Language choice, education and community identity in Northwest Cameroon

by

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Introduction
As is the case in most of sub-Saharan Africa, formal education is highly valued among the minority ethnic groups of Cameroon’s Northwest Province. A former British colony, with more than 50 national languages currently in use, this province of Cameroon exhibits both commitment to indigenous culture and active interest in participating in the ‘modern world’. Formal education is prized for its transmission of valued knowledge and skills: literacy, numeracy, knowledge of the English and French languages, and an array of scientific and cultural information valued by the North.

Certainly the role of English-language education in the Northwest Province is undeniable. For those who can afford the tuition fees, public and private schools alike produce well educated individuals who go on to make their mark in the national and international scene. However, for most of the population of the province, living in small towns and villages, formal education delivered in English fails to give their children a thorough grounding in literacy, English skills or critical thinking. In such circumstances the effectiveness of primary education, not to mention higher education, is questionable.

Not only so, but the English–mediated curriculum also fails to give minority-language young people the needed grounding in their identity and history as members of vital minority cultures. To the contrary:

the modern school doesn’t teach [children] the way their own community is living. When the school and community worlds are separate, returning to the community means going ‘back’ to a foreign world.2

Such schooling fails the student, the community, and ultimately the nation.

However in eleven minority-language communities of the Northwest Province, a mother-tongue primary education program3 is providing an alternative: an educational experience that is firmly located within the community and which demonstrates substantial pedagogical and cultural relevance to local realities (NACALCO 2001). This paper constitutes an examination of the pedagogical and cultural impact of this program in the three largest ethnolinguistic

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1 The term ‘national languages’ as used in this paper refers to the local or minority languages of the nation – as opposed to the two official languages, French and English. Even the largest minority language populations in Northwest Cameroon constitute no more than 2% of the total population of the country.
2 Dr. Gabriel Mba, University of Yaoundé, Cameroon; PROPELCA program director, NACALCO.
3 In the Cameroonian context, ‘mother tongue education’ refers to any education program which formally includes use of the students’ mother tongue as a language of instruction. The term does not refer to the exclusive use of the mother tongue in the classroom, however, and the program could actually be legitimately termed ‘bilingual education’ (see discussion below). This paper uses the former term in accordance with the terminology of those who have conceived and now carry out the program in Northwest Cameroon.
groups of Northwest Cameroon – the Nso’, the Kom and the Bafut - in terms of the instructional quality and cultural relevance which characterize this educational alternative.

The research on which the paper is based was carried out as part of a postgraduate study program in the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh. The research took place over eleven months in 2002-2003. Research methods included direct observation of primary school classrooms, mother-tongue teacher training events and language committee meetings; analysis of the extant body of publications in the three languages; and approximately 130 interviews (both semi-structured and open-ended) of individuals and groups. The interviewees’ mother tongue and English were used as appropriate in the interviews.

The cultural and linguistic context

Northwest Cameroonian cultures, and the Nso’, Bafut and Kom in particular, are characterized by a high degree of social structure and a hierarchical leadership which is still very prominent today. These societies trace the lineage of their kings through many generations, spanning hundreds of years (Chilver and Kaberry 1967; Nkwi and Warnier 1982). These three ethnic groups are the largest in the province, with populations of approximately 80,000 (Bafut) to 150,000 (Kom and Nso’) people4 living in the ‘homelands’ of Bafut, Kom and Banso’ respectively5; these areas each measure up to perhaps 100 km in diameter and consist of series of villages and towns. People of these ethnic groups also migrate to other parts of the country, and can be found in the larger cities throughout Cameroon.6

These ethnic communities are also known for the widespread use of their mother tongue. In the homelands, which range from 30-200 km away from the provincial capital of Bamenda, monolingualism is the norm among children and is not uncommon among women. Among the multilingual population, the mother tongue is the language of preference between its speakers no matter where in the country they are. Within these culturally homogeneous homelands, the culture and language of Bafut, Kom and Nso’ respectively are decidedly in the majority. Not only so, but in cities located outside the geographical boundaries of the ethnic community, cultural associations and development associations exist on behalf of nearly every town in the homeland; association members meet monthly, socializing in the mother tongue and planning ways to promote development in their home areas.

However despite these indications of strong cultural and linguistic identity, the English language is dominant to the point of hegemony in the formal education system of northwest Cameroon. The national education policy of Cameroon recognizes English and French as the country’s two official languages of education, with national syllabuses prepared for both francophone and anglophone areas of the country (Ministry of National Education 2000). The government stance towards use of local languages in the classroom has over the past 100

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4 Since government population figures are calculated by division, not by ethnic group, no official numbers exist; these population figures reflect data from 1987 as well as more recent estimates of linguists who have been working in the areas for 10-20 years.

5 The Nso’ people speak the Lannu’so’ language; their home area in Northwest Province is Banso’. The language and geographical home areas of the Bafut and Kom people are called by the same name as the peoples themselves. The term ‘homelands’ is used here as a generic term for these linguistically and geographically defined entities.

