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Investigating the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic early learning Centre classrooms: Exploring Setswana pedagogy in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstract

This research investigates the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms in Gauteng Province, South Africa, with particular attention to Setswana as the language of teaching and learning. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research combined an extensive literature review with empirical evidence gathered from classroom observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. Two practitioners from community based centres one rural and one township were purposively selected as participants. Data interpretation was guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (2020), which provided a framework for analyzing the role of language in learning. Findings underscore the necessity of robust language policies, structured professional development, and mentorship frameworks to strengthen implementation. Teachers were observed using approaches such as storytelling, songs, and code switching to support skill acquisition, although challenges such as limited Setswana resources, uneven teacher preparation, and mixed parental attitudes were identified. On a practical level, the study advances recommendations for teachers, curriculum developers, and policy makers to strengthen Setswana instruction through resource development, bilingual progression, and community engagement. By addressing a notable gap in research on Setswana pedagogy in multi ethnic ELCs, the study offers both theoretical contributions and practical strategies for promoting equity, inclusivity, and learner achievement within South Africa's multilingual education system.

Keywords: Classrooms, Early childhood education, Early learning Centre, Mother tongue, Multi-ethnic, Pedagogical.

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1. Introduction

South Africa is a wonderfully multilingual country with entrenched policies on multilingualism. Unlike during the apartheid era, where people were perceived to have been grouped into homogenous homelands in accordance with their home languages and supposedly their cultures [1] the current linguistic map tells us that the linguistic distribution is quite

diverse among the eleven official languages and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) recognises 15 others, across the nine provinces [2]. In recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages, the state must take practical positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages [3]. The national government and provincial governments may use any official languages for government considering usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances, and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned [3, 4]. But the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages [2].

South African society is characterized by its dynamism, simultaneously engaging its citizens while requiring them to navigate social interactions with sensitivity [3]. Within this multilingual context, the practice of code-switching and language mixing is both widespread and socially significant, and it should not be construed as inherently problematic [1]. Speakers frequently alternate between languages to enhance self-expression, to establish rapport or impress their interlocutors, to facilitate comprehension, or because certain lexical items are more accessible or widely recognized in one language than another [5]. Attitudes toward language use remain deeply personal; however, it is imperative to acknowledge that the expectation of respect for one's own language is contingent upon the reciprocal demonstration of respect for the linguistic repertoires of others Kamali and Nazari [5].

Department of Education [2] South Africa is recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with eleven official languages and numerous indigenous languages spoken across its provinces. In Gauteng Province, Early Learning Centres (ELCs) serve children from multi-ethnic and multilingual backgrounds, reflecting the broader cultural and linguistic diversity of the region. Early childhood education is a critical stage in cognitive and social development, and language plays a central role in shaping how children learn, interact, and construct meaning [4, 6]. Despite this diversity, English often dominates as the medium of instruction in ELCs, which may not align with the linguistic realities of young learners. Research in multilingual education suggests that mother tongue instruction can enhance comprehension, foster learner confidence, and promote inclusive classroom practices [3]. However, the extent to which mother tongue instruction is integrated into pedagogical strategies in multi-ethnic ELC classrooms in Gauteng remains underexplored.

A language shows a vital part in the life of a human being. The language facilitates a comprehension of the surroundings, learning of concepts, and achieving several skills. A child who proficiently learns their heir lives, accumulates extensive language skills that help them to express themselves and develop their thinking capacity. Additionally, this language cultivates confidence and a sense of self-worth in a child in learning other things [7]. Mother tongue is the first language one learns as a baby, the language one grows up knowing, which is also known as the native language. A child first comprehends what is around them through the language they hear their mother communicating in from before they are born and throughout their lives [7].

Mother tongue is appreciated due to numerous reasons. Mother tongue is central in framing the thinking and emotions of individuals. Learning in school highlights the use of the mother tongue [7]. Mother tongue is an influential tool in advancing learning in people. The importance of mother tongue is studied because when children develop their mother tongue, they are simultaneously fostering a whole host of other essential skills, such as critical thinking and literacy skills [8].

The study of mother tongue use in Multi-Ethnic Early Learning Centres (ELC) classrooms attempts to establish whether the government policy on languages is effective and whether centres can implement it. It also looked at whether Multi-Ethnic Early Learning Centres (ELC) Classrooms can play a role in promoting the use of indigenous languages.

