Space for Home Language in the Ongoing National Dialogue for Educational Reforms in Multilingual Suriname

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Key Words: Multilingualism, Ethnic diversity, the Surinamese Educational Plan (SEP), Mother tongue, Home language, National dialogue

Abstract

After a series of conquests, slavery, independence, revolution and the civil war, Suriname is currently in the building phase of development and democratic recovery. In line with this development, in April 2019, there began a national dialogue on the future of education in Suriname. Although Suriname is linguistically and ethnically diverse, Dutch is the only official language. It is also the language of instruction, textbooks and reading materials in school. The socio-cultural history and migration and settlement of indentured labourers of various ethnic and social groups at various timelines in the history of Suriname pose a challenge for the implementation of the European model of education and training. This paper provides a brief description of the multilingual and multi-ethnic context of Suriname, and much needed structural reforms in its education system. It also underlines the significance of recognizing and respecting cultural diversity and multilingualism as one of the starting points for reforms.

Introduction

Make the citizen good by training and everything else will follow.

–Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Doyle and Smith (2007-2013)]

The essence of the above quote from Rousseau sets the tone of the national dialogue for reforms in education in Suriname to ensure education for all. After a series of conquests, slavery, independence, revolution, civil war and the period of democratic recovery, the Republic of Suriname acquired its political independence on 25 November 1975. Although Suriname is characterized by ethnic and linguistic diversity, Dutch is its only official language; it is the language of instruction, textbooks, and all reading materials in schools. The Surinamese government attributes the poor learning performance of the schools, especially in the interior parts of the country to language barriers and the fact that the curriculum does not fit the local context (MOESC, 2010). The starting point of the new curriculum for primary education is the recognition of and respect for cultural diversity and multilingualism. Furthermore, teachers have to increase their competence to offer all pupils a promising learning environment. This paper provides a brief description of the multilingual and multi-ethnic context of Suriname and makes a plea for structural reforms in education.

Multilingual and Multi-Ethnic Society

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Suriname is one of the smallest countries in South America, with a population of over 558,368 citizens (2017). During the colonial period, the Amerindians, its original inhabitants were pushed over, paving the way for slaves from Africa to do the plantation work. With the abolition of slavery came the Chinese, the Indians and the Javanese indentured labourers. The country has three distinct regions (Table 1).

Table 1
Three Distinct Regions of Suriname

Region	Surrounding areas	More information
the urban coast	densely populated and widely spread capital city of Paramaribo	A majority of the population lives on the urban and the rural coasts
the rural coast	the areas surrounding Paramaribo	
the interior	Amazonian	

Suriname has more than 19 languages and their varieties, such as Sarnami Hindustani, Javanese, Chinese, Portuguese and the famous lingua franca, namely Sranan Tongo (which means the tongue of Suriname). According to the latest statistics from 2017, the Hindustanis form the largest population group (27.4 per cent). Different ethnic and linguistic groups have their customs, traditions, rituals, music, dance and different cuisines, and live harmoniously. The status of language in Suriname is given in Table 2.

Table 2
Status of Languages in Suriname

Language Status	Language	Other details
Official Language	Suriname Dutch	60 per cent population; The use and standardization of the language is regulated by the Dutch Language Union, an institution jointly established by the Dutch, the Belgians and the Surinamese, as the language is intelligible with other forms of the Dutch language (Kroon &Yağmur, 2012).
Vernacular language / Lingua franca	Sranan Tongo	English-based Creole; lingua franca of the Surinamese Dutch, Javanese Surinamese and Hindustani speakers. In July 1981, the Surinamese government established an official spelling for the language to aid in its written format (Yağmur & Kroon,2011).
Officially recognized languages	Javanese Surinamese	Used by Surinamese residents of Javanese descent,
	Sarnami Hindustani	Used by immigrant workers from India

It is important to note that the languages are constantly evolving just like their speakers. Individuals seek and create the means to make themselves understood, exchange experiences, build cultural identity and shape it through language.

Education System in Suriname

The education system in Suriname is administered by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and is modelled on the pre-independence Dutch system; it played a crucial role in the "Dutchization" of the society. At the end of the 20th century, the government took initiatives to align the education system to the needs of the Surinamese people. The Constitution of Suriname (Constitution of Suriname 1987 Reforms of 1992) under the Thirteenth section of Article 39) asserts that "the State shall recognize and guarantee the right of all citizens to education and shall offer them equal opportunity for schooling. In the execution of its education policy the State shall be under the obligation

a. To assure obligatory and free general primary education
b. To assure durable education and to end analphabetism;
c. To enable all citizens to attain the highest levels of education, scientific research and artistic creation, in accordance with their capacities;
d. To provide, in phases, free education on all levels;
e. To tune education to the productive and social needs of the society."

Though primary education is the State's responsibility, private players also provide education. Education is compulsory from the age of seven to twelve years. (See Table 3 for the structure of the education system). In the context of the extension of primary education to the age of twelve,

the Suriname government has started to change compulsory education in which Dutch is the official language. The process of Surinamization (of teaching methods in particular) is an ongoing initiative under the National Dialogue for reforms in Education.

