

Integrating Human Rights and Social Justice Education through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Abstract

Background: Language-in-education policies across many African countries continue to privilege colonial languages, often marginalizing Indigenous languages and limiting access to culturally grounded and equitable education. Instruction conducted primarily in English, French, or Portuguese can distance learners from community knowledge systems and constrain critical engagement with issues of justice and human rights.

Purpose: This paper proposes a justice-oriented framework that integrates Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).

Methodology/Approach: The study employs conceptual analysis informed by linguistic human rights scholarship, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and research on multilingual education. Curricular exemplification is used to illustrate how human rights and social justice concepts can be embedded in first-language instruction.

Findings/Conclusions: The analysis suggests that integrating HRE and SJE within MTB-MLE can strengthen linguistic identity, foster critical consciousness, and expand opportunities for academic engagement and civic participation. However, effective implementation depends on coherent language policy, sustained teacher preparation, and collaboration with local communities.

Implications: Reframing language policy as a human rights issue shifts debates about multilingual education from questions of efficiency to questions of justice. The proposed framework contributes to scholarship on culturally sustaining pedagogy and justice-centered language education, highlighting the importance of positioning African languages at the center of equitable educational futures.

Keywords

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education; Human Rights Education; Social Justice Education; Linguistic Human Rights; Sub-Saharan Africa

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African education systems are in contention about what language should be used to teach young Africans in their classrooms. This struggle is not merely an issue of pedagogy; it reflects deeply ingrained political power relationships, cultural heritage, and the contested concept of justice itself. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the continued reliance on colonial languages for schooling, English in Nigeria or Kenya, French in West Africa and Middle Africa, and Portuguese in East Africa and Mozambique, is perpetuating

inequities in ways that both mirror and extend what happened during colonial times. As Thiong'o (1986) argues, language is never neutral; language is the carrier of culture, tradition, memory, and national ethos. When African children are required to learn in colonial languages, their literate practices are delegitimized and their cultural patrimonies reduced to a form of background information. Research across various contexts has shown that such processes not only disadvantage learners cognitively and socially, but they also diminish the

transformative potential of education as a site for liberation (Bamgbose, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2012; Heugh, 2015).

The advantage of using a colonial language for instruction in education is often justified on practical grounds. For example, if someone knows English and French as a foreign language then one will be able to access global networks in different regions of the world. (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Yet this rationale obscures the deeper structural violence embedded in language policy: the consistent relegation of African languages to the private sphere, while colonial languages dominate schooling. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017) have framed such practices as violations of linguistic human rights, explaining that one's mother tongue should not be suppressed; to deny expression in the language that is closest to them is nothing other than a breach of human rights. In many classrooms, speaking one's first language is still punished, reinforcing internalized hierarchies of value between "local" and "global" identities (Trudell, 2016). These policies not only perpetuate educational inequalities they also constrict the civic imagination, narrowing the terms through which young people can articulate justice, rights, and belonging.

This paper starts out with the assumption that language policy cannot be separate from human rights and that education in Africa must be reimagined not only in terms of access and outcomes but also in terms of epistemic justice. Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) provide pedagogical and ethical tools for cultivating critical consciousness, civic responsibility, and equity-oriented learning (Adams & Bell, 2016; Freire, 1970). Yet in those same languages of conquest, the contradiction occurs. These approaches are often mediated through colonial languages, creating a contradiction: Learners read and write about freedom from slavery, inalienable rights, and dignity, all while using the colonial tongue that has historically denied them this possibility. In effect, HRE and SJE run the risk of becoming disembodied ideals that are disconnected from practice. Integrating HRE and SJE within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) addresses this paradox by rooting justice discourses in learners' own languages and cultural epistemologies.

This paper is both a scholarly intervention and

a personal reckoning. As a product of colonial schooling turned critical pedagogue, I argue MTB-MLE needs to be reclaimed as an action of resistance. The classroom is not neutral; rather, it is a place where linguistic hierarchies are made or unmade unless it is deliberately reimagined as a space for justice and affirmation. By blending personal experience with theory, I take up the dual task of exposing how current language-in-education policies constitute epistemic violence and offer an alternative framework for transformation.