6 NGO language development specialists in Bafut and Banso’ estimate that up to half of the total populations of these ethnic groups live outside the homeland area.
years ranged from outright prohibition to a limited acceptance of the informal use of local languages as a pedagogical ‘last resort’ with monolingual children. The norm is that from the day they enter the classroom, children throughout the Northwest Province are plunged into English-language instruction without regard for their inability to understand it. This submersion in English continues throughout the schooling experience of the child.

The commitment among parents and teachers to English-medium instruction is certainly understandable. The history of formal education in this region demonstrates a desire for English-language education among the local population, consistent over the years and apparently unrelated to pedagogical considerations. Beginning with the efforts of the Phelps-Stokes Educational Commission in the 1920’s (King 1971:56), the attempts of education reformers to introduce ‘adapted education’ and an attendant decrease in focus on the English language have met with resistance every time from parents and community leaders determined to see their children receiving the same education that is available to children in the European centers (Bude 1985:40). Expatriate educators continue to encounter this insistence on “real” (i.e. Northern-oriented) knowledge instead of any adapted version (Zimmerman 2002:64).

It is striking, then, that in this heavily pro-English educational environment a space has opened in the homelands for the use of Bafut, Kom and Lamnso’ languages for early primary education. Beginning with experimental programs in 1979, the use of the mother tongue in primary grades has developed into a viable and locally respected educational alternative for children in the homelands. It is the contention of this paper that this phenomenon has its roots in the demonstrated ability of the mother-tongue program to succeed at exactly the points where the English-only system fails: those of instructional quality and cultural relevance. Evidence for this position may be found by examining these two educational alternatives in terms of their impact on the quality of instruction delivered and its relevance to local culture.

The English-only system and instructional quality
Instructionally, the English-only methods practiced in the Kom, Bafut and Nso’ primary schools fail to serve minority-language students well. This type of education, known as submersion education (Baker and Jones 1998:476), has as its goal the prompt assimilation of a language minority population to the exclusive use of the school language. Baker and Jones note that although submersion education may logically be regarded as the quickest way to ensure that a child learns the majority language, its impact on the child is frequently negative.

The child has to try to take in information from different curriculum areas, each with their own special language, and learn a language at the same time. While some children do succeed in Submersion education, many children fail to achieve their potential. Such failure may be academic, . . . [or may be] in terms of physical and mental health. A child may have a lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, may learn to opt out physically, academically and emotionally from the school. School disaffection and alienation also occur as outcomes. (Baker and Jones 1998:477)

These outcomes are familiar to anyone who has experience in the educational system of Northwest Cameroon.

7 However it is noteworthy that the National Education Policy published in 1998 states clearly that national languages have a place in the Cameroonian education. This is move is expected to provide welcome support for mother tongue education initiatives in the country.
Look outside [the window]: those adults are talking in the mother tongue, and the child is actively participating in the discussion. But if you bring him in here [an English-language meeting], he will act like he doesn’t know his right from his left. You can even see it in your own child, when he comes home from a day in English school – he is in shock – you can see it!  

As observed among the Bafut, Kom and Nso’ populations, this method of instruction is flawed in two ways: it inhibits the student’s learning of subject matter, and at the same time teaches English in a stress-filled and relatively non-systematic manner.

In repeated classroom observations, students in grades 1 to 4 appeared to have only an incomplete grasp of the subject matter being taught in the classroom, from the grade 1 pupils who simply ignored their teacher’s directives to the upper grade children who routinely showed hesitancy and guesswork in their engagement with new information. Local educational leaders state that children typically only start internalizing subject matter in grade 4 or 5; until then, they are so focused on learning the language of the classroom that they make little progress in actual content learning. Years of learning are lost for the minority-language student.

The first few years of school are really spent in learning English, not course content. So much effort goes into teaching vocabulary and English expression that the deeper concepts of the subject are not taught.

As for language instruction, formal instruction in English takes place for one period a day. The most commonly used English textbooks (for example Ndangam 2000) assume that English is the second language of the student. They begin with pictures and sight words and proceed from there in a programmed and structured way. However, for the rest of the school day the children hear only English from their teachers and are not permitted to use the mother tongue. Some teachers do admit to using the mother tongue (if they are able to speak it) very occasionally, when the child is clearly not able to understand the material in any other way. This use of the mother tongue is considered to be a good teacher’s last resort. However this practice is generally frowned upon by educational authorities, and many teachers will not admit to doing it. So the greater portion of the day consists of English submersion education for the Kom, Bafut or Nso’ child.

It is also worth mentioning that corporal punishment is still commonly carried out by teachers in primary schools of the Northwest. Such punishment may be meted out for disciplinary reasons, but another common reason is failure to answer the teacher’s questions correctly. Ironically, a large proportion of these teachers are speakers of the child’s mother tongue, yet their commitment to ‘English-only’ in the classroom appears to override linguistic and cultural solidarity with the pupil. This kind of pressure must certainly take its toll on the minority-language student, inhibiting effective learning and engendering negative attitudes about the entire learning process.

