

From Colonial Medium to Local Agency: Historical Insights for Malawi's K-12 Language of Instruction Policy

Livinia Kaunda, University of Minnesota, (vaniakaunda@gmail.com / kaund009@umn.edu)

Cited as:

Kaunda, L. (2026). From colonial medium to local agency: Historical insights for Malawi's K-12 language of instruction policy. *World's Education Journal by CISC*, 1(1), 102–122.

<https://doi.org/10.24926/wejc.v1i1.7079>



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

[The World's Education Journal by CISC \(WEJC\)](#) is a peer-reviewed academic journal initiated and managed by the [CEHD International Student Community \(CISC\)](#). WEJC publishes manuscripts in education across all disciplines offered at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development.

From colonial medium to local agency: historical insights for Malawi's K-12 language of instruction policy

Livinia Kaunda, University of Minnesota, (vaniakaunda@gmail.com / kaund009@umn.edu)

Abstract

English version

This paper interrogates and analyzes English-based instruction in public schools, especially lower elementary classes in Malawi—a former British colony—as a demonstration of imperialism and epistemicide. Using a review of literature, the author argues that this English-based instruction policy, even in lower elementary classes—that is, grades 1 to 4—is counterproductive to the educational outcomes for students since English is a minority language in the country. Framed within historical accounts of educational resistance from marginalized and disenfranchised groups, the paper draws insights from such groups to argue that code-switching from English to Chichewa pedagogy enacted by Malawian teachers is a form of epistemological liberation that warrants endorsement. Ultimately, the author proposes a policy modification that sees lower elementary classes being taught using Indigenous languages or household languages and English being demoted to a regular subject or course.

Chichewa version

Pepalali likufufuza ndikusanthula maphunziro omwe amachitika pogwiritsa ntchito Chingelezi m'masukulu a boma, makamaka m'makalasi oyambilira a pulayimale ku Malawi—dziko lomwe kale linali pansu pa ulamuliro wa atsamunda la Britain—ngati umboni wa utsogoleri wa chitsamunda komanso kuchepa kwa nzeru zachikhalidwe. Pogwiritsa ntchito kafukufuku wa mabuku olemba kale, wolembe pepalali akutsutsa kuti ndondomeko iyi yophunzitsa m'Chingelezi ngakhale m'makalasi oyambilira—kuyambira sitandade 1 mpaka 4—imakhala yotsutsana ndi zotsatira zomwe zikuyembekezeka m'maphunziro, chifukwa Chingelezi ndi chilankhulo cha ochepa kwambiri m'dziko muno. Pepalali likutenga nzeru kuchokera ku mbiri zakale zomwe zidaonetsa kuti ndi kotheka kusintha njira yakaphunzitsidwe ndi kupeza njira yoti ana a sukulu azithandizikira. Pomaliza, wolembe akupempha kuti ndondomeko yophunzitsira ana m'ma kalasi a sitandade 1 mpaka 4 isinthe. Ana aziphunzitsidwa mu zilankhulo zakwawo, kapena zilankhulo zomwe zimagwiritsidwa ntchito m'mabanja mwakwawo, ndipo Chingelezi chikhale chabe ngati imodzi mwa ma kalasi omwe ana amaphunzira.

Keywords:

English, marginalized, language of instruction, disenfranchised, Chichewa

Introduction

Somewhere in a standard 6 mathematics classroom in the central region of Malawi, southeast Africa, a teacher writes a mathematical word problem on a chalkboard: ‘If Mr. Banda harvests 90 bags of maize and sells $\frac{3}{4}$ of the maize, how many bags of maize does he have left?’ The classroom is silent; no murmur is heard. The teacher—noticing that the students, who are bright and capable of solving such fractions, are stumped with the language barrier—switches to Chichewa. “Ngati a Banda akolola matumba 90 a chimanga, kenako iwo ndikugulitsa matumba $\frac{3}{4}$ a chimangacho, kodi a Banda atha kukhala ndi matumba angati a chimanga chotsala?” Upon switching to Chichewa—the predominantly spoken native language in Malawi—a wave of hands shoots up, demonstrating the students’ comprehension of the math problem. This scene does not describe an isolated case but depicts a common occurrence across public primary and secondary schools in Malawi, where a policy of English as the medium of instruction is creating inequalities largely felt by students in rural districts of Malawi, where English is not commonly spoken and learning resources are limited (Kamwendo, 2016; Kamwendo, 2021).

