moving the Centre* 38)? It is assumed that there would be no cultural barriers to overcome, no necessity for costly translators or extra services, no need to intervene in a “natural” trend of English preference, and everyone could communicate with each other.

There are two problems with accepting the spread of English in South Africa. The first is that it assumes that English is the “de facto” or “natural” common language of

everyone, and its spread is a result of it being in “the right place at the right time” (David Crystal qtd. in Alexander, “English Unassailable but Unattainable” 4). This isn’t actually the case. For example, while many South Africans are shifting to English as an additional language, “in some urban areas Tsonga and Venda speakers shift to the dominant African language of the area, like Sotho” (Mesthrie 2). Some students, like Vusi at Spearman Road, can speak multiple indigenous African languages, some because they have switched schools so many times, others because their family members come from different ethnicities (Mesthrie 13; personal interview). This kind of multilingualism is undervalued because it doesn’t include English, or even Afrikaans. People are shifting to the language which holds the most linguistic capital, and that language isn’t always English (Olivier). Additionally, English hasn’t been as neutral as its proponents claim. While Afrikaans gets demonized because of its association with apartheid, it is forgotten that English was also a language imposed by colonial oppressors prior to apartheid. It was used in missionary education, and legislation in the nineteenth century made English proficiency a requirement for certain employment; additionally, it was one of the official languages when South Africa was first united as a British commonwealth (McCormick 220).<sup>14</sup> The spread of English hasn’t been a neutral, universal occurrence, but rather a result of intentional oppressive policies in South African history with varied effect in different parts of the country.

The second problem with accepting the domination of English is that it is not really being learned. While it is true that English enjoys a monopoly in South African public education, the difficulties outlined in the previous chapter prevent students from effectively learning English. What is widespread is the preference and *desire* for English

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 1 for further details.

– proficiency is not. Of all the African languages, isiZulu speakers have the highest levels of English understanding; 32% of Zulu-speakers understand English, compared to 24% Xhosa-speakers and 14% of Tswana-speakers (Olivier). I found that the main difference between learners who were succeeding and those who were struggling was an English-supportive home environment: family members who spoke English, books available at home or a functioning local library, and starting English at a young age (MacFarlane and Seekoei; Figure 36). Matric pass rates have risen to 70.2% in 2011, but “poor English skills is one of the reasons why achieving high results in maths and science is still a problem as it acts as a gatekeeper for the understanding of these subjects” (Martin Prew, qtd. in John, “Matric pass rate may be deceiving”). Only 43.6% passed maths, and 53.4% passed physical science, while 90% passed their home language (John, “Matric pass rate may be deceiving”). Finally, in a misguided effort to promote multilingualism, failing a language class can result in failing an entire grade level (Olivier). English isn’t being taught in a way that allows students to actually use it and benefit from the linguistic capital that it holds; even worse, it is preventing students from learning other subjects and progressing through school.

Bourdieu theorizes that it could never actually be possible for all students to successfully learn a language such as English, for if they did the linguistic market would collapse. As in a capitalist economic market, the value of something is linked to its exclusivity (55). English is a linguistic commodity held by a dominant few (only 8% of South Africans are mother-tongue speakers), and even if a student does eventually become a fluent speaker they may be stigmatized because of their accent (Olivier). Regional dialects, vocabulary, and accents are distinguished because they operate as a

marker of social difference (Bourdieu 54). It would be impossible for everyone to become a fluent and accepted English speaker because something else would come to replace it; the system depends on having an exclusive, dominant language at the top. Linguistic capital is a tool of power and dominance, and to maintain power the speakers who “possess that competence [in this case, the ability to speak English]” need to be able to “impose it as the only legitimate one in the formal markets (the fashionable, educational, political and administrative markets) and in most of the linguistic interactions in which they are involved” (57). The fewer the number who speak the dominant language and the greater its perceived value, the greater its rate of profit or distinction (Alexander, “English Unassailable but Unattainable” 5).<sup>15</sup> One way this dominance is assured is through the almost exclusive use of English in higher education; the only other language used in higher education is Afrikaans, in five out of 21 schools (Council on Higher Education, “Language Policy Framework”). My South African students dreamt of becoming doctors, teachers, and scientists, all of which require advance degrees taught in English (Figure 36; “South African Higher Education”).