2. Problem Statement

Although South Africa's education policies acknowledge the importance of multilingualism, many Early Learning Centres (ELCs) in Gauteng Province continue to prioritize English instruction. This practice can disadvantage learners whose home language differs from English, leading to reduced classroom participation, limited comprehension of foundational concepts, and challenges in social integration. Teachers often face difficulties balancing diverse linguistic needs, and there is limited empirical evidence on how mother tongue instruction functions pedagogically in multi-ethnic classrooms. The lack of focused research on this issue creates a gap in understanding how language-of-instruction choices affect early learning outcomes in Gauteng Province. Without addressing this gap, learners may continue to experience inequities in access to quality education, which can have long-term implications for their academic success and social development.

3. Purpose of the Study and the Research Question

The purpose of this study is to investigate the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic ELC classrooms in Gauteng Province. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how mother tongue instruction influences learner participation, comprehension, and social integration. By analyzing classroom practices, teacher perspectives, and learner outcomes, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights into the role of mother tongue in early childhood education. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on language-in-education policy and inform strategies for creating inclusive, effective learning environments in linguistically diverse contexts.

The accompanying aim is to contribute valuable insights to the existing body of literature. To guide this study, this paper specifically sought to respond to *the research question:*

How does mother tongue instruction, specifically Setswana pedagogy, influence teaching and learning practices in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre classrooms in Gauteng Province, South Africa?

4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms, a context that has received limited scholarly attention in South Africa. Second, the findings have practical implications for teachers, who often struggle to balance linguistic diversity with curriculum demands. Third, the study contributes to policy discussions on language in education, offering insights that may guide the implementation of multilingual strategies in early childhood settings. Finally, by highlighting the benefits and challenges of mother tongue instruction, the research supports efforts to promote equity, inclusivity, and improved learning outcomes for young learners in Gauteng Province and beyond.

5. theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning is inherently shaped by language and social interaction [9]. Within this perspective, the mother tongue functions as a vital cognitive instrument in the zone of proximal development, enabling learners to construct knowledge through guided social mediation [9]. When children participate in classroom activities using their home language, they are better positioned to internalize concepts through scaffolded support [7]. In parallel, Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis highlights that cognitive and academic skills acquired in a first language can be transferred to the learning of additional languages. This suggests that consistent use of the mother tongue not only strengthens multilingual development but also enhances academic resilience [10].

Building on these perspectives, the Funds of Knowledge framework underscores the educational value of children's everyday linguistic and cultural practices [10]. Incorporating the mother tongue into curriculum design affirms learners' identities and draws upon their home-based knowledge as a foundation for inclusive and equitable instruction [7]. Taken together, these theoretical lenses provide a compelling rationale for this study to explore how mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms, in Gauteng Province, can cultivate equitable learning environments, identity-affirming, and cognitively enriching.

This study is grounded in several interrelated theories that illuminate the role of language in education and provide a lens through which South Africa's linguistic ecology can be understood.

Cummins [11]. Cummins argues that proficiency in the First Language (L1) provides a strong foundation for acquiring a Second Language (L2) [11]. Skills such as literacy, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking developed in L1 transfer to L2, enabling learners to succeed academically. In the South African context, this theory supports the argument that mother-tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase enhances learners' ability to transition effectively to English or Afrikaans later in schooling Auger [12] and Cummins [11].

Gauvain [9]. Vygotsky emphasises that learning occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation. Language is the primary tool through which knowledge is constructed, making familiar home languages critical for scaffolding learning [9]. This theory explains why learners taught in their mother tongue demonstrate stronger engagement, motivation, and problem-solving skills, as highlighted in studies by Kidwell, et al. [8] and Auger [12].

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Language and Identity: Auger [12] and Cummins [11] highlight the socio-political and cultural functions of language in education. Language is not only a cognitive tool but also a marker of identity, belonging, and empowerment. This perspective frames mother-tongue education as essential for cultural survival and equity, particularly in multilingual societies like South Africa, where English dominance risks marginalising indigenous languages.

Critical Theory of Language Policy: Scholars such as Auger [12] argue that language policies must be analysed in terms of power relations and social justice. Even progressive policies like the Cummins [11] and UNESCO [4] face challenges in implementation due to structural inequalities and societal attitudes favoring English. This theoretical lens helps interrogate the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities, situating the study within broader debates on equity and transformation.