Table 3

The Structure of Suriname Education System

Education	Level	Related information
Primary	Primary school	7-12 years Public schools (51%) and private schools (religious 48%; private 1%). Public schools fall under the management and authority of the government.
Secondary	For juniors (VOJ)	Secondary education for juniors consists of a general educational field which includes a general education program (MULO) and vocational programs. The vocational courses for juniors such as primary vocational education, primary technical education, primary industrial education, simple technical education, simple vocational education, train the students for further specific education.
	For seniors (VOS)	The secondary education for seniors consists of general training courses and vocational training courses such as preparatory scientific education (VWO) and higher general education (HAVO), which prepares the students for admission to university education, which in turn prepares the students for higher professional education.
Tertiary	All courses	All courses at the post-secondary level for which at least a diploma at VOS level or equivalent is required for admission (UNICEF, n.d.) The Anton de Kom University is the only university in Suriname. It was established in 1966 and opened its doors on 1st November 1968

More than 80 per cent of all children attend primary school, but the number of dropouts is very high. Most of the teachers in the coastal area are competent, but there is a huge shortage of competent teachers in the interior region.

The Surinamese Educational Plan (SEP)

According to the Ministry of Education and Community Development (MOECD), the Surinamese Educational Plan (SEP) (2004) was established through a participatory process with stakeholders and was adopted at an Education Congress on 29th November 2002. It describes five sub-sectors— (a) pre-primary and primary education; (b) secondary education; (c) higher education;

(d) physical infrastructure, and (e) education administration. The most important radical change concerned the new educational structure and reforms of the educational administration – the decentralization of decision-making and the autonomy of schools. Programmes and activities needed for this transformation and institutional strengthening were included in this plan. This plan guided other reforms in education.

National Dialogue for Education Reform, April 2019

The national dialogue for educational reforms was started in April 2019 as a series of intensive meetings between the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for three days. The stakeholders involved discussed the aspirations of Suriname and ways to develop young people to function optimally with attention to basic life skills aimed at active social participation, professional practice, economic independence and optimal social responsibility. The aim was to produce an internationally competitive workforce. The strategy adopted to achieve this aim involved reducing the knowledge gap between Suriname and other countries, improving educational financing and management, focusing on schools and classes, addressing inequalities and strengthening regional cooperation.

Several initiatives have been taken and a great deal of money has been invested in the education system of Suriname under the Surinamese Educational Plan (SEP) and the Basic Education Improvement Program (BEIP). This national dialogue for reforms in education focuses on the policy formulation and implementation of plans for qualitative developments in education and human resource of Suriname (MINOV, 2004)

Critical Review of the Dialogue

It is interesting to note that this dialogue does not consider the issue of mother tongue education and the role of language in early education, the structural changes required for the development of language-specific teaching materials and textbooks along with the trained teachers, and a roadmap for their training. The multilingual context requires an enquiry into the patterns of language choices, language proficiencies, and linguistic attitudes to Dutch, native languages, Sranan Tongo and foreign languages, (English and Portuguese). This understanding is important to formulate an inclusive school language policy. Several reports reveal that the students in the interior regions are disadvantaged. Gardiner and Stampini (2013) discuss the reasons for the disadvantages as follows:

"The structural causes of the particularly low enrolment of students in the Interior include poor infrastructure, limited school oversight, long travel time, high prevalence of costly private schools, and high rates of migration, child labour, pregnancies and marriages. The regional gap is also due to the system's cultural bias towards those on the coast. All classes are taught in Dutch, despite the fact that the majority of students in the Interior are first exposed to the Dutch language when entering school. In addition, few teachers are local, and teachers working in the Interior are generally less qualified." (p.3)

Agnihotri (2014, p.2) critiques the

constrained multilingual approach. He observes:

"Those who look at language merely as a means of communication or, more professionally, as an object of enquiry out there or in the human mind, fail to appreciate its fluid nature and its symbolic and iconic value. That children speaking different 'languages' effortlessly play common games together in the playground should have several lessons for the formal classroom. Any child whose languages are slighted in the classroom becomes reduced as a human being; she is very often silenced for years to come and simply drops out of the education system."

The valorization of the Dutch as the primary medium of instruction, to date, makes early education a challenge for children. Its colonial legacy and availability of instructional materials and textbooks allow the Dutch to have primacy over other local and native languages. A thorough revamping of the education system from primary to higher education is needed. The government is working on a policy paper indicting the changes for improving basic education (Asin, Gobardhan & Krishnadath, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down this dialogue. Hopefully, with normalcy restored, the issue of home language use in classrooms will find a central focus in the deliberations.

Conclusions

The centrality of a language policy with a thrust on the home language of the children as the medium of instruction to achieve quality education cannot be overstated. The low literacy rate, the significant number of school dropouts, and high training costs and academic expenses keep a sizeable population away from higher education. The socio-cultural history, with the migration and settlement of indentured labourers of ethnic and social groups, poses a challenge to implementing the European model of education and training. Suriname requires an organically rooted policy and planning that connects the students to their roots and strengthens the multilingual and multi-ethnic fabric of the society. A multilingual and multi-ethnic context of Suriname requires meticulous and inclusive planning to promote the native/local languages and democratic values and to give prestige to the home language. Furthermore, it needs a structured initiative to produce textbooks and training materials in local languages for primary education. The presence of skilled and trained teachers remains central to these implementations.

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