I situate this problem within the broader frameworks of Phillipson’s (2008) linguistic imperialism, where the dominance of a colonial language remains long after independence. Phillipson (2008) argues that the remaining of colonial languages, especially English, is not merely incidental but rather a mechanism and tool of white supremacy and structural power maintained through policy and consequently leads to the devaluation of indigenous languages. A look at the suppression of indigenous languages among Native American students in boarding schools (Adams, 2020), for example, attests to these linguistic imperialist frameworks of using language as a tool of control.

This paper argues that English as a medium of instruction in Malawi's primary and secondary public schools is a perpetuation of imperialist frameworks that function as a form of epistemicide. While existing scholarship on this subject has emphasized the harmful effects of this linguistic epistemicide on students' educational trajectories, this paper takes a different approach. It draws critical connections to the historical resistance of marginalized groups in the United States of America (USA) against white supremacy frameworks to reconceptualize the pedagogical acts of code-switching among Malawian teachers and students as practices of epistemological and linguistic liberation. This paper, therefore, aims to explore the resources that both historically and currently disenfranchised individuals have utilized to overcome barriers and oppressive educational systems. By foregrounding these acts of resistance and survival, this paper illustrates how such histories of struggle provide avenues for envisioning more just educational futures.

Disenfranchised Groups' Agency and Counter-Narratives in US History

Historically disenfranchised people and communities are typically defined as groups and communities that have faced systemic challenges and barriers to social, educational, economic, and political participation due to historical practices and policies (Blesset, 2015). These communities include, but are not limited to, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and indigenous peoples. Given the historical harmful practices experienced by these disenfranchised communities (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999), such as indigenous language suppression and genocide (Adams, 2020), enslavement (Wolfe, 2006), and social segregation (Esparza, 2023; Williams, 2005), the likelihood of focusing on these depressing and negative narratives is warranted. However, from my perspective, it is equally important to foreground the counternarratives that illuminate how these historically marginalized

communities circumnavigated these oppressive systems. By centering these stories of agency, we reveal not only the resilience in these people but also the multitude of contributions they made throughout history (Walker, 1996).

During the reconstruction era, formerly enslaved people built and managed native schools throughout South America. In Virginia alone, there were about 500 native schools run solely by ex-slaves who resisted external control from white people (Williams, 2005). According to Williams (2005), “the ex-slaves' educational movement became a test of their capacity to restructure their lives and to establish their freedom. Although they appreciated northern support, they resisted infringements that threatened to undermine their initiative and self-reliance” (p. 12). Formerly enslaved people initiated these educational movements, which gave rise to the concept of universal public education in America (Anderson, 1988). We see similar resistance to ‘external’ educational control in San Felipe Independent School District (SFISD), where Mexican Americans, another historically disenfranchised group, organized themselves to establish an autonomous school district that resisted industrial-based education for their children during the Jim Crow era (Esparza, 2023).

The presented examples of the resistance of marginalized communities and groups towards oppressive systems in history provide the idea of possibilities of countering the contemporary repressive systems that continue to oppress minoritized communities and students in education today. An example of these repressive systems is the disproportional discipline of Black and brown students in contrast with that of white students in schools (Townsend, 2000). Townsend (2000) argues that exclusionary discipline practices are used with students across ethnic groups; however, for African American students, they are disproportionately subjected to corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion, which results in widening the achievement gap

in education. A more recent study on the same issue of discipline found that Black students are usually disciplined for behaviors that their white peers are not (Darling-Hammond, 2023), which includes “subjective behavioral categories like defiance or disrespect” (Carwin, 2018).

Another example of an oppressive system in contemporary times with historical roots is the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools. The works of Adams (2020) in *Education for Extinction*, Esparza (2023) in *Raza Schools*, Thiong’o (1991) in *Decolonizing the Mind*, and Phillipson (2008) in *The Linguistic Imperialism of Neoliberal Empire* exemplify the struggle that minoritized communities have faced in relation to English as the most prized language. Historical acts of resistance to this ideology range from Native American students in off-reservation boarding schools going into hiding (some climbing trees) just to speak their indigenous languages (Adams, 2020). SFISD, on the other hand, went into a legal battle to maintain their autonomy in educating their students using a curriculum befitting the cultural background and language of the Mexican American students.