5.1. Integration with the Literature Review

The theories outlined above provide the conceptual scaffolding for this study. Cummins and Vygotsky explain the cognitive and developmental benefits of mother-tongue instruction, while sociolinguistic and critical perspectives highlight its cultural, identity, and equity dimensions [9, 11]. Together, they frame mother-tongue education not merely as a pedagogical choice but as a transformative practice that addresses historical inequalities and promotes inclusive learning. This theoretical framework thus connects directly to the literature reviewed, offering a multidimensional lens through which the attitudes of parents and teachers toward mother-tongue education can be critically examined [9, 11].

6. Literature Review

6.1. Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction

The mother tongue of a child is closely associated with the child's growth and development [6]. As the child matures, his or her language develops and, through language, personality and experience are expressed. The mother tongue is a part of culture; it transmits culture and, in turn, is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs [6] states that as man is the cause, transmitter, and recipient of culture, so her mother tongue reflects her culture, personality, and cultural group to which she belongs [6]. Further provides a comprehensive ranked list of reasons which are commonly advanced for the use of First Languages (L1) in education. Psychologically, the mother tongue facilitates adjustment between home and school [4]. It assists the formation of the child's concepts and categories of thought. People are emotionally attached to their

mother tongue, use of the prestige language promotes feelings of inferiority, as well as alienation from the child's family [1].

The mother tongue promotes freedom of expression; new concepts are difficult to grasp in an unfamiliar language. Learning to read is easier if done in the mother tongue, because of difficulties and interferences caused by different phonemic and orthographic systems, and because most of the phonological system of a language is the basis for reading skill [7]. The prestige language usually offers the promise of advancement and status, but the mother tongue should be used as a bridge to promote better adjustment and less alienation [8]. The mother tongues seldom have political importance, but it is claimed that the interests of the state are best served by using the mother tongue as the medium of initial instruction because this enables the educational system to be maximally effective. The use of both languages, in sequence, will smooth the path of integration into the wider society [8].

Today, the official languages of the Republic of South Africa are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. Sibanda and Tshehla [6] argues that English facilitates communication not only with neighbouring countries, but within the wider context of international discourse. Financial considerations make this language the most feasible medium of instruction after the initial years of primary education [1]. These considerations include the cost of translating the existing texts into other languages, English and Afrikaans. These are languages in which texts are readily available [4].

6.2. The Current Language Situation in South African Schools

Following South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, responsibility for public schools shifted to provincial departments. The South African Schools Act of 1996 established a uniform framework for governance, funding, and organization [2]. In 1997, a new language policy was introduced, promoting multilingualism defined as the acquisition of more than one language and affirming the importance of maintaining home languages [2]. Under this policy, learners were granted the right to choose their Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), provided the school offered it, and space was available [4].

School Governing Bodies (SGBs) were tasked with determining language policies and promoting multilingualism [2]. In practice, however, English has remained compulsory in many schools, with Afrikaans and African languages offered only as additional subjects. While some schools operate as dual medium institutions, this arrangement has largely served to preserve Afrikaans rather than elevate indigenous languages as a full medium of instruction [1]. Consequently, learners who speak African languages as their first language continue to face disadvantages compared to English and Afrikaans speakers.

Research highlights the challenges of the early transition to English. The Threshold Project MacDonald [13] found that African learners and teachers struggled when English became the LoLT in the fifth year of schooling [10]. More recent studies show that African learners often face linguistic and cultural difficulties in English-medium schools, leading to subtractive multilingualism, where the second language gradually replaces the first [4].

Despite government policy advocating additive bilingualism, most schools continue to teach primarily through English or Afrikaans. Some formerly Afrikaans-only schools have introduced English streams, while others now offer African languages as optional subjects [8]. However, these remain token gestures rather than genuine integration. Access is further constrained by high fees in former White-only schools, limiting opportunities for working-class Black and Coloured learners [12].

At the systemic level, monolingual assumptions persist. Home language (HL) is often used as a criterion for school admission, disadvantaging learners whose language differs from the school's medium of instruction [1]. In higher education, transformation has been limited; no university offers instruction in an African language, and English has become the de facto LoLT, even in institutions that previously taught in Afrikaans Sibanda and Tshehla [6]. Black students, having completed secondary schooling largely in English, tend to prefer English-medium instruction at university [4].