8 Mr. Justin Suuyren, General Secretary of the Nso’ Language Organization and primary school teacher.
9 Mr. William Banboyee, Nso’ Language Organization chairman and former Catholic Education Secretary for Cameroon
10 Mr. Lawyer Ephraim Ajoff, primary school headmaster.
11 Mr. Ambe John Che, Bafut Language Association literacy supervisor.
12 At one primary school I visited, I heard a child being beaten outside one of the open windows of the classroom. When I inquired of a teacher, I was casually told that the punishment most likely had to do with the student’s failure to perform in class.
In addition, this instructional system inhibits the development of critical thinking in the minority-language student. As Sonaiya (2002:109) notes, the teacher-centered direct method of instruction so commonly used in sub-Saharan Africa does not require that the student’s mother tongue be used, or even that the student understand the language of instruction. However, the use of learner-oriented instruction to develop critical thinking ability has become a very popular educational concept in Cameroon today, promoted at various levels of teacher training. This method depends on the learner being able to think and express himself or herself well in the language of instruction, as a student is highly unlikely to develop such higher level cognitive skills through a language he or she does not control. The students may memorize data and they may be able to repeat to the teacher what has been given them; but without knowing the language well, a more profound level of critical engagement with the subject matter is not possible.

Finally, this instructional method exploits power differentials in a manner that significantly disadvantages the minority-language child. What this child brings to the classroom – his or her home culture, language and ways of knowing – have little value in the English-medium, European curriculum-driven classroom. The teacher holds everything that is of value, because the teacher is the gatekeeper to the English language and the English-language curriculum. The teacher not infrequently uses this power to maintain discipline and compliance among the students. It is difficult to imagine the delivery of high-quality instruction in circumstances such as these, where the students’ prior knowledge is institutionally devalued and discounted.

Not only so, but parents may also be excluded from their children’s educational experience. Asked in this study whether their children were learning well in school, non-English speaking parents admitted that they had no idea. Thus the influence of the home and the family on a child’s schooling is minimized, granting even greater power to the classroom teacher and the education system he or she represents.

The English-only system and cultural relevance

Culturally, current English-medium primary education in Northwest Cameroon fails to provide minority-language young people grounding in their identity and history as members of vital minority cultures. The hegemonic position of the English language and English-mediated school knowledge is heavily supported by parents, the local school and national-level policies. The Ministry of National Education’s newly-published National Syllabuses for English Speaking Primary Schools in Cameroon (2000) does include space in the new curriculum for the teaching of “national cultures”, but the objectives of that subject encompass only art forms, dance and music. There still appears to be no room for teaching history, philosophy or science from the minority culture’s point of view.

Thus from the age of five, four or even three years old, the minority-language child in Northwest Cameroon is encouraged to completely immerse him/herself in English and English-mediated curriculum. Success is measured, both at home and at school, by one’s

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13 This is termed the ‘new approach’ in anglophone Cameroon, and ‘nouvelle approche pedagogique’ or NAP in francophone Cameroon.
14 In the mother-tongue literacy classes I observed in primary schools, where a volunteer teacher comes into the classroom for an hour a week to teach, the ‘regular’ classroom teachers consistently refused to use the mother tongue in front of the students – even when they were native speakers of the minority language. Their sole contributions to these lessons was to chide the students – in English, always – for perceived misbehavior.
facility in that knowledge - even when this means the child is lost to the home culture. Boarding schools carry out this aim even more intensely, as contact with family and home concerns is abbreviated or lost. Whatever the outcome in terms of pedagogical effectiveness, the minority-language child cannot avoid giving up at least some measure of his or her culture in order to attain to the higher-prestige culture of the Northern school system. The impact on young people’s identity and sense of belonging is significant, and it worries local leaders.

People who throw out their culture are being foolish; they are getting rid of what makes them who they are, in order to have what they will never have – although they might have deceived themselves on that point. When we just take what is from outside, assuming that it must be better, it leaves us worse off."15

Ironically, the perceived irrelevance of home culture and language to the minority-language child is a false assumption. The reality is that many of these young people either remain in or return to their home culture and area as adults. Amin’s study of population trends (1999:195-197) shows that although the population in urban centers of Cameroon’s Northwest Province has increased in the last decades, the population in rural parts of the province is also increasing; the rural population of that province is still more than twice as high as the urban population. Particularly for those who attend only primary school, the tendency is to stay in the home area as adults. Those who leave for higher education may return to the home area after failing to find paid work elsewhere.16 Community leaders are familiar with the disillusioned school leavers who cannot find work in the city and return to the village, yet find it difficult to fit into the culture which once was their home.