While the historical and political conditions behind these U.S. cases differ in significant ways from the Malawian context, the two settings are analytically connected through mechanisms of linguistic and educational injustice. In the United States, the marginalized communities named previously struggled as racialized and linguistically minoritized groups within a white-majority nation that elevates the English language as the norm for full citizenship and educational success (Adams, 2020; Blesset, 2015). By contrast, in Malawi, it is the majority of the population—students and families who do not use English in everyday life—who are marginalized by an English-dominant school policy designed and maintained by a postcolonial legacy and elitism (Kamwendo, 2016). I therefore use the term “disenfranchised” not to claim that these histories are the same but rather to name a shared mechanism in how language policy

and schooling devalue local and indigenous languages and constrain educational participation (Mchombo, 2017). Reading these cases together allows me to trace resonances in how communities respond to linguistic domination in schools, even as I attend to the distinct colonial and postcolonial trajectories that shape each setting.

Given this legacy, I argue that culturally relevant language instruction in public schools is possible, with a specific focus on Malawi. In the context of discussing disenfranchised people in this paper, I argue that Malawians fit that description due to the history of colonialism as well as the imperialist legacy that continues to inform policies in Malawi to this day. The freedom dreams of historically disenfranchised communities affected by oppressive educational systems, policies, and practices and their acts of resistance provide me with the impetus to critically examine English as a medium of instruction in Malawi public schools.

The Contemporary Manifestation—Imperialism in Policy

History of Language Policy Development in Malawi's Education

Malawi has a total of 16 languages, with Chichewa being the dominantly spoken national language (Chepkemoi, 2017). After Malawi gained its independence from Britain in 1964, during the presidency of Dr. Kamuzu Banda, who was Malawi's first president, the new administration decided to retain the colonizer's language, making English the official language of the nation (Kamwendo, 2008). In 1968, the new administration made some language policy changes that saw the institution of Chichewa as the language of instruction in lower elementary classes (standards 1 to 4¹) even in districts where Chichewa was considered a minority language. The rationale was to instill a sense of unity in citizens by speaking and learning the same

¹ Primary school runs for 8 years. Lower elementary classes are standards 1 to 4. Standards 5 to 8 are considered middle to high elementary classes.

language from formative years of schooling. The policy also made English the language of instruction from standards 5 to 8 in elementary schools (Kamwendo, 2008).

In 1994, a new administration rose to power under the leadership of Dr. Bakili Muluzi, who also made changes to the language of instruction policy. As cited by Kamwendo (2008), the secretary of education in 1996 announced that:

With immediate effect, all Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4 classes in all our schools will be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction. English and Chichewa will, however, continue to be offered as examination subjects in the primary curricula. In the past, Chichewa was used as both a medium of instruction and a subject, making it very difficult for beginners to grasp ideas. However, English will continue as a medium of instruction beginning in Standard 5 (p.355).

According to Msonthi's (1997) study, the majority of Malawians were unhappy with the policy change. Concerns ranged from people fearing the policy would encourage ethnicity, which takes away the unity of Malawians as a whole. For instance, the primary identity for people would be Yao, Tonga, or Tumbuka² first, and being Malawian would be secondary. Others were concerned that the government did not have adequate resources to finance the production of textbooks and curricula in all 15 indigenous languages in Malawi. Yet others were concerned that removing English as the language of instruction in the lower elementary classes would limit their children's chances of attaining fluency in English (Kamwendo, 2008; Msonthi, 1997), which was contrary to their hopes and dreams because, despite English being a minority language in Malawi, compared to indigenous languages, it possesses higher linguistic capital (Kamwendo, 2021).

² These are some of the ethnic tribes in Malawi. The indigenous languages spoken by these tribes are also known by the same name of the tribe. For example, Yao is both a name of a tribe and a name of an indigenous language

In 2014, another modification, or rather, a retrogression, was made to the policy. This change reinstated English as the language of instruction in lower elementary classes—standards 1 to 4. As mentioned earlier, the English language holds more prestige and is viewed as the language of the elite by most Malawians, indicating that linguistic imperialism undermines other languages, including native ones (Phillipson, 2008). Kamwendo (2021) adds that “one of the consequences of colonialism has been the devaluation of African languages and the acceptance by the population of the pernicious myth of their inferiority to major Western languages” (p. 524). Former minister of education Dr. Lusicious Kanyumba was quoted on Al Jazeera saying, “English speaking has been a problem for our pupils, even for those who complete secondary school education. It is the wish of the government to see most of the pupils write and speak good English while at primary school” (Masina, 2014). This exemplifies how a Black Malawian, influenced by white supremacy frameworks, views English as the most valued language even today. This ideology is supported by the Malawi Education Act (2014) section 78 which states “the medium of instruction in schools and colleges shall be English” (p.29).