Overall, South Africa's education system remains dominated by English and Afrikaans, despite policies supporting multilingualism [10]. Indigenous languages continue to lack recognition as legitimate media of instruction, perpetuating inequities in learning outcomes and cultural identity [4]. Teachers are acutely aware of the difficulties learners face in acquiring knowledge through a second language, while learners and parents view English primarily as a tool for socioeconomic mobility, often adopting localized African English varieties in preference to standard English norms [1, 3].

7. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how mother tongue instruction influences learner participation, comprehension, and social integration in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms in Gauteng Province. Two purposively selected ELCs serving linguistically diverse communities were investigated, as they provided appropriate contexts for exploring language use in early learning.

The case study approach was chosen for its ability to provide rich, contextually grounded insights into real classroom practices [14, 15]. In line with [16] this design enabled an in-depth understanding of how practitioners navigate language instruction in multi-ethnic settings. Early Learning Centre (ELC) practitioners were deliberately selected as participants due to their relevant expertise and experience [14].

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews captured practitioners' perspectives on mother tongue instruction, while observations provided contextual evidence of teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were particularly suitable as they allowed flexibility and elicited nuanced views [17]. Data analysis followed qualitative thematic analysis [16]. The process involved coding, categorizing, and refining themes to capture the depth of the data. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to ensure trustworthiness and interpretive integrity.

8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed to safeguard the rights and dignity of participants and to maintain the integrity of the research process. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld using pseudonyms, with only the researcher having access to identifiable information. Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, procedures, and potential implications. Credibility and authenticity were enhanced by employing transparent data collection procedures and using qualitative methods that accurately captured participants' lived experiences.

9. Findings from Classroom Observations and Interviews

9.1. Classroom Observations

9.1.1. Use of Mother Tongue in Instruction

Observations revealed that teachers frequently alternated between Setswana and English, with Setswana serving as the primary language of explanation for complex concepts. This practice ensured that learners could grasp the meaning of lessons more effectively and participate with greater confidence. Learners were noticeably more engaged when instructions were delivered in Setswana, particularly during literacy and numeracy activities where comprehension was critical. Code-switching emerged as a common pedagogical strategy, enabling teachers to bridge understanding across multi-ethnic groups and to accommodate learners whose home languages differed from Setswana.

9.1.2. Pedagogical Strategies

Teachers employed a range of strategies to integrate Setswana into classroom practice. Storytelling, rhymes, and songs in Setswana were used to build listening and speaking skills while reinforcing cultural identity. Group work and peer interaction also highlighted the role of Setswana, as learners often collaborated in their mother tongue, which fostered confidence and fluency. However, the observations also revealed a shortage of Setswana-based teaching materials. Teachers often had to improvise or translate English resources, which limited the consistency and depth of mother-tongue pedagogy.

9.1.3. Challenges Observed

Despite the benefits, several challenges were evident. The multi-ethnic composition of classrooms meant that some learners struggled when Setswana was the dominant language, requiring additional scaffolding to ensure inclusivity. Teacher preparedness varied, with some educators lacking formal training in mother-tongue pedagogy, leading to uneven practices across classrooms. Furthermore, parental expectations sometimes conflicted with classroom realities. While many parents valued Setswana instruction, others expressed a preference for English, believing it to be more advantageous for their children's future academic and professional opportunities.

9.2. Interview Findings

9.2.1. Teachers' Perspectives

Interviews with teachers reinforced the observational findings. Educators consistently emphasized that Setswana instruction enhanced learners' comprehension, participation, and confidence. They acknowledged, however, that professional development in multilingual pedagogy was urgently needed. Many teachers expressed frustration at the lack of Setswana teaching resources and highlighted the difficulty of balancing Setswana with English, particularly in preparing learners for later grades where English becomes the dominant medium of instruction.

9.2.2. Parents' Perspectives

Parents offered diverse perspectives that reflected both cultural and pragmatic concerns. Many valued Setswana instructions for their role in preserving cultural heritage and strengthening children's sense of identity. At the same time, some parents worried that extensive reliance on Setswana might delay English acquisition, which they viewed as essential for future success in higher education and employment. Overall, parents favored a bilingual approach, where Setswana could be used to build foundational skills while English was gradually introduced to prepare learners for later schooling.

9.2.3. Learners' Perspectives

Where learners' voices were included, they expressed feeling more comfortable and confident when Setswana was used in the classroom. They were more willing to participate in discussions and activities, and peer support often played a crucial role in reinforcing understanding. Learners frequently relied on classmates to translate or explain concepts in Setswana, which fostered collaborative learning and strengthened their social bonds.