People who go to secondary school think they will have a job in an office. Then they don’t get one, and they come back and are roaming the streets. They don’t know how to handle a hoe! They live in Bafut, but they start stealing.17

This phenomenon seems to be on the increase, as competition for paid employment in the cities increases.

The use of mother tongue in primary school: an alternative
The principal mother-tongue program being implemented in Cameroonian primary schools is called PROPELCA (Projet de Recherche Operationelle Pour l’Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun, Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Cameroonian Languages). Originally sponsored by the University of Yaoundé I, PROPELCA classes began in experimental form in 1981. The Lamnso’ language was one of the first two languages in which PROPELCA was implemented. The program’s goal was to "develop a complete educational structure for the teaching and maintenance of [minority] languages in the school system … and to ensure that this system is completely state and/or community supported in structures and funding" (Tadadjeu 1997:20). The PROPELCA program has since grown to include at least 29 Cameroonian languages, including Bafut and Kom as well as Lamnso’. It has also received approval from the Cameroonian Ministry of National Education for expansion nationwide. Its current national proponent is the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees, NACALCO (NACALCO 2001).

15 Dr. Joseph Mfonyam, Bafut Language Association executive committee member.
16 Mr. Mbaswa Evaristus Joko, Divisional Delegate of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Boyo Division.
17 J. Mfonyam.
In the Kom, Bafut and Nso’ areas, the PROPELCA program is sponsored and implemented by the language committees: the Kom Language Development Committee (KLDC), the Bafut Language Association (BALA) and the Nso’ Language Organization (NLO). These language committees are locally organized institutions dedicated to the promotion of the written mother tongue (Mfonyam 2001; KLDC 1991). The PROPELCA program includes primers, reading materials and math texts in the mother tongue; it also provides for teacher training and on-site supervision.

Pedagogically the PROPELCA model is more difficult to classify than the submersion model represented by the English-only education system. Strictly speaking, the program is a bilingual one: in every grade, both the mother tongue and English are part of the curriculum. In one sense, the formal PROPELCA program is a transitional bilingual education model: it runs for the first four years of school, beginning with 80-90% of class time in the mother tongue and decreasing that proportion each year until 80-90% of class time is conducted in English by grade 4. However, according to those who study bilingual education in the North, the goal of transition bilingual education is the fastest possible mainstreaming of the student into the majority language classroom. In Northwest Cameroon, the language committees who implement PROPELCA see its purpose very differently. They see PROPELCA as helping to meet the need for maintenance or revitalization of the mother tongue, particularly in written form. They also value its potential for making minority-language students more successful in the mainstream curriculum, not only by their acquisition of English but also in terms of promoting cognitive and academic development in the mother tongue – particularly in the subjects of reading, writing and math. This perspective is characteristic of a one-way developmental bilingual education program, in which a single language group is taught through two languages (Collier and Thomas 2004:2).

The program also emphasizes teaching English as a subject alongside academic content. Not only is ESL taught as a subject from grade 1, but controlled instruction in English occurs throughout the program; as the students learn subject matter in the mother tongue, they also acquire the relevant English vocabulary and discourse as a separate but related step. The PROPELCA classroom is thus characterized by a two-pronged focus: academic and cognitive development in the mother tongue in the early grades, and a controlled and safe environment for the learning of English as a second language. As a result PROPELCA students in this region of Cameroon are reputed to be earning higher scores on English-language examinations than their peers in the English-only classes, an outcome that is highly valued by parents.

As a complement to the formal PROPELCA program described above, an informal PROPELCA language education program also exists in which mother tongue literacy is taught as a subject to students in upper primary grades. This strand of the PROPELCA program demonstrates more of the characteristics and goals of the heritage language program as described by Baker and Jones (1998:508-509).

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18 Mr. Chah Linus Chituh, inspector of primary schools, Njinikom subdivision.
PROPELCA is not unusual in the developing world in terms of its educational goals and processes, and the description above has many correlates across sub-Saharan Africa.\textsuperscript{19} However, perhaps because most bilingual education research today is carried out in the North, it is difficult to find a ‘natural fit’ for programs such as PROPELCA in the bilingual education typology currently in use in the North.

**PROPELCA and instructional quality**

The most striking instructional outcome of PROPELCA is evident right from grade 1, because children taught in their mother tongue begin to read and write by the second term of their first year. In contrast, the English-only grade 1 classrooms at the same place in the school year feature students who have learned only the first part of the English alphabet and cannot yet read or write in any language.\textsuperscript{20} The difference, of course, reflects the ease of learning in a known language rather than an unknown one. PROPELCA proponents claim that in fact, mother-tongue classrooms finish the 9-month grade 1 syllabus in as little as half that time; the remaining time in the school year is given to review and ensuring that every student is well grounded in the material. So one feature of PROPELCA schooling is that it makes instructional time more efficient, as well as allowing more students to successfully learn the subject matter.