Schooling Problems Associated with the Policy

According to a study by Kayambazinthu (1998), only a small percentage of people in Malawi speak English fluently. Chichewa and other indigenous languages are the main languages of daily interaction. Kamwendo (2016; 2021) corroborates the minority status of the English language in Malawians and calls Chichewa and other indigenous languages household communication languages. Due to this fact, a majority of students face linguistic challenges when transitioning from home to school because, as Kamwendo (2021) argues, some learners meet English for the first time when they enter primary school in standard 1. Among other consequences of this linguistic disconnect, Kamwendo (2016) found that there is a ‘silent

students' phenomenon in lower elementary where students remain silent during class periods because they do not know how to say what they want to say. In some cases, this phenomenon affects students in Standard 4 because, even at this level of their education, they have not yet mastered the English language and still possess a limited vocabulary. In most cases, students with no knowledge of English prior to primary school continue to face academic challenges beyond lower elementary (Issa & Yamada, 2013).

Others have argued that the new language policy perpetuates educational inequities (Issa & Yamada, 2013; UNESCO, 2015). The schooling structure in Malawi can be divided into three types: public schooling, private schooling, and international school. The first two types, public and private schools, use the national local curriculum developed by the ministry of education in Malawi. Students attending these schools write the same national examinations, which are conducted in English. Research has shown that middle-income Malawians prefer sending their children to private schools, which are better resourced and have qualified teachers (Kamwendo, 2016; Kathewera, 1999), rather than to public schools that are heavily under-resourced and where teachers lack motivation due to low pay and high student-to-teacher ratios of around 74:1 (Kamwendo, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). This creates an unlevel ground where students are not provided with the tools they need to succeed academically.

A study by Masina (2014) found that the linguistic situation for rural public schools is worsened since most of the teachers in primary schools are not fluent in English. In this context, students are provided with second-class education due to teachers struggling with the language. Coupled with the 'silent students' phenomenon, it is unrealistic to expect students in such learning contexts and environments to perform as well as students from private schools during national examinations.

Historical Foundations of Language Policy in Malawi

While colonialism has played a significant role in the development and implementation of these deficit-based language policies in Malawi, imperialism has kept these colonial frameworks alive to this day. I use the term deficit-based here because the retainment of the colonial language English as an official language was endorsed under the guise of modernization (Kamwendo, 2021). This association of colonial frameworks to modernization is similar to the characteristics of settler colonialism, as Wolfe's (2006) study found that "settler colonialism was foundational to modernity" (p. 394). The framing of the English language as a steppingstone to the modernization of Malawian people is counterproductive and contrary to reality because the education department is heavily underfunded and teachers are in short supply, especially those fluent in English (Kamwendo, 2016; Kamwendo, 2021). The government does not have the financial capacity as well as human resources—teachers fluent in English—to effectively use English as a medium of instruction (CSEC Malawi, 2024). The practice of teaching instruction in English also falls contrary to empirical research conducted by many scholars and organizations, one of them being UNESCO. UNESCO (2003) proposes that the best medium of instruction in lower elementary classes is mother tongue languages.

In 'Decolonizing the Mind,' Thiong'o (1991) cautioned that as Africans, how we view ourselves and even our environment is dependent on how we understand imperialism in its colonial and neocolonialism stages. He continues that if Africans are to do anything about their collective ways of being today, they must confront what imperialism has been doing to them and how they view themselves in the world. Indigenous Americans in off-reservation boarding schools present similar examples of white supremacy frames influencing how people view themselves. The narrative of using boarding schools as a mechanism for indoctrination, where

the savage was eliminated to be replaced with a civilized American (Adams, 2020), provides reasons to confront white supremacy and, if I may add, imperialism's influence on the self-perception of minoritized people. In his book *Education for Extinction*, Adams (2020) covered vignettes from students who came to loathe their cultural identity and even their language. One account exemplifies the influence of white supremacy on a female Indigenous American student's perception of her own culture and language, as she wrote an apology letter to her White school principal for speaking her indigenous language. In what follows, I discuss avenues taken in confronting imperialist frameworks in education.