The suggested framework draws on four overlapping traditions: linguistic human rights, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and multilingual education. Each of these contributes its own insights into how language mediates identity, power, and participation. Linguistic human rights emphasize the ethical and legal imperatives of mother-tongue instruction (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2017). Critical pedagogy makes education an act of freedom and insists on dialogic, problem-posing approaches that cultivate learners' critical awareness (Freire, 1970). Postcolonial theory scopes out language hierarchies as vestiges of colonialism and advocates for the recovery of African ways of knowing (Thiong'o, 1986). Multilingual education research has demonstrated that MTB-MLE, when it is systematically supported, brings cognitive, social and academic benefits (Cummins, 1981; Heugh, 2015; Trudell, 2016). Together, these communicate that teaching through mother tongues should not be seen as a remedial concession but rather an imperative for justice.

The question behind this work is not only intellectual, but personal as well. As someone shaped by the complexities of the blended festering pot of multilingual education, I am interested in how the educational system can both respect students' linguistic abilities and foster in them a critical awareness and understanding of rights, power, and justice. This essay argues that integrating HRE and SJE in their native languages can simultaneously increase students' academic accomplishments, build civic power, and cultural resilience. Such integration affirms linguistic and cultural identities, disrupts colonial hierarchies of knowledge, and reimagines education as a tool for equity and transformation.

Rather than offering a universal template, this paper advances a context-responsive approach that examines how learning can be grounded in





the linguistic and cultural resources of African communities while still interrogating the power dynamics embedded within those contexts. This orientation positions justice-centered language education not as a neutral pedagogical choice but as a necessary intervention in systems that have long marginalized African epistemologies. In reclaiming African languages as legitimate sites of human rights and social transformation, the paper underscores the structural urgency of rethinking language policy as a matter of equity, dignity, and epistemic repair.

To develop this argument, this paper first outlines the conceptual foundations that position language policy as a matter of human rights and epistemic justice. It then details the methodological and analytical approach guiding the study, followed by a curriculum framework demonstrating how HRE and SJE can be embedded within MTB-MLE in practical terms. Building on this, this paper analyzes the curricular modules and the role of teacher preparation before turning to the broader findings and implications for policy and practice. Together, these sections advance a reimagined model of language education rooted in justice, cultural relevance, and linguistic rights.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Foundations

Incorporating Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) into Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is based on a variety of traditions that question how power, knowledge, and identity are made and contested. This framework draws on five overlapping paradigms: Linguistic Human Rights, Critical Pedagogy, Postcolonial and Decolonial Theory, Epistemic Critique, and Multilingual Education. Each of these perspectives exposes the inequities embedded within language policy while also offering routes to justice-centered transformation.

Linguistic Human Rights

Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) affirm the rights of individuals and communities to use, keep, and transmit language across generations and particularly in public domains such as education or the media, or in governance. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017) note that negative rights (non-discrimination in language) are complemented by positive rights (access to education and public life in one's own language). In African contexts

where state-sanctioned policies often favor English, French or Portuguese, denial of LHR means restricted access to education, cultural alienation, and epistemic exclusion (Bamgbose, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2012). Language becomes a substitute for power: competency in colonial tongues is a frequent deciding factor when it comes to access to higher education, employment prospects, and exercising political rights. This study highlights that the omission of African languages is not merely a policy decision but a breach of human rights with significant societal ramifications.

Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice Education

Freire (1970) criticizes the "banking model" in which learners are cast as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge being built from the top down. Instead, he suggests a "problem-posing" pedagogy with students as co-constructors of knowledge. Adams and Bell (2016) broaden this vision to include Social Justice Education (SJE), which emphasizes identity, privilege, and systemic disparities as critical components of teaching. Together, these show the importance of classrooms that not only offer content but also foster critical literacy to question systems of oppression. In multilingual African contexts, these observations reveal how language operates as a tool of power and exclusion. Colonial languages frequently categorize learners as either legitimate or illegitimate, perpetuating hierarchies of intelligence and belonging. Including SJE in MTB-MLE, therefore, goes beyond the rationale of "good development start". It defines mother tongue instruction as both affirmative and resistant. Unlike Adams and Bell's and Freire's paradigms, which emerged in Latin America and the United States, respectively, SJE/MTB-MLE application in multilingual contexts on the African continent must account for overlapping colonial practices and multiple epistemologies that intersect in several languages spoken by indigenous groups and migrants. The amalgamation of these frameworks argues that SJE-infused MTB-MLE is not simply about access and results, but it is about beginning to develop our critical consciousness concerning these very systems that have turned language into a site of inequality.

Postcolonial Theory and Language

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) criticizes African education systems that emphasize European languages that

separate students from their cultural worldviews. He describes how African children were chastised for speaking their mother tongues at school, leading to internalized guilt and an associated brilliance with English. This is not just a continuation of colonial control but also what Spivak (1988) calls epistemic violence, rendering subaltern voices inaudible under dominant discourses. Decolonial scholars like Mignolo (2009) raise the concept of epistemic disobedience, which is a refusal to accept Eurocentric knowledge as the only valid form of value. With such an approach, embedding HRE and SJE in mother tongue-based multilingual education is an act of epistemic disobedience: it legitimizes African languages as modes of theorizing justice and human rights. Fanon (1967) further examines the psychological dimensions of language imposition. He argues that internalized oppression and inferiority are perpetuated by colonial languages. According to Foucault (1980), the creation, administration, and instruction of knowledge are all inextricably linked to a language. Ojaide (2015) also remarks that African oral traditions, usually denigrated as “folklore,” in truth contain many rich repositories of philosophy and knowledge. Together, these conceptualizations establish MTB-MLE not as a wistful return to tradition but forward-looking strategy in which the people reclaim control over their knowledge and culture.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

MTB-MLE supports learners’ first language (L1) as a basis for instruction before introducing additional languages (L2, L3) in a sequenced approach. Cummins’ (1981) interdependence hypothesis offers a cognitive rationale, suggesting that literacy and academic skills developed in a first language will transfer to additional languages when supported.

MTB-MLE has primarily taken transitional forms across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, where authorities support learners’ L1 or a regional lingua franca during Primary 1–3 (roughly equivalent to Grades 1–3 in U.S. systems) and then transition to using English, French, or Portuguese almost exclusively from Primary 4 (Trudell, 2016). In elite private schools, colonial languages are prevalent from Primary 1. This structure advantages urban or elite children who have had prior exposure to colonial languages while systematically

disadvantaging the rural majorities and working-class learners who have a L1 different from the school’s language. The transition to a different language halts cognitive development, which leads to widespread literacy failure, high rates of repetition, and dropping out of school (Brock-Utne, 2012).

Studies offer additional evidence of harm and possibility. Brock-Utne (2012) conducted a classroom analysis in Tanzania and found that learners only taught in English tended to rely on rote memorization, reciting what they did not understand, while teachers avoided deeper explanations due to understanding the limitations of the learners’ language ability.

Trudell’s (2016) ethnographic study conducted in East and West Africa indicates that when children are taught in their home languages, not only does learner participation increase, but also parental participation is strengthened to a point that schooling feels like a part of everyday life. Nonetheless, the study also cautioned that where the implementation of MTB-MLE was developed organically in communities, resistance occasionally arose from parents about their child’s schooling experience. In some cases, parents indicated that local language schooling may be detrimental to their ward’s socioeconomic progress.

Heugh’s (2015) comparative studies of long-term MTB-MLE programs in Ethiopia and South Africa confirmed that mother tongue instruction for an extended period of time leads to better educational outcomes. In Ethiopia, learners who received 8 years of L1 schooling achieved higher literacy rates in the home language, but also higher levels of proficiency in English than peers who transitioned from home language schooling earlier. In South Africa, however, the 3-year early-exit model led to lower literacy rates and ultimately affected educational inequality. These findings effectively dispel the myth that African languages are a hindrance to learners’ ability to acquire a global language. In contrast, they show that prolonged MTB-MLE can robustly support indigenous language development and as well as lead to greater levels of proficiency in the acquisition of international languages.

