



Burundi

The impact of language policy
and practice on children's learning:
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa
2017

2.3. Burundi

2.3.1 Background information

Burundi is geographically small but densely populated, with a population over 10 million. Burundi has been independent from Belgium since 1962.

Ethnologue lists three languages in Burundi: French, Kirundi, and Swahili.

2.3.2. Current language policy

The 2005 Constitution of Burundi, Section 1, Article 5, states that the national language of Burundi is Kirundi; the official languages are Kirundi and “all other languages determined by the law”. However, the original version of all legislative texts must be in Kirundi.¹

From 1973, a ‘Kirundisation’ programme was implemented throughout the country, except in some private urban schools.



¹ <http://www.accpuf.org/images/pdf/cm/burundi/constitution-du-burundi-180305.pdf>

Contrary to the original plan, however, the Kirundisation programme was confined to the first four years of primary school with French serving as the medium of instruction from Grade 5. Rwantabagu contends that ending the programme at Grade 4 was related to both the lack of terminology for teaching content subjects in higher grades, and also the lack of commitment on the part of policy-makers to

using Kirundi as medium of instruction more extensively (Rwantabagu 2011, p. 465).

Rwantabagu also argues that Burundian teachers and national elites continue to believe that using African languages in the education system will lower educational standards and isolate the country internationally (2011, p.466).



2.3.3. Education policy and practice

The fact that Burundi has one indigenous language (Rwantabagu 2009), widely spoken in the country, should make language of instruction choices less complicated, but this has not proven to be the case.

As of 1993, scholars argued that Burundi was essentially a monolingual Kirundi-speaking nation, francophone in name only (Ndayipfukamiye, 1993). Nonetheless, the curriculum in Burundi today mandates the use of Kirundi and French as languages of instruction in the primary grades; in the higher primary grades, French takes precedence over Kirundi (Rwantabagu, 2014). This privileging of French is problematic, both pedagogically and culturally. Rwantabagu (2014) observes that some Burundians believe that Kirundi, as the language of cultural identity, should be the primary medium of instruction, at least in the early primary grades; for others, French should be prioritized as “the language of academic and professional promotion” (p.38).

In the current situation national exams include Kirundi; the primary teachers’ college curriculum includes French, Kirundi and English. The basic education reform currently in process, which integrates basic and early secondary education into a 9-year fundamental education, calls for Kirundi to be the medium of instruction in the first 3 years and French to be the medium of instruction in the following 6 years. Stakeholders in this process, including UNICEF, are advocating the teaching of both languages in all 9 years of fundamental schooling, in order to strengthen student learning outcomes throughout.²

In addition to the use of Kirundi and French, Burundi’s membership in the East African Community has led to the introduction of English and Swahili as early as Grade 1, even though these two languages are spoken by less than 5 per cent of the Burundian population and are not supported in the teacher training system (Mazunya and Habonimana, 2010). Considering the tremendous learning load for the young pupil presented by the use of four languages (Kirundi, French, English and Swahili) from Grade 1, these language choices seem to be more related to political considerations than pedagogical ones.

2.3.4. Studies

A recent study of the language of instruction situation in Burundi is one of a series of studies across francophone Africa: *Les langues de scolarisation dans l’enseignement fondamental en Afrique subsaharienne francophone* (School languages in primary teaching in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa; LASCOLAF). The LASCOLAF study by Burundi, carried out by Mazunya and Habonimana (2010), is an in-depth, qualitative description of the language-in-education situation in the country. It makes a range of recommendations regarding revision of language policy, curriculum and teacher professionalization; it also recommends the formation of a language research center to help inform language-in-education decisions.

2.3.5. Language education Initiatives

A three-year, joint initiative of World Vision and Save the Children is delivering the Literacy Boost programme in two regions of the country³. The development of Kirundi reading materials is part of the project.

² UNICEF Burundi, 2017.

³ <http://www.wvi.org/literacy-boost>. Accessed 11 March, 2016