Another aspect of PROPELCA which affects instructional quality is its enhancement of classroom communication. In PROPELCA classrooms two-way communication between teacher and pupil is the norm, even as early as grade 1; pupil questions and ancillary comments are common. This compares favorably with the English-only classroom, in which pupils tend to speak only when questioned by the teacher and do not typically initiate communication. The communication in a PROPELCA classroom also tends to be characterized by a greater focus on the subject matter, as compared with the relatively large proportion of meta-talk and repetition found in the English-only classroom. One Nso’ grade 1 teacher put it this way:

I used to think that my students knew nothing when they came to school. But [with PROPELCA] I saw that they do know some things, but they couldn’t tell me because we were not speaking in the mother tongue. They already know things about what you are going to teach them.

Still another feature of PROPELCA which enhances instructional quality is the manner in which English is taught. The PROPELCA classroom provides a linguistic and cognitive shelter to the minority-language child, in which he or she has the chance to concentrate on learning English without the interference of having to simultaneously learn other curriculum content as well. The separation of new content learning from second language learning facilitates the effective acquisition of both these kinds of knowledge, and PROPELCA’s

\textsuperscript{19} Within Africa, examples of officially sanctioned use of local languages in primary schools can be found in Malawi (Williams 1996), Eritrea (Hailemariam 2000), Guinea-Bissau and Niger (Hovens 2002), Mozambique (Benson 2002), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Robinson and Gfeller 1997), Mali (Muskim 1999), Nigeria (Afolayan 1995; Fafunwa et al 1989), Zimbabwe (Thondlana 2002), South Africa (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Arthur 2001) and Tanzania (Rubagumya 1990) as well as Burkina Faso, Kenya, Ethiopia and Cameroon (Trudell 2001).

\textsuperscript{20} The linguistic and literate environment in the Bafut, Kom and Nso’ areas is such that children entering grade 1 do not typically have prior knowledge of the English alphabet, unless they are among the few who attend nursery school before entering primary school.
recognition of this fact appears to be unique among the educational alternatives of the Northwest Province.

The combination of the above elements – cognitive and academic development in the mother tongue, the teaching of English as a second language and not as a medium of instruction, and the benefits of effective communication between teacher and child – result in superior performance of the PROPELCA students compared to their peers in English-only classrooms. It is readily acknowledged by teachers and educational administrators in the region, whether they themselves practice PROPELCA teaching or not, that by grade 4 PROPELCA students outperform their peers in reading and writing – in English as well as in the mother tongue. This outcome is highly valued by parents, for whom their children’s oral and written fluency in English is a priority. This recognition also supports studies done in Cameroon and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, which show that the use of mother tongue in schooling results in improved school performance (Hovens 2002; Gfeller 2000; Tadadjeu 1990; Cairns 1987). Not only so, but the PROPELCA students’ superior ability in English reading is confirmed by studies which show that L2 reading comprehension is significantly facilitated by L1 reading ability (Bernhardt and Kamil 1995; Yamashita 2002).

Learning in a language which they speak also allows primary students to better engage with the new knowledge and values they encounter in school. PROPELCA’s pedagogical strategy includes incorporating local understandings of numeracy, nature and students’ social world into its instructional framework. This can be easily seen in the way addition is approached:

People have the concepts in their mother tongue – they are doing math every day. The new [mathematical] language is “2 + 2 = 4”, but the reality is something they do every day. So how to link “2” to the reality of two? The [English] teacher doesn’t bother to find out whether they have the concept in their mother tongue or not. But in PROPELCA, the assumption is that they have the language, their mother tongue; the concept is known. What we must do is help them see what they are actually doing when they say, “2 and 2 gives you 4.” Arithmetic in African languages involves only the concrete form of a number; also, different noun classes mean different words for the number. So the need is to link in the child’s mind the concrete fours with the abstract “4”. So approaching arithmetic in mother tongues the children get it quickly. For counting, different languages might conceptualize, for example, 11 as 10 and 1. The standard way of teaching requires a whole week to teach 11, then a whole week to teach 12. But PROPELCA can rather say, “How do you say this number?” They say, “we say ten and one, ten and two,” so you teach that 11 is ten and one. You can teach the addition in just one day!21

Use of the mother tongue in schools also lessens the non-congruence between a child’s home environment and the school environment. It is not merely a matter of a different linguistic code being used; use of the mother tongue is surrounded by a whole environment of behaviors and social expectations, and the mother tongue classroom becomes associated with that environment in the child’s mind. The nature of the behavioral differences observed with use of the two languages will be further discussed below; but one result of using of the mother tongue is that it sets the child more at ease and decreases the stress of the classroom.