These studies above indicate that when properly designed and implemented, MTB-MLE is not merely a technical language policy but a justice-oriented educational model of practice that validates the





identities of learners, promotes cognitive growth, and prepares students to engage productively in their local and global contexts.

However, these traditions do not align seamlessly. Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy emerged from Latin American struggles against dictatorship, while Adams and Bell's (2016) social justice education framework reflects U.S. debates on race, identity, and inclusion. Their direct application to African multilingual classrooms risks oversimplification. Likewise, linguistic human rights emphasize institutional guarantees, whereas postcolonial and decolonial theory often stress the limits of rights discourse as a Eurocentric construct (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017). Rather than assuming harmony, this paper treats these frameworks as an assemblage: partially overlapping, sometimes contradictory, yet mutually generative. The value of this synthesis lies not in resolving their tensions but in mobilizing their insights to design educational practices that affirm linguistic identity, cultivate critical consciousness, and resist colonial hierarchies

METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

This paper employs a conceptual and theoretical methodology rather than an empirical one. It draws on human rights education scholarship, postcolonial theory, decolonial thought, and multilingual education research to construct a justice-oriented framework. The goal is not to give a one-size-fits-all solution but rather to propose a conceptual framework that can guide curriculum development and teacher training policy across different contexts. By combining theory and reflective insight, the methodology exposes both the challenges and transformative potential of incorporating HRE and SJE into MTB-MLE.

Positionality and Researcher Stance

This analysis is informed by my lived experience within African multilingual schooling systems. My first experience with linguistic violence came at the age of six, when a teacher hit me on the wrist for speaking Twi in class. Like millions of African children, I was taught through colonial schooling that intelligence equated to proficiency in European languages, a lesson that has shaped my entire educational trajectory and scholarly commitments.

This positionality is not incidental to the research but central to it. As a product of colonial schooling turned critical pedagogue, I bring both insider

knowledge of the harms produced by language hierarchies and scholarly distance to analyze their structural dimensions. Following feminist and decolonial research traditions (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1999), I acknowledge that all knowledge is situated. My experiences as a Twi speaker educated in English-dominant systems inform both my theoretical framing and my commitment to justice-oriented reform. These experiences translate into concrete analytical choices: why I prioritize postcolonial theorists (Thiong'o, Fanon, Spivak) over Western frameworks alone; why I propose participatory curriculum design that centers community and educator voice; and why I treat indigenous knowledge systems as epistemologically legitimate rather than supplementary. The classroom is not neutral; it is a space where linguistic hierarchies are either reproduced or disrupted. By blending personal experience with theoretical analysis, I expose how current language-in-education policies constitute epistemic violence while offering an alternative framework grounded in linguistic human rights and critical pedagogy.

Conceptual Approach to Curriculum Design

The curriculum design advanced in this article addresses the long-standing criticisms of Eurocentrism and human rights education (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017), which tend to make liberal rights discourse universal at the expense and marginalization of non-Western epistemologies and experiences. To counteract this trend, this framework situates rights discourse in indigenous languages and cultural formats through pedagogical processes of indigenization. Proverbs, oral narrative, songs, and the community-based repository of knowledge are not considered "add-ons" to supplement learning and teaching but are integral pedagogic resources.

For example, the Akan proverbs of Ghana or the Yoruba folktales in Nigeria offer rich implicit lessons on dignity, reciprocity, and justice. Integrating these into classroom discourse enables students to interact with rights principles in culturally relevant terms, rather than as abstract concepts that are imported from international conventions. Oral storytelling, a pervasive feature of African societies, gives students a narrative place where they can grapple with moral issues, contest interpretations of fairness, and build meanings around responsibility together. Likewise, community

forums, intergenerational conversations, and role-play activities grounded in local traditions can contextualize HRE and SJE within established cultural frameworks of knowledge and authority.