Forms of resistance to white supremacy and imperialist frameworks in education

A study by Chilora (2000) reported that some teachers in rural districts circumnavigate the policy by code-switching when teaching lower elementary classes. This involved using English and the indigenous language widely spoken in that district. Although the educational policy in Malawi does not endorse this practice, other scholars have confirmed its effectiveness. For example, a study by Jones (2008) sought to understand teachers' responses to a language in education policy in Kenya and found that most teachers would use indigenous languages to explain and clarify the meaning of new English vocabulary.

I interpret the code-switching that teachers enact as a polyvalent response to the English as the medium of instruction policy, rather than a single act of resistance. Teachers' deliberate use of Chichewa and other local languages may be regarded as a manifestation of pedagogical and epistemic resistance. In this context, Malawian teachers' methods are in line with the research on code-switching pedagogies, which shows how teachers employ students' household languages to support marginalized identities and epistemologies (MacSwan & Faltis, 2019). At the same time, code-switching in these situations is a practical way to cope with problems that

are caused by teachers' limited English fluency, large class sizes, and a lack of suitable materials (Kamwendo, 2016; Masina, 2014). In such circumstances, switching to local languages is a pragmatic decision teachers make to alleviate challenges incurred by the English-dominant system imposed upon the majority of the Malawian population without providing the requisite training, resources, or linguistic resources for its success.

Though it is a different context, the example of Blacks in South Africa resisting Bantu education during apartheid contributes to the argument in this paper. To their argument, they feared that the fundamental aim of the Bantu type of education was to produce a semi-illiterate industrial force that should serve the needs of the Whites who controlled the economy at that time (Marivate, 1993). Bantu education would be instruction of lessons using Black indigenous languages other than the official languages, which at that time were only English and Afrikaans. During apartheid, Black Africans who had limited mastery of English or Afrikaans served as a cheap source of labor (Marivate, 1993). It is with this background that students protested and resisted Bantu education, although the policy was later implemented anyway. Still, these acts of resistance provide the optimism to reimagine the future where marginalized people are empowered to influence policy changes and equitable policy developments. Two decades later, South Africa now has 11 official languages, including indigenous/Bantu languages, which have equal linguistic capital as English and Afrikaans.

Envisioning Just Educational Futures in Malawi

Given the historical context and possibilities of equitable educational practices of Mexican American youth discussed in *Raza Schools* by Esparza (2023) and the education of Black youth in Caswell County Training School (CCTS), which was heavily underfunded and under-resourced (Walker, 1996), I am proposing to examine the ways that schools should be

centering indigenous languages in Malawian schools alongside the English language in pedagogy.

In Raza Schools, the San Felipe Independent School District (SFISD) exemplifies the centering of indigenous languages in their school curriculum by establishing culturally relevant teaching practices that were embedded in Mexican American heritage and language (Spanish) (Esparza, 2023). Esparza (2023) highlights cases where the SFISD resisted the broader Texas state educational policies that marginalized Mexican American students by enforcing English instruction through Americanization classes. In response, the independent school district developed its own policies that allowed instruction in lower elementary classes to be in Spanish to ensure that students develop crucial foundational literacy and numeracy skills. As the students moved ahead in their classes, they transitioned to English and Spanish instruction, which enabled them to excel academically while transitioning to English proficiency (Esparza, 2023).

Similarly, I propose a pedagogical practice that students in lower elementary classes be taught in their Indigenous language, that is, whatever household communication language is dominant in that district, and English should be taught as a subject. It is imperative to comprehend the distinction between English as a language of instruction and English as a subject. The distinction by UNESCO is as follows:

The language of instruction in school is the medium of communication for the transmission of knowledge. This is different from language itself where the grammar, vocabulary, and the written and oral forms of a language constitute a specific curriculum for the acquisition of a second language other than the mother tongue (UNESCO, 2003, p. 17).

In this way, having English as a subject will only familiarize lower elementary students with the language, which is different from English being the medium of instruction. I propose to

use indigenous languages as mediums of instruction to ensure that critical foundational skills in these formative elementary years, such as numeracy, literacy, and writing, are mastered in the language that students are fluent and comfortable in. This would also provide room for parents and family members to support lower elementary students in reviewing their school lessons since Kamwendo (2021) found that even most parents do not know how to speak English; thus, they do not know how to assist their children with schoolwork. By implementing this practice in pedagogy, teachers would recover their confidence in teaching and explaining new concepts in vernacular language, as research has shown that most teachers cannot clearly express themselves in English and thus cannot teach effectively using it (Masina, 2014). Another implication of this would be an increase in cultural awareness and pride in both teachers and students, which would gradually counter the imperialist and white supremacy frameworks that have created a narrative that indigenous languages are inferior to English.