21 Mba.
Finally, the ability to decode printed text has a high value among parents. Perhaps it represents the child’s conquest of the mysterious world of books and higher learning; in any case, parents are very pleased to find that their child can ‘control’ reading. The literate environment in the Bafut, Kom and Nso’ communities is not rich, and the fact that it consists almost entirely of English-language material puts reading beyond the reach of those who do not speak English well (including nearly all young children). So even if a child is only sounding out the words on a scrap of newspaper, or even reading the writing on their father’s footwear, the ability to decode print is seen as a real achievement. PROPELCA classrooms facilitate the learning of that skill at a much earlier age than the English-only classrooms do, and for that they are valued by parents. If instructional quality can be described in terms of providing valued knowledge and skills in a timely manner, that is what PROPELCA delivers.

**PROPELCA and cultural relevance**

Cultural relevance is obviously a significant aspect of mother tongue schooling. However, the relative prominence of cultural relevance as an educational program feature varies worldwide from program to program. Intercultural education, for example, focuses on “the dynamic interface between indigenous cultural traditions and those of the . . . non-indigenous sector” (Aikman 1999:191). Multicultural education is more concerned with affirming and legitimizing children's differing cultural perspectives (Zéphir 1999:135). Many maintenance-oriented models of bilingual education advocate legal recognition of "linguistic human rights" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:482), and the construction of a truly pluralist society (May 1999:45).

In this vein, May criticizes traditional multicultural education for overemphasizing "lifestyles at the expense of life chances" (May 2001:174) and understating the impact of structural discrimination on the lives of minority students. Such perspectives would consider educational reform and even more broad-based social reforms to be essential.

Compared to these positions the PROPELCA model is much more circumspect and, perhaps, realistic. The PROPELCA program’s goal is cast primarily in terms of making students into successful learners in both the mother tongue and English. The program is based on the national curriculum for primary schools; PROPELCA teachers are trained to adapt the national primary school syllabus for the inclusion of mother tongue instruction, but they do not ignore it in favor of more radical formulations regarding ‘what students should know’.

Nevertheless, the relevance of the PROPELCA program to Kom, Bafut and Nso’ cultures is undeniable. One of the most obvious cultural effects is that of increased proficiency in the mother tongue. Students learn to manipulate and understand the structures of their language as they read and write mother tongue text. Not only so, but they report that their proficiency in oral mother tongue is also strengthened and enhanced in terms of ease of oral expression, boldness in speaking in public, and familiarity with culturally unique concepts and vocabulary. Nso’ and Kom adults who had attended PROPELCA classes as children were asked about the impact of mother tongue education for them, and responded this way:

> It helped me to express myself in communities and in our tribe as a Nso’ person.23

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22 “Being literate” was mentioned most often as a desired outcome of primary school in a series of 48 parent interviews.

23 Patricia, Meliim, (Banso’).
I believe the additional language (Lamnso’) reading and writing skills improved my view of the Nso’ Culture.24

I learned more about my culture and I can communicate better in my mother tongue.25

They have also helped me to speak my mother tongue fluently.26

The advantages of attending PROPELCA classes are that … it makes me to know our tradition. It has helped me in speaking the language and also writing it.27

It helped me in expressing myself in the midst of people. It also identified me as a good Nso’ man.28

How PROPELCA has helped me: It has made me to love mother tongue and to speak it well.29

These comments also illustrate the connection between mother tongue learning and the ease of maintaining one’s identity and relationships with the mother tongue-speaking community. PROPELCA schooling helps mitigate the child’s sense of alienation in school, and helps him or her stay connected with the home culture.

An additional demonstration of PROPELCA’s connection with mother-tongue culture has to do with the classroom environment, where the domains and behaviors associated with English and those associated with the mother tongue are in stark contrast. The PROPELCA classes observed tended to be noisier, more participatory and less characterized by strict discipline than the English-only classes. This was especially noticeable where the mother tongue was being taught as a subject (the informal PROPELCA program). In part this might be because some of these classes were taught by special volunteer teachers. However, I believe a more fundamental reason has to do with the different domains associated with the languages involved. English is the language of incomprehensible content, of punishment for wrong answers, of examinations that determine one’s future. The mother tongue is the language of home, of play, of comfort and comprehension. When the students begin to interact with a teacher in the mother tongue, they visibly loosen up. They frequently act as though they are enjoying themselves in class, and they tend to talk more volubly with each other and with the teacher.

An Nso’ teacher described one Lamnso’ pre-reading lesson in which he had shown the class a drawing of a speckled hen. Experience in English-medium classrooms led him to expect that he would say, “This is a fowl,” whereupon the students would dutifully respond, “This is a fowl.” But no sooner did he hold the drawing up than the students immediately identified it as not just a fowl, but a speckled hen. They then let loose a volley of information about hens, fowl, and what kinds of chickens they had at home. The teacher remarked, “You could have written a book with all the things they told me about this topic!”

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24 Ano-Ebie, Buea (Nso’).
25 Eva-Marie, Nkar, (Banso’).
26 Wilfred, Bamenda (Kom).
27 Dieudonne, Bamenda (Kom).
28 Berinyuy, Meliim (Banso’).
29 Veronica, Fundong (Kom).
Teachers of both the *formal* (mother tongue as medium) and the *informal* (mother tongue as a subject) PROPELCA classes often remark that the students particularly enjoy classes in the mother tongue.