However, as the process unfolds, it is important to avoid the creation of new hierarchies and exclusions. One prevalent risk is the idealization of “tradition” while favoring privileged or dominant cultural groups, effectively silencing minority perspectives. To reduce this danger, the curriculum follows three principles:

- **Participatory Co-Design:** Teachers, learners, parents, and community elders are all involved in curriculum development as co-creators. This means that multiple perspectives contribute to shaping both content and pedagogy.
- **Pluralism in Knowledge Systems:** Indigenous practices come into play along with critical global frameworks. This plurality rejects binary opposition between “local” and “universal” and instead encourages dialogue across epistemic traditions.
- **Critical Reflexivity:** Educators and students are emboldened to not just challenge the hierarchies at the service of colonialist policies but also examine national, ethnic, and generational exclusions within indigenous knowledges. From this perspective, cultural forms like proverbs and stories should not be put on a pedestal; they are instead given a platform for discussing what justice should look like and how human rights can be realized.

By anchoring the curriculum in both indigenous traditional frameworks and critical pedagogy, this approach develops learners’ ability to critically analyze rights in ways that are relevant to their lived experiences. The aim is not to replace one discourse that is dominant with another, but rather to create dialogic and multilingual learning spaces where African epistemology in all its diversity is respected while preparing learners to engage in global rights and justice discourse.

COLONIAL LANGUAGE HIERARCHIES AND THEIR EFFECTS

The language hierarchies found in African education systems are not coincidental. They are the result of colonial structure and post-colonial accommodation, in which language functioned as a tool to impose governance, stratification, and exclusion (Alexander,

2005; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). During the colonial era, European powers imposed English, French, and Portuguese not merely as means of communication but also as instruments for subjugation. Language policy served as a vehicle to limit access to power, breed local elite intermediaries, and destroy the legitimacy of indigenous epistemologies. Education in the colonial languages, hence, served as both a barrier to entry for the poor and a symbol of social distinction.

Post-independence reforms throughout Africa often did not succeed in dismantling these hierarchies. For example, in Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania, children are provided with only two to three years of mother tongue instruction before they are moved to English as the only medium (Heugh, 2015). Similarly, in francophone states such as Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Cameroon, children are taught in French from Primary one, despite that many children do not speak French at home (Djité, 2008). In Mozambique and Angola, Portuguese remains the default language of schooling, even though it is the home language of only one minority group (Mutua, 2002). These policies have been justified in the name of national unity, international diplomacy, and economic integration, yet such policies continue to marginalize learners whose home languages have been excluded (Bamgbose, 2000).

It is crucial to recognize, however, that the persistence of colonial languages cannot only be rationalized without reference to their colonial origins. In many states in Africa, they serve the function of lingua francas among populations that are ethnolinguistically diverse (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998), and parents believe they offer an opportunity towards social and economic mobility. Furthermore, inequities in educational contexts cannot be framed solely in terms of language policy, because they interact with longstanding issues of underfunding, teacher shortages, and poor governance. What is clear from the research, however, is that when children are taught in colonial languages they do not have familiarity with, from the beginning of schooling, it will severely impede their learning and literacy development (Brock-Utne, 2012; Heugh, 2015). It is important to emphasize that this theoretical construct does not dispute the utilitarian function of colonial languages, but rather to emphasize that their uncritical elevation within a hierarchy maintains an inequality that systematically disregards and depletes indigenous linguistic repertoires.



The literature repeatedly emphasizes the disconnect between the languages used in educational settings and the language abilities of the children who are educated in their home language. In his study, Brock-Utne (2012) describes instances in Tanzania when students receiving instruction fully in English used rote memorization as a strategy for learning without understanding. Heugh's (2015) comparative study across Ethiopia and South Africa also indicates that extended mother-tongue instruction has stronger literacy outcomes than both L1 and L2, undermining the assumption that local languages hinder the acquisition of global languages. Trudell (2016) further illustrates that when schools use languages that are not familiar to the community, it weakens parental support and lowers student motivation.