Thus encouraging the spread of English does not seem to be a move away from South Africa’s unequal and repressive past. In contrast, it seems to reinforce social hierarchy, though along linguistic rather than racial lines (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 96). This is not to say that English should not be learned by South Africans at all – they should be allowed to learn English if they so choose. However, Bourdieu points out that “symbolic domination” operates subversively, as “invisible, silent violence” in a

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<sup>15</sup> Desai suggests that the dominance and distinction of English is even promoted at the top levels of South African organizations and government: “Would it be possible for somebody who spoke no English or Afrikaans to be elected to the national executive of say the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) or the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC)” (21)? She said this in 1994, but the question remains.

“monolingual habitus” in which speakers assume “an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint” because the dominant competency (English fluency) has become normalized (Bourdieu 50-51; Alexander, “English Unassailable but Unattainable” 5). Many of the teachers I interviewed described it as a calculated choice that parents and students are reluctant to make but feel that they must in order to succeed. For speaking English to be a real choice, the linguistic market needs to be changed so that English isn’t hegemonic. South African policymakers and academics have recognized this, and many have articulated steps to language justice in a variety of ways.

### **Privilege Indigenous African Languages Instead**

Neville Alexander, previous PANSALB chairperson and leading South African language academic, proposes that one way forward is to raise the linguistic capital of indigenous African languages: “the critical question is whether we will be able to make our product ‘profitable’ and/or whether the ideological dimension can supersede the purely materialistic in such a way that people prefer to be multilingual even if it is not obviously of immediate or short-term material benefit to them” (“English Unassailable but Unattainable” 5). While Bourdieu critiques the use of specific languages for an economic return, Alexander is proposing that South Africans operate within this capitalist structure; however, instead of letting English remain as the most profitable linguistic investment, he aims to privilege indigenous African instead. He proposes to make this shift by imposing a “transitional period” in which schools are forced to have at least two languages of instruction (rather than one LOLT and an additional language class), and by making trilingualism the norm (*An Ordinary Country* 94-95). He sees this as the

“Africanisation, that is, normalization of South African education by bringing about the situation where the African languages, not the European languages, are dominant” (95).

Yet this possible way forward is also problematic. Academics like Alexander (and Ngũgĩ in Kenya) see raising the status of indigenous African languages as process of returning dignity to these languages and thus balancing out previous injustices. However, the danger here is that this is nostalgia for a past that no longer exists and, perhaps, never did. The current South African reality is that mother-tongue English speakers, as well as mother-tongue Afrikaans speakers, are now a part of South African society, even if they are a minority. Elevating the status of indigenous African languages so that they attain dominant linguistic capital simply continues a system of inequality. A hegemony of indigenous African languages would come to replace the hegemony of English, thus continuing to alienate and oppress a different group of South Africans.

### **Provide More Legislative Support**

The *South African Schools Act of 1996* and *National Education Policy Act of 1996* are attempts by the South African government to provide more legislative support for language planning policy. The *South African Schools Act* establishes the framework and organization of basic public education in South Africa, and language policy is noted and provided for as a relevant concern (Art. 6). The *National Education Policy Act* reiterates the Constitution in recognizing the rights of individuals to determine their LOLT in education (Art. 4.a.v-vii.).<sup>16</sup> They are both founding acts of legislation intended to determine a national policy for language in education, and they led to the “Language-in-Education Policy” of 1997. This policy articulates the need for “additive” multilingual

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<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the Preamble of each piece of legislation clarifies in which language the President signed the Act, usually English and occasionally Afrikaans.

programs (in which additional languages are learned in addition to one's mother-tongue) in contrast to "subtractive" programs (in which additional languages are learned as replacements of one's mother-tongue) (Saville-Troike 59). Additionally, the policy recognizes the complexity of language, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 1, and states that the promotion of multilingualism,

presupposes a more fluid relationship between languages and culture than is generally understood in the Eurocentric model which we have inherited in South Africa. It accepts a priori that there is no contradiction in a multicultural society between a core of common cultural traits, beliefs, practices, etc., and particular sectional or communal cultures. Indeed, the relationship between the two can and should be mutually reinforcing and...should give rise to and sustain genuine respect for the variability of the communities that constitute our emerging nation. (Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Language-in-Education Policy")

The goals stated in these policies and Acts have not changed significantly since the time they were enacted. However, the overall educational policy has changed substantially. In the late 90s, the Department of Education implemented a policy entitled "Curriculum 2005," which supported an outcomes-based education system (OBE) focused on establishing standards and goals for students in each grade. This was widely acknowledged as a failure and was recently replaced with the current "Schooling 2025" (G. Boyce; DBE, "What is Schooling 2025?"). "Schooling 2025" aims for an improvement in the educational system overall by 2025 (measured by certain indicators), rather than focusing so closely on the outcomes of students in each grade level as an

indication of the overall health of the educational system (DBE, “What is Schooling 2025?”).

Additionally, PANSALB currently supports a new *South African Languages Bill* drafted by the Department of Arts and Culture, though feels it is dangerously inadequate. PANSALB believes the bill “lacks the necessary mechanism to deal with language rights violators and fails to offer remedies to the victims of such violations” (“PANSALB News”). Although the legislation is in place to protect the multiplicity of South African languages, PANSALB sees a specific language act as necessary to finally ensure indigenous African languages the equality they deserve. They believe that it could finally provide the legal mechanism to punish “language rights violators” (although PANSALB does not clarify what constitutes a language rights violation), and effectively promote the growth of indigenous African languages. However, in its current form, the Bill replicates the language of previous legislation and seems only to provide for the creation of new language boards which would do essentially the same work PANSALB already does (Minister of Arts and Culture, *South African Languages Bill of 2011*).

All of these policies and legislation enshrine several common goals: to promote multilingualism as a “remedy for past practices of exclusion and oppression” and as a “defining characteristic of being South African,” in an attempt to be inclusive of South Africa’s multicultural people; to support the language choices of schools, students and their parents by creating a coherent policy that is flexible enough to allow for different linguistic situations; and to create a policy which acknowledges the role of English while simultaneously promoting the use of African languages (Marback 355; DBE; Reagan 59; Desai 23). These goals look towards a future which is “grounded in opposition to an

apartheid past” in which “language rights enable acts of constituting self and society that are not strictly limited but that are always framed in terms of the cultural and historical legacy of language discrimination” (Marback 259). Overall, these policy efforts make clear that language in education is acknowledged as a problem and that the government is creating legislation with the problem in mind.

The creation of progressive language legislation is an attempt to align South African policy with human rights norms, distancing the country from the human rights violations committed under apartheid. The concept that humans deserve certain respect and freedoms is not new. However, the articulation of this concept as “human rights” emerged after World War II in the International Bill of Rights (which includes the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as well as the *International Covenants* on the various kinds of human rights). A human right can be understood as a right “which all men, everywhere, at all times ought to have, something which no one may be deprived...something which is owing to every human being simply because he is human” (Cranston 36). Protecting these human rights is not natural or innate, but rather requires protection through international humanitarian law (in the form of supranational declarations and conventions as well as national legislation and policy) which is upheld by the international human rights regime, including the UN and its state parties (Alexander, “An Ordinary Country” 31). However, there is frequent disagreement as to what specifically constitutes a human right: for example, is the right to use one’s mother-tongue a human right which everyone, everywhere ought to have? If so, what kind of protection should be provided for the right? Should states default to mother-tongue

schooling rather than schooling in a lingua franca? How can protecting this right encroach on an individual's right to choose their language of instruction?

These kinds of disagreements have developed three generations of human rights. The first generation of rights has substantial protection in humanitarian law, while second and third generation rights have less protection. Civil and political rights are generally known as first generation rights. These are rights such as “freedom of speech” or “freedom of religion” and are considered “negative” rights because they entail protection from excesses of the state. In other words, the state is not allowed to dictate what types of speech or what types of religion are permissible. While many states continue to deprive their citizens of these first generation rights, they are enshrined in “harder” law: there is some legal accountability if states fail to conform to these rights. Social, economic and cultural rights are generally known as second generation rights. These are rights, such as the right to a basic education, which require action or resources from the state. They are thus protected by “soft” law: there is little legal accountability if states fail to conform to these rights because some states lack the resources to them (Vasak 29-32). For example, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that the rights “may be limited by law” if resources are unavailable to fully ensure the exercise of those rights. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has no such exception (United Nations, *International Bill of Human Rights Fact Sheet*). The South African Constitution similarly distinguishes between the two generations of human rights: the Constitution states that “Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions *where that education is reasonably practicable*” (my italics; ss. 29, 2a). This last phrase, “where

reasonably practicable,” and other similar “safety clauses” are loopholes which can be used as an excuse for not implementing certain Constitutional demands (Alexander, “An Ordinary Country” 91). The sections on political and other first generation rights contain no such exceptions. This disparity between the protection of first generation and second generation human rights reveals that, contradictorily, human rights (supposedly universally equal and applicable) are treated unequally in practice. Second generation rights are not treated with the same degree of importance as first generation rights, even though they, too, have a profound effect on human dignity.

International human rights norms place linguistic rights as part of the second generation of rights because there are so few pieces of legislation focused on language. UNESCO supports mother-tongue and multilingual education as part of its overall stated strategy, but it relies on relatively few policy documents to support that strategy (*UNESCO Languages in Education Strategy*). For example, the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, the *Convention on Discrimination in Education*, and the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* all provide basic linguistic protections, such as an individual’s right to use their own language, but always within the context of larger aims of “cultural diversity” or the rights of minorities (*MOST Clearing House Linguistic Rights: International Legal Instruments*). South Africa was involved with the creation of the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*, the most comprehensive current language legislation, which provides specific definitions of “language communities” and what kinds of rights these communities are entitled to; however it is a non-governmental document (Art. 1 sec. 3; Art. 3). As a non-governmental document, certain South African NGOs were signers of

the *Declaration*, however South Africa as a country was not a signer (*Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*). Therefore, the document is largely aspirational.

The creation of new legislation is based on these limited international norms, like the *South African Languages Bill*, is an attempt to combat the secondary status of language rights by creating greater protection and more enforcement mechanisms. However, the three goals of language policy (multilingualism, flexibility for wide applicability, and acknowledgement of both English and indigenous African languages) often find themselves at odds with one another in practice. For example, flexible policy permits schools to choose their own LOLT, which usually operates as a way for schools to avoid teaching indigenous African languages because they choose English or Afrikaans. Thus, African language promotion (as part of the push for multilingualism) has been waylaid in an attempt to keep policy flexible. Parents have the right to request African languages as the LOLT, however, this requires a minimum of 40 other learners also request the same language. It is particularly hard to request indigenous African languages as an LOLT at historically white or Indian schools which have a history of not teaching indigenous African languages and which claim to lack the resources to make it possible (Republic of South Africa, “FAQs on LOLT;” Olivier). And even at the those schools, such as Dokodweni, where the LOLT is an indigenous African language for the first years of primary school and it is understood that students learn better when taught in their mother-tongue first, the Department of Basic Education “encourages learners to change to English as a LOLT in the Intermediate Phase [Grade 4]” (Republic of South Africa, “FAQs on LOLT”). While this is technically multilingualism, it can be considered “subtractive” multilingualism (in which the manner of learning English erodes the value

of the mother-tongue), especially since isiZulu is only retained as an additional language class rather than as the vehicle of education for certain classes after Grade 3 (Murray 438).

Additionally, most language education policy uses language similar to that in the Constitution, specifically caveats such as, “where reasonably practicable” or “Neither the Department of Basic Education (DBE) nor the provincial departments of education can force a school to offer any specific language offering” (Republic of South Africa, “FAQs on LOLT”). These “safety clauses” are considered necessary because they recognize the limited availability of resources, but they ultimately undermine responsibility and, furthermore, do not question the allotment of resources. Perhaps resources are limited because they are not being allotted in a manner that is most beneficial to the public, and language education should be given given higher priority in regards to resources. However, the post-apartheid fear of defending and enforcing certain languages (and presumably, by extension, certain ethnic groups) remains powerful and renders the policy impotent.

Another aspect of the problematic South African language policy is the multiplicity and constant restructuring of government departments and government curriculum policy. Under the current Zuma administration, new departments have been created and old departments have been split into two (G. Boyce). Within this structure, various departments could be, and have been, involved with language policy promotion: the Department of Arts and Culture, the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Higher Education and Training, and a variety of governmental commissions and organizations such as PANSALB. To implement language policy effectively, it is

necessary for all of these organizations to coordinate policy. For example, the Department of Higher Education and Training cannot expect universities to use indigenous African languages as the LOLT because the Department of Basic Education does not provide a foundation for it within the primary and secondary schools (“Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education” 7). And the rapid change of state curriculum – from the evolution of OBE, to its downfall, to the current “Schooling 2025” and recent changes in the matriculation exam within a span of 18 years – has provided difficulties for schools, teachers, and students trying to keep up with every new change. It also makes it difficult to track which methods have been effective and which have not.

Finally, enacting change via human rights-based legislation continues to present problems. The disparate identities of South Africans make it almost impossibly difficult to create a domestic language policy (based on international human rights norms) that is coherent while also accommodative of disparate situations and needs. For this reason, the above South African legislation remains largely aspirational and un-actionable. Additionally, because language rights are perceived as second generation rights within the international human rights regime, many South Africans continue to see them as relatively unimportant in comparison to the other concerns, such as housing rights and the slow economy. Clearly, “the greatest obstacle to making language rights meaningful is in the attitudes of the people themselves” – how can we then make language rights meaningful to South Africans (Marback 371)? Creating progressive language legislation may not be the ideal way of doing so.

### **A New Proposition**

Charles Taylor makes a valuable observation when he said, “perhaps we don’t need to ask whether it’s something that others can demand from us as a right. We might simply ask whether this is the way we ought to approach others” (72). The problem with trying to implement change through a human rights framework is that it allows for the articulation and putative protection of rights, through which South Africa presents itself as a protector of human rights, while simultaneously permitting a reality which fails to uphold these stated rights. Clearly, after the disastrous and demeaning oppression of apartheid, South Africans want to distance themselves from racism and intolerance by upholding and defending human rights. However, in practice and in the classroom the reality is vastly different from the aspirations outlined in the Constitution and in language legislation. Language rights have become a fiction that South Africa can claim that to support without actually doing so in practice, despite the fact that the majority of South Africans would prefer that their life actually mirrored these aspirations rather than falling short time and time again. Instead of pushing forward relentlessly and hoping that more legislation and more policy will eventually make a change, a fundamental reevaluation of the *purpose* of that legislation is required to make the stated aspirations a reality.

Martha Nussbaum, a prominent contemporary philosopher, suggests that rather than using new laws and legislation as a starting point for change, we need to take a step back to examine the foundations of human rights and what they are actually for. What are they trying to achieve? They are not intended to be unachievable goals, but rather to protect human dignity. Applying this to the South African language situation, we need to ask what is the purpose of learning a language and education in South Africa? What is it for? The Language-in-Education Policy of 1997 states that the primary purpose is “to

promote full participation in society and the economy” (DBE). However, we know that focusing exclusively on this purpose can result in the hegemony of English which, as shown earlier, serves to perpetuate inequality and subversive oppression among South Africans. Neither can the exclusive purpose be to support the growth of indigenous African language and culture and relegation of English, as Alexander suggests (Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 95). This simply replaces one form of dominance with another. A different approach is required – perhaps one which is based in the idea that the purpose of education and learning languages should be to support the growth of human beings as individuals, to create the circumstances in which humans can make an informed, real, and free decision of who and what and how they want to be, without an end goal of what that human being looks like. It is up to each human to decide for themselves, within their cultural and historical constraints. Nussbaum calls this line of reasoning the “capabilities approach.” She defines “capabilities” as that which humans are distinctly capable of doing or being (5). Therefore, the approach takes into account the self-determination of individuals, within the realities of their specific situation, and places it as the basis for all law and policy. Essentially, Nussbaum is suggesting we stop creating new policy until we understand what the citizens desire from the policy (within societal and historical realities). Then states should implement legislation and law that does not prescribe a specific outcome, but instead provides a basis for the realization of a variety of outcomes, depending on the person’s capability. It is the duty of states to protect and prevent the obstruction of basic capabilities through rights (Nussbaum 71). South Africans should have an education that allows them that kind of freedom.

Nussbaum's theory of human capabilities uses a set of ten equally important guidelines, which she believes stand as a marker of the bare minimum which allow individuals and their capabilities to flourish (72). She maintains that they are not culturally specific and can apply for any human community anywhere, and that after the basic measures are fulfilled communities are free to practice whatever culturally specific practice they wish. This requirement is essentially a minimum threshold which is necessary to protect human dignity and determination of one's own life. An example of how this threshold works is that states can, and should, provide basic education (such as literacy and basic math and science), which may also include cultural education (such as history and cultural practices). The content of this education can be decided according to the citizens' choosing, as long as the content does not violate the basic guidelines of human capabilities. However, if cultural education teaches that one racial group is superior to another (such as missionary education or education under apartheid), it has violated one of Nussbaum's ten guidelines: human beings should be able "to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (79). The state should not be absolutely free to teach any cultural tradition it chooses because it may obstruct the capabilities of certain citizens unequally. While the capabilities approach can not ensure that everyone will reach their full capability, it requires that the state provide a foundation from which individuals can *pursue* their full capability (81). Thus, cultural education which teaches that one racial group is superior to another would prevent some individuals from attaining the basis, or threshold, from which to pursue their full capability.

Nussbaum does not specifically address language in her guideline regarding education ("senses, imagination, and thought"), but she does state that an individual

should be “able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education” (78). The realities at Spearman Road and Dokodweni reveal that many students are not receiving an “adequate education” because of the way English is dominant in the classroom. English may be obstructing the full capabilities of these struggling students, rather than enabling their full capabilities as desired.

How can South Africa ensure this minimum requirement and create an education system which supports human capabilities? What do South Africans need to be able to achieve their capabilities? It will clearly require a reallocation of resources to the real support (rather than the professed support) of indigenous African languages, to promote their growth perhaps through language “corpus planning” (the creation of dictionaries, the innovation of an expanded vocabulary to accommodate complex technical concepts, the promotion of indigenous language use in textbooks and literature, etc.) (T. Reagan 61). And this reallocation of resources may look unequal on the surface because it will require that more corpus planning and money be allocated towards languages such as isiZulu, rather than equally between English and isiZulu. However, as Charles Taylor writes in *Multiculturalism*, it may be necessary to provide resources unequally between groups to provide for greater overall equality (55; 57). To create the equal status of indigenous African languages with English will require unequal support in favor of the indigenous languages for a period of time until they have been equalized.

Reallocating resources will be difficult. Many South African policymakers assume that supporting indigenous African languages in education will be prohibitively costly. This may be the case, but perhaps not as costly as not taking action. Inaction will

likely continue to create an uneducated citizenry which is already hurting the economy and reinforcing a cycle of poverty, ultimately stagnating South Africa's progress away from apartheid (John; Macfarlane and Seekoei). Former teacher-turned-scholar, Kathleen Heugh, actually estimates that supporting indigenous African languages may not be as costly as policymakers think. Most South African teachers are already mother-tongue indigenous African language speakers and would thus require little training to teach in these languages (31). In contrast, these teachers are currently expected to teach in English, an effort which they largely fail to do (as exhibited by the extensive code-switching at Spearman Road Primary School) and which requires a great deal of training, resulting in the mediocre success exemplified by low matric pass rates and the situations I observed at Spearman Road and Dokodweni.

Ultimately, South Africa might benefit from reevaluating the purpose of education using the capabilities approach, rather than addressing the difficult language situation from a human rights perspective. The human rights perspective (aligning South African legislation with international human rights norms) can become overburdened by concerns of how to reasonably allocate resources in support of language rights rather than actually providing rights. And encouraging the hegemony of English seems unlikely to support the capabilities of all South Africans equally. South Africans should examine what they are truly able to do and to be, and how education and language can be restructured to help them fully achieve those goals. As long as a basic threshold of indigenous languages in education is met, South Africans should be free to choose for themselves (from an informed perspective) what languages they learn and what their education system looks like.

## Conclusion

South Africa is a unique and successful country in many ways: it has earned the title “the rainbow nation” because of its diverse population, and the 1994 transition enabled the creation of a progressive Constitution and a democratic government which has withstood time and conflict better than most governments in other African countries (Tutu qtd. in Alexander, *An Ordinary Country* 81). However, 1994 was also a moment of possibility that may have been lost. The ANC granted concessions to the Afrikaner leaders in the hope of sustainable peace instead of continued violent bloodshed and a potential escalation to civil war. Of course this was not an easy choice to make, but it has left a legacy of festering inequality instead.

One manifestation of this inequality is language, and especially the role of language in education. As indigenous African languages have been suppressed by English hegemony in public education, many indigenous African language-speakers have been thwarted in their efforts to succeed in school. And because education plays a significant role in determining future careers and aspirations, students’ hopes of a better future than their apartheid and colonial predecessors are diminishing. Several teachers even expressed a longing for the overt oppression of apartheid: “at least under apartheid, we knew where we stood” (Mr. Mthula and Mr. Adams, personal interviews). Inequality and oppression have been endemic in South Africa, and the hegemony of English is now contributing. Hopefully, South Africa will soon realize the impact of English dominance in public education and will make actionable change.

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