The identification of PROPELCA classes with home was described by an adult PROPELCA alumnus:

> The school was similar to our home because I felt at home when the language was used in school.³⁰

Such connection with the home culture matters a great deal to the Bafut, Kom and Nso’ people. This is partly due to current economic realities; getting out of touch with the home culture is often counterproductive, if one will be living in that culture after school ends. But probably more salient is the high value of cultural integrity among these peoples; maintaining the ability to fit in and be a ‘real Kom/Bafut/Nso’ person’ is highly desirable.

**The institutional grounding of PROPELCA**

Perhaps most important to its cultural relevance, the PROPELCA mother tongue education program is grounded in local institutions whose goal is to promote mother tongue literacy and language development among their populations. The Kom Language Development Committee (KLDC), the Nso’ Language Organisation (NLO), and the Bafut Language Association (BALA) are recognized community-based organizations which have the support of traditional leadership and local elites. Comprised of educators, linguists and community leaders, these language committees are considered to be the authorities on written language development and are respected for their commitment to maintenance and promotion of the mother tongue.

At the bottom of everything you find is the mother tongue. In Lamnso’ we say, “The Nso’ people are the Fon³¹; and the Fon is the Nso’ people, but the Nso’ people and the Fon are the language.” So the real identity of the Nso’ man is the language. There is nothing that identifies you like the language. So the idea of holding the language intact, as a vehicle of communication, as a store of the treasure of the Nso’ people, has been the primordial aim of the NLO because all these cultural values, the written language, the various norms, can only be stored in the Nso’ language.³²

The philosophy of BALA is getting the Bafut language written so that the Bafut man can read and write his own language; to be able to record the way of life of the Bafut people, Bafut civilization, culture, philosophy, and history. People should be able to live with their language in written form, like any other civilization.³³

These language committees’ influence in the community depends on their integration into the community and its hierarchy:

> There is not one specific source of KLDC authority. It functions for the benefit of all, like a CIG [community initiative group]. It is hard to establish a specific source of

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³⁰ Jude, Aduk (Kom).
³¹ The Fon is the chief or king of a people. Particularly in the Northwest, the Fon wields substantial authority.
³² Suuyren.
³³ Mr. Samuel Mfonyam, chairman of the Bafut Language Association.
authority. KLDC is composed of people from all over the Kom kingdom; its executive committee and its membership are widespread in origin.34

Supreme above us is the Fon. We consult him from time to time depending on what we have. And what we depend on him is for policy making. His connection to NLO is not quite official; it is informal, because he himself, the Nso’ language is nobody’s language but his language, traditionally. So he is the custodian alone. Anything that is wrong we have to complain to him.35

The language committees are considered to be the authorities on the standardized written form of the local language. They organize adult literacy classes in the mother tongue, collaborating with local institutions such as churches and special interest groups to integrate mother tongue literacy into their activities and priorities. The language committees also edit and produce most of the literature published in the mother tongue, including the very popular annual agenda books and calendars which follow the local 8-day week and highlight events of local importance. The committees produce and distribute periodic newsletters in the mother tongue as well.

It is these language committees which are also responsible for promotion of the PROPELCA program within the language community, training of teachers in the PROPELCA method, supervision of those teachers, and production and distribution of mother tongue textbooks. The small amounts of money available from outside funders as incentives to literacy teachers and supervisors are disbursed through the language committees. Although national and international organizations36 have a part in the functioning of PROPELCA (in the form of funding, national-level advocacy and advanced level training), it is the language committee which determines whether the mother tongue education program in an area stands or falls.

The language committees’ credibility extends into the local schools as well. The PROPELCA supervisors, themselves all experienced teachers, have free access to classrooms where the PROPELCA program is being followed. Their interactions with local education authorities are characterized by mutual respect. PROPELCA’s development as an experimental non-governmental program has given it no official place in the educational structure; nevertheless, its acceptance in the local schools signals a recognition of both the community-based credibility of the language committees and the educational expertise of their personnel.

This grounding of the PROPELCA program in a local institution helps to ensure that local priorities and perspectives are reflected in the program’s personnel and goals. Although the program’s curriculum is not locally derived, the purposes of its supporting institution are closely linked to local language and community.

Towards a realistic appraisal of mother tongue education
Mother tongue education in a minority language community such as the Bafut, Kom and Nso’ communities can be very influential on both community language attitudes and student achievement levels. However it is important to understand what this type of mother tongue education is, and is not, capable of. If as Tollefson (1991:183) states, "inequality is rooted in

34 Hon. Ndim Albert Waingeh, chairman of the Kom Language Development Committee; former Member of Parliament; secondary school headmaster.
35 Suuyren.
36 Such as NACALCO, CIDA, UNICEF, SIL International and the University of Yaoundé I.
system and structure . . . which are reflected in the educational system, and therefore are not amenable to change by it", then it is not realistic to expect a mother tongue primary school program to change the world for minority language groups.