9.3. Integrative Insight

Taken together, the classroom observations and interview findings converge to highlight the pedagogical importance of mother-tongue instruction in Setswana. Learners demonstrated greater engagement, comprehension, and identity formation when Setswana was integrated into teaching. Teachers and parents alike recognized its value, though challenges such as resource shortages, inconsistent teacher training, and differing parental expectations remain significant. These findings underscore the need for policy support, structured teacher development, and bilingual strategies that balance Setswana with English. In doing so, the study provides a foundation for more effective instructional practices and clearer guidelines for advancing mother-tongue pedagogy in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms across Gauteng Province.

10. Results and Interpretations

This was an exploratory study, investigating the strategies used to teach mother tongue basic skills to Early Learning Centre (ELC) learners from diverse language backgrounds. From the collected data, main themes were inductively and interpretively generated. Data from the semi-structured interviews with the two participating practitioners and from classroom observations revealed that teaching mother tongue basic skills to Early Learning Centre (ELC) learners was a very difficult activity. Practitioners had to continuously navigate between working as learning facilitators and as information transmitters.

10.1. Mother Tongue Instruction and Learner Achievement

The findings of this study confirm the well-established argument in multilingual education literature that mother tongue instruction enhances learner comprehension, confidence, and participation. Scholars such as Sibanda and Tshehla [6] and Namaziandost, et al. [7] have long emphasized that learners acquire language foundational basic skills more effectively when taught in their home language. The observed improvements in Setswana learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing basic skills resonate with these theoretical claims, demonstrating that mother tongue pedagogy is not only culturally affirming but also academically enabling.

10.2. Multilingual Classrooms and Code-Switching Practices

The study's observation of frequent code switching between Setswana and English reflects broader research on multilingual classrooms in South Africa. Scholars argue that code switching is a pragmatic strategy that allows teachers to mediate meaning across diverse linguistic groups [4]. In the Gauteng Early Learning Centre (ELC) context, where classrooms are multiethnic, code switching emerges as a necessary pedagogical tool rather than a deficiency. This finding contributes to theoretical debates by reframing code switching as a resource for inclusive teaching, aligning with sociolinguistic perspectives that view multilingual repertoires as assets rather than obstacles [7] [7].

10.3. Resource Limitations and Teacher Preparedness

The shortage of Setswana teaching materials and inconsistent teacher training observed in this study echo national concerns about the implementation of language in education policy. While South Africa's Language in Education Policy [18] advocates for mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase, practical challenges such as inadequate resources and limited teacher preparation have hindered its realization [8]. This study adds empirical weight to critiques of policy practice gaps, highlighting the urgent need for investment in teacher development and the production of Setswana-based learning materials.

10.4. Parental Expectations and Policy Tensions

Interviews revealed parental ambivalence: while many valued Setswana for cultural identity, others prioritized English for socioeconomic mobility. This tension reflects broader societal debates in South Africa, where English is often perceived as the language of opportunity despite policy commitments to multilingualism. The findings illustrate how parental expectations can shape classroom practices, sometimes undermining mother tongue pedagogy. Theoretically, this underscores the importance of considering socio-political factors in language policy implementation, while practically, it suggests the need for awareness campaigns and community engagement to build support for mother tongue education.

10.5. Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to scholarship on multilingual education by providing context-specific evidence from multiethnic ELC classrooms in Gauteng Province. It extends theoretical debates by showing how mother tongue instruction operates in linguistically diverse settings, where Setswana is both a medium of instruction and a bridge across ethnic groups. The findings reinforce the argument that mother tongue pedagogy is central to equitable education, while also highlighting the complexities of implementing such approaches in multiethnic contexts [10].

In concurrence, the results affirmed the point that during the presentation of the text, learners need to have contextual knowledge. This means that previous knowledge is essential for learners' consistency in linking the new knowledge of content correctly with their prior knowledge for them to understand new knowledge of content [10]. This will also encourage learners to gather new information and use it when needed, thereby indicating that learners need to be reinforced by various techniques during the lesson presentation, which could, for example, include providing the learners with a simple outline of understanding of word types [10].

