

Source: SUNDAY ARGUS

Date: 22-May-2005

Topic: 25

Ref No: 2892



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ID: 03219932-01 Source Page: 18

Pandor's language edict is just political symbolism

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IT IS A sad commentary on the quality of journalism in South Africa that every time there is a ministerial announcement or parliamentary speech, the newspapers lead with meaningless headlines like "major shake-up in education".

This was especially true in the week leading up to Naledi Pandor's introduction of the debate on the education budget in the national assembly.

Barely a year into her job, Pandor started her speech by acknowledging that "the terrible impact and imprint of apartheid education is as hard and as unyielding as a crocodile's skin".

But she is a politician and she has to make the poor crocodile's skin appear as soft and pliant as a condom.

Pandor also has to indicate that she has something new to say.

It would be terrible for the minister, already under question for what appears to be a lack of a fresh agenda, merely to affirm what her predecessors have already established in law and policy. Hence the flurry of familiar announcements or, more correctly, political statements.

It is what the political scientist Murray Edelman once called Political Language – the subtitle to his book by that name is *Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail*.

South Africa has 11 official languages and legally speaking no student is forced to take English and Afrikaans. English was never a required language after 1994. It was always optional.

The problem, of course, is that there are powerful forces within and outside schools that will retain English (rather than Afrikaans) as both subject of study and medium of

instruction in the overwhelming majority of schools.

Schools, for example, have teachers who are experts in English language education and who have taught the subject for many years.

No amount of politicking will suddenly change this base of experience into Zulu or Pedi language expertise, desirable as that might be.

Worse, it should by now be clear that government has neither the political will nor the base of resources (it claims) to develop the teachers and the textbooks to ensure that the indigenous languages blossom into fully-fledged academic languages.

It is, by the way, one of the unfortunate myths of our new democracy that by simply teaching in the mother tongue, achievement in subjects like science and mathematics will dramatically improve; but that is another subject for another day.

It is not only the exigencies of school life, or the vagaries of politics,

that will blunt efforts to encourage the growth and development of indigenous languages. Parents make conscious decisions about what kinds of schools and what language media are more likely to improve their children's chances in higher education and in a globalised marketplace.

This explains the growing move of white Afrikaans-speaking pupils into English-medium schools and it explains the mass desertion of township schools as parents move their children, at considerable cost, to English suburban schools.

Sadly, it also explains why the majority of politicians in the national assembly place their children in elite public or private schools. They know, in their heart of hearts, that their children would be severely disadvantaged at university or in the workplace if they were to be placed in

schools where English (or Afrikaans) was not the medium of instruction.

It really does not help when ethnic nationalists, black and white, caricature these parents as class snobs committing cultural suicide. Parents are rational – and unless they are convinced that the quality and medium of education offer their children a competitive advantage, they will simply move to schools where, in their judgment, this is more likely to happen.

So, why this seemingly new announcement that "all languages

will now be equally available as subject choices"?

Because as a politician representing the majority party in government, the minister from time to time has to make the kinds of symbolic utterances that signal what is worth striving for – even if there is not the remotest possibility that such ideals will ever reach behind the classroom door. It is time for citizens, if not the media, to distinguish symbolism from substance.

The challenge to government is to turn currently disadvantaged schools into attractive options for all our children to learn languages that include, but extend beyond, English and Afrikaans.

The signal that indigenous languages are important is worth defending; our democracy will be poorer if we do not broaden the language options of our children, and enrich their lives through a vibrant multilingualism that does not reduce language education to the learning of grammatical rules and social greetings. This means major investments in the basic infrastructure (qualified teachers and high quality textbooks) required for the expansion of indigenous languages. Anything less should be seen as political language.

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