One thing PROPELCA is not is an attempt to establish the use of minority languages throughout the Cameroonian education system on an equal basis with English (or French in the case of the francophone provinces). Such attempts can be seen in more aggressive bilingual education programs elsewhere in the world, but this is not the aim of the architects of PROPELCA. In a highly multilingual country such as Cameroon, with two international languages already in place as official languages of education and with no single African language of wider communication, they have chosen to develop and strengthen the domains of each language in education: the local language for local primary education, and the official languages for higher and international education (Tadadjeu 1990).

However, consistent with their aim of promoting mother tongue literacy throughout the language community, the language committees do seek opportunities to teach mother tongue literacy as a subject in both upper primary and secondary schools.37

Another thing PROPELCA is not is an attempt at radical curriculum reform. As has been mentioned above, the PROPELCA program concentrates on adapting the national curriculum to local language realities, not reforming it. Such a cooperative stance is possible for PROPELCA because the flexibility in local interpretation of the national curriculum allows room for the implementation of the mother-tongue program. More important, however, fitting the PROPELCA program into the established curriculum responds to the predominant community desire that the children succeed in the current educational system, not that it be transformed. Local support for mother tongue education is primarily based on the perception that it has a positive impact on pupils’ exam results.

The PROPELCA approach would enable faster learning to read in English. . . . The purely PROPELCA teacher uses Kom as a medium and a base for children to move on into reading and writing English. And English can be taught as a subject. PROPELCA does indeed prepare children well for English, better than the current strategy of using pure English. That has been my personal observation, and I think others have seen it too; the upper primary children who have had PROPELCA perform better than their peers in English.38

Obviously this perspective is grounded in support for the hegemonic position of English and English-mediated knowledge in the formal school system. It could in fact be argued that if PROPELCA’s proponents were really concerned about empowerment of minority language communities, they would spend more effort in engaging local parents and leaders in dialogue about the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors embedded in the use of local language and English for learning. Such interactions could represent the power to shape their future in a more intentional way. Gaventa and Cornwall (2001:72) note that

[k]nowledge, as much as any resource, determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom. Through access to knowledge, and

37 Hon. Waingeh, a Kom secondary school headmaster and the chairman of the KLDC, has described establishing Kom language literacy classes in his school. Members of the NLO carry out similar programs in a few secondary schools of Banso’. Such classes depend heavily on the support of the school headmaster.
38 Lawyer.
participation in its production, use and dissemination, actors can affect the boundaries and indeed the conceptualisation of the possible.

Why then is this not part of the PROPELCA agenda? I believe it is because the program’s proponents, from the NACALCO leaders down to each volunteer teacher, are ‘insiders’ to the realities of education in Cameroon. All have themselves attended primary school in some part of Cameroon; most have struggled with language issues, themselves not being native speakers of English or French. They share the underlying values of the local Cameroonian populations: a faith in the role of education in facilitating national and individual progress; an understanding of the immutable dominance of French and English in the real world; and a willingness to live with a series of language domains that allow a place for both local and official languages. Mother tongue education as currently formulated by PROPELCA has so much to offer to the rural populations: an easier and more successful primary school experience, the possibility of increased respect for and use of the mother tongue, maintenance of cultural identity among the young. These outcomes are significant for Cameroonians in the Northwest Province. And finally, as eminently practical people, PROPELCA’s proponents have certainly weighed the likelihood of official acceptance of the various models of bilingual education, and they have chosen to promote a model which could be endorsed – and in fact has been endorsed - by national education authorities.

Mother tongue education is not by itself able to turn around historical and political forces that have formed the context and expectations of the education system. However, such a program can be seen as part of a wider process, integrated into a broader strategy of language development and promotion such as those being implemented by the KLDC, BALA and NLO. It does seem crucial that the language development and promotion strategy be formulated and controlled by local leaders and concerned citizens. When it is, the result is mother tongue education which the population can eventually be brought to support, and which can also reflect community identity and priorities in the process. In fact, the three languages committees seem to be making progress, as parents of school-aged children now express increased support for the PROPELCA programs in their area.

As the minority ethnic groups of the Northwest Province face the future, a key question is: can their cultures continue to serve them, or must they surrender their identity in order to survive? They know that the priorities shaping today’s world are driven by economics and technology, with little attention given to societal coherence or local identity. But what priorities will they themselves live by?

It appears that for the great majority of the Kom, Bafut and Nso’ people the values, culture and language they grew up with will continue to exert significant influence into the future. Thanks to the efforts of the language committees and other promoters of local language development, communities are realizing that formal educational alternatives exist which can support and enhance their home culture and knowledge even as they facilitate the educational success of the community’s children.
References