This resulted from inadequate practitioner preparation, compounded by the lack of espoused teaching mother tongue strategies by way of policy guidelines and in-service training. Auger [12] asserts that practitioners in a South African primary school classroom not only need knowledge and skills about teaching strategies but also the specific underlying linguistic concepts and knowledge for them to teach mother tongue basic skills effectively. Thus, it is envisaged that mother tongue basic skills teaching does not get the attention it deserves. More precisely, [10], reports that some practitioners were not clear about specific educational know-how and techniques, as well as critical pronunciation structures.

In this study, the teachers' responses gave a clear picture of the positive impact of the activities, which they engaged their learners in, as making a major contribution. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the technique of incorporating context knowledge using games, puzzles, songs, and phrases while teaching words helped adapt the teaching style to the pedagogy and basic skills of the mother tongue, especially with respect to learners from diverse language backgrounds [7,

8]. Participants alluded to the fact that music was also a powerful way to influence school learners' emotional behaviour, as they saw singing as a calming game or practice, not as an educational process.

Classroom observations revealed that learners were more engaged when taught in Setswana, particularly in literacy and numeracy activities. Teachers employed strategies such as storytelling, songs, and code-switching to strengthen learners' skills and bridge linguistic diversity. However, challenges such as limited Setswana teaching materials, inconsistent teacher training, and parental ambivalence toward mother-tongue instruction were also evident. In addition, it was clear during these classroom observations that the participants went the extra mile with their learners to improve their attitudes and mother tongue pedagogy and basic skills.

In this study, the participants strongly contended that one successful way to teach oral skills was to stress the techniques of teaching mother tongue language basic skills as the central theme. The participants argued that providing such strong and effective techniques was necessary to relate the knowledge of mother tongue basic skills to classroom practice and that this would have a beneficial impact on learning [7] aver that this situation would demonstrate the efficacy of teaching mother tongue learners from diverse backgrounds. Hence, Auger [12] recommends establishing, maintaining, and consolidate Setswana strategy for teaching mother tongue basic skills as a dynamic instructional strategic framework for all practitioners.

11. Conclusion

The investigation of the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms within Gauteng Province, South Africa, highlights the profound significance of language in shaping early learning experiences. The findings affirm that instruction in the home language enhances children's cognitive development, classroom engagement, and socio-emotional adaptation, thereby supporting [9] assertion that language mediates thought and learning within the zone of proximal development. Similarly, Namaziandost, et al. [7] the linguistic interdependence hypothesis reinforces that skills acquired in the mother tongue can be transferred to subsequent languages, promoting long-term academic resilience. However, the study also exposes substantial challenges. These include inadequate practitioner training, limited institutional support, and sociolinguistic complexities in multilingual township contexts.

Additionally, the widespread parental preference for English reflects broader socio-economic aspirations but risks undermining the cultural and cognitive benefits of home language instruction [4]. Consequently, this study underscores that sustainable language policies must go beyond symbolic recognition of multilingualism. They should prioritize structured capacity-building initiatives for practitioners and the development of curricula that validate and integrate diverse linguistic repertoires. For policymakers and implementers alike, the key implication is that early language use must be reframed as a resource rather than an obstacle.

By embedding mother tongue instruction into pedagogical practice, Early Childhood Education can foster equitable participation, cultural identity affirmation, and more robust foundations for multilingual learning in South Africa's diverse classrooms [8]. Additionally, the government should consider organising and administering Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) programmes to enable practitioners who were trained decades ago to stay current on how to effectively assess mother tongue use comprehension skills.

12. Recommendations

To strengthen the pedagogical role of mother tongue instruction in multi-ethnic Early Learning Centre (ELC) classrooms within Gauteng Province, South Africa, several recommendations are proposed. Clearly, sustained capacity building for practitioners is essential. Professional development programmes should focus on equipping educators with strategies for integrating home languages into pedagogy, supported by mentoring systems where experienced teachers guide newcomers [8].

Therefore, curriculum frameworks must embed multilingual practices that validate children's cultural and linguistic identities, ensuring inclusivity while promoting cognitive and academic growth. Similarly, policy interventions should prioritize allocating resources to multilingual teaching materials, low-cost training modules, and community engagement initiatives, particularly in township contexts where linguistic diversity is pronounced.

Furthermore, parental sensitization campaigns are needed to address misconceptions that equate English with academic success, highlighting instead the cognitive and transfer benefits of strong mother tongue foundations [12]. Lastly, rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to track the implementation of mother tongue-based instruction, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement. Collectively, these measures will enhance equity, promote identity affirmation, and develop solid foundations for multilingual learning in South Africa's diverse early childhood contexts.

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