The effects of learning through unfamiliar languages are not only academic, but also psychological and sociological. In many rural areas, children's exposure to colonial languages starts in schools (UNESCO, 2010). This leads children to experience frustration, disinterest, and ultimately makes them likely to drop out of school. More insidiously, students internalize shame and inferiority when their home languages are deemed unintelligent or irrelevant (Prah, 2009; Thiong'o, 1986). Fanon (1967) warns that this is a potent source for "colonial alienation" when a colonial language becomes associated with intelligence and worth, while indigenous languages are dismissed as ignoble and primitive.

In addition, there is the elevation of colonial languages, which adds to the system of what Bourdieu (1991) calls linguistic capital. The proficiency to speak English or French is often associated with intelligence, professionalism, and mobility. These perceptions of language shape parent aspirations, teacher expectations, and student self-worth. In many homes, parents actively discourage the use of home languages because they believe these languages limit opportunities. This creates a cycle of cultural eradication and language insecurity that goes beyond school settings and permeates family and community life.

These hierarchies are also institutions that reinforce linguistic hierarchies. African languages are underrepresented in curricula, absent from textbooks, and are not assessed nationally (Wolff, 2017). These institutions function as sites of epistemic reproduction, excluding not only children

from multilingual and multicultural engagement but also parents, communities, and educators from shaping linguistic and cultural futures. By privileging colonial languages as the dominant medium of legitimacy and social mobility, they perpetuate linguistic imperialism and reinforce cultural hierarchies, thereby foreclosing the possibility of more pluralistic and decolonial forms of knowledge production and transmission. The consequences are far-reaching beyond the school context. In many African countries, being able to speak a colonial language is a requirement for accessing higher education, formal employment, and engaging in political processes (Alexander, 2005), thus disempowering women, rural populations, and speakers of less common language groups. Language, then, becomes a marker of citizenship and legitimacy.

It is important to be clear that any challenge to colonial language hierarchies is not just a matter of cultural nostalgia. It is necessary for educational equity, cultural revitalization, and inclusive development. What is therefore required is not just the translation of curriculum stories but a critical reimagining of the role of language in the construction of knowledge, power, and identity. An education system that situates African languages at the core, rather than the periphery, empowers learners to engage with the world on their own terms, rather than through borrowed lenses.

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING HRE AND SJE THROUGH MTB-MLE

The integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) in Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) presents an opportunity to disrupt language policy and pedagogical practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. This curriculum framework sits on the conceptual foundation laid out previously and is informed by culturally responsive pedagogies, critical literacy, and community knowledge systems toward constructing locally relevant and globally conscious education.

The model serves as a response to criticism in which traditional HRE is perceived as European-centric and irrelevant to the lived experiences of African learners (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017). By instituting human rights concepts in local languages and cultural practices, this curriculum framework validates students as linguistically accountable while

encouraging engagement and criticality around notions of justice and equity.

Curriculum Goals and Learning Outcomes

This curriculum is organized into three interrelated goals:

- Knowledge: Acquire knowledge and understanding of key concepts of human rights, like dignity, equality, and justice, within the context of local cultures.
- Skills: Facilitate critical thinking, dialoguing, working collaboratively, and advocacy through participatory learning methods.
- Attitudes: Foster empathy, pride in cultural identity, and a desire to work for social action and justice.

These objectives are synchronized with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), which requires states to implement human rights education at all levels of education. The Declaration clarifies that human rights education is not only an exercise in transferring knowledge, but that such education also includes the development of values, attitudes, and skills that instill in learners the belief they can be rights-holders and rights-defenders. By invoking the Declaration, this framework is firmly set within global standards despite the chasm between global obligations and local action and implementation of education systems in Africa. The curriculum presented here seeks to amend that chasm by anchoring a rights discourse to indigenous languages, oral traditions, and participatory pedagogies ensuring that human rights education is both accessible and transformative for African learners.

Pedagogical Principles

The curriculum is grounded explicitly in Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 2020) and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014), providing the pedagogical underpinnings for this curriculum. Freire's work focuses on the movement from "banking education" to "problem-posing pedagogy," where learners