It is imperative to acknowledge that a similar policy to what I am proposing here was already implemented during the administration of Malawi's second president, Dr. Bakili Muluzi. However, the policy was poorly planned and thus faced overwhelming backlash from the citizens. One of the critiques of the policy, for instance, was that the government had failed to consult relevant educational stakeholders before policy development and implementation (Kathewera, 1999). People worried that the Ministry of Education and schools were ill-prepared to shift the medium of instruction to Indigenous languages considering that all textbooks prior to this were in the English language (Kathewera, 1999), a concern that I validate.

Drawing from the experiences of Black educators in segregated America, precisely in Caswell County Training School (CCTS), yes, resources are helpful, but they are not critical. If teachers are willing to teach and students are willing to learn, then education will happen

(Walker, 1996). Despite the systemic inequalities they faced with the state withholding funds for their school and inadequate resources and infrastructure, Black educators at CCTS made extraordinary efforts to nurture and educate their students and helped them reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996). Nevertheless, I contest that CCTS being an example of one school, the feasibility of its success therefore cannot be extrapolated to a national level.

The experiences of SFISD and CCTS exemplify the accomplishments of communities in the midst of adversity and material scarcity (Esparza, 2023; Walker, 1996). Even so, it would be erroneous to generalize that willpower and community mobilization alone, as was the case in the aforesaid examples, can uphold a national transition in the language of instruction policy. In Malawi, any effort to use indigenous languages as a medium of instruction must immediately deal with the financial, infrastructure, and human resource problems that made the earlier Muluzi-era strategy less effective (CSEC Malawi, 2024; Kathewera, 1999). My proposal does not dismiss concerns about a lack of stakeholder consultation, materials, and teacher training. Instead, it uses them as design lessons: start with small, district-level pilots in Standards 1–4 where one or two local languages are already dominant; use low-cost, locally made materials instead of waiting for full textbook sets; offer short, practice-focused in-service modules on multilingual pedagogy (Kamwendo, 2016; Reilly, 2022); and repurpose existing English textbooks for teaching English as a subject, not as the only way to learn.

In this proposed model, teachers would give instructions in lower elementary classes using students' indigenous languages while simultaneously teaching the English language as a mere subject. Doing this would provide lower elementary students a strong foundation in foundational subjects while at the same time exposing students to the English language, which would facilitate a smoother transition to the English medium of instruction in Standard 5

onwards. The proposed approach would also fulfill parents' expectations over their children's English acquisition without compromising students' foundational learning skills (Kathewera, 1999; Reilly, 2022). Ministry officials, school management committees, and parent associations would work together to make local plans for how parents can help their children learn at home and how progress will be measured. These plans would be based on lessons learned from Malawi's own language of instruction debates in previous administrations (Kamwendo, 2016; Reilly, 2022). Taken together, these steps reframe my proposal not as a low-resource miracle modeled on CCTS and SFISD, but as a phased, context-sensitive pathway that combines historical lessons about community agency with sober attention to Malawi's structural constraints (Esparza, 2023; Walker, 1996).

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that English instruction in lower elementary classes in Malawi is counterproductive to the educational outcomes for students. Additionally, it also creates inequities, especially between rural and urban students, which is felt during national examinations taken in English despite the discrepancies in the instruction of lessons in various rural schools. I therefore proposed a policy modification that would see lower elementary classes being taught using Indigenous languages, and English would just be one of the subjects learned. Drawing from examples of Esparza (2023) in Raza schools, Walker (1996) in *Their Highest Potential*, and the back-and-forth debates of language of instruction policy in Malawi, I believe that having Indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in lower elementary is the best hope for an equitable and just educational future for students in Malawi.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the insights gained from the course Interlocking Systems of Oppression taken in Fall 2024 at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, which deeply informed my thinking and provided the inspiration for this paper.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

- Adams, D. W. (2020). *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875–1928* (2nd ed., revised and expanded). University Press of Kansas.
- Anderson, J. D. (2010). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (1st ed.). The University of North Carolina Press.
- Blessett, B. (2015). Disenfranchisement: Historical underpinnings and contemporary manifestations. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 39(1), 3–50.
- Carwin, M. (2018). The charter school network: The disproportionate discipline of Black students. *CUNY Law Review Forum*, 21, 49.
- Chepkemoi, J. (2017). What languages are spoken in Malawi? World Atlas. Retrieved December 6, 2024, from <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-languages-are-spoken-in-malawi.html>

- Chilora H .G. (2000). Language Policy Research and Practice in Malawi. A paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Conference, San Antonio, USA 8 – 12 March 2000.
- CSEC Malawi (December, 2024). CSEC’s statement on the 2024–25 mid-year budget review: strengthening commitments to education for a brighter future. The education hub—Malawi.
<https://medium.com/the-education-hub-malawi/csecs-statement-on-the-2024-25-mid-year-budget-review-strengthening-commitments-to-education-for-a4ad0c6267bf>
- Darling-Hammond, S., Ruiz, M., Eberhardt, L.J., Okonofua, J. (2023). The dynamic nature of student discipline and discipline disparities. PNAS. doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2120417120
- Esparza, J. J. (2023). Raza schools: The fight for Latino educational autonomy in a West Texas borderlands town. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Issa, M. D., & Yamada, S. (2013). Stakeholders’ perceptions of the language of instruction policy in Malawian primary schools and its implications for the quality of education. Hiroshima, Japan: Centre for the Study of International Cooperation at Hiroshima University.
- Jones, J. M. (2008). Teachers’ views and practice: The place of the mother tongue in the implementation of the Kenyan language-in-education policy. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 45–58.
- Kamwendo, G. H. (2008). The bumpy road to mother tongue instruction in Malawi. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 29(5), 353–363.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630802147858>
- Kamwendo, G. H. (2016). The new language of instruction policy in Malawi: A house standing on a shaky foundation. *International Review of Education*, 62(2), 221–228.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-016-9557-6>
- Kamwendo, G. H. (2021). Voices of ignorance versus voices of knowledge: Debates on English as a medium of instruction in Malawian primary schools. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 12(4), 523–544. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2020-2003>
- Kathewera, J. (1999). Change of terminology and medium of instruction policy in standards 1–4. In G. Kamwendo, A. Mtenje, & B. Sandhass (Eds.), *Towards a national policy for*

- education: Proceedings of a national symposium on language policy formulation (pp. 107–115). Zomba: Centre for Language Studies.
- Kayambazinthu, E. (1998). The language planning situation in Malawi. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 19(5), 369–439.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434639808666363>
- MacSwan, J., & Faltis, C.J. (2019). *Codeswitching in the Classroom: Critical Perspectives on Teaching, Learning, Policy, and Ideology* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315401102>
- Malawi Education Act. (2014, December 31).
<https://malawilii.org/akn/mw/act/2013/21/eng@2014-12-31>
- Marivate, C. N. (1993). Language and education, with special reference to the mother-tongue policy in African schools. *Language Matters*, 24(1), 91–105.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10228199308566071>
- Masina, L. (2014, August 21). Malawi schools to teach in English. Al Jazeera. Retrieved December 6, 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/08/malawi>
- Mchombo, S. (2017). Politics of Language Choice in African Education : The Case of Kenya and Malawi. *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 5(4), 181–204.
<https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2017.04.001>
- Msonthi, J. (1997). Parents' attitudes towards multilingual education in the lower primary school (Standard 1–4): The Malawi experience. BEd Dissertation, English Department, University of Malawi.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, J. (1991). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Heinemann Educational Books.
- Phillipson, R. (2008). The linguistic imperialism of neoliberal empire. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5(1), 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427580701696886>
- Reilly, C., ResCue, E., & Chavula, J. J. (2022). Language policy in Ghana and Malawi: differing approaches to multilingualism in education. *Journal of the British Academy*, 10s4, 69–95.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s4.069>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies : research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/hol052/98030387.html>

- Townsend, B. L. (2000). The disproportionate discipline of African American learners: Reducing school suspensions and expulsions. *Exceptional Children*, 66(3), 381–391.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290006600308>
- UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a multilingual world*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges*. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2015. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved December 6, 2024, from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002322/232205e.pdf>
- Walker, V. S. (1996). *Their highest potential: An African American school community in the segregated South*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Williams, H. A. (2005). *Self-taught: African American education in slavery and freedom* (1st ed.). University of North Carolina Press.
- Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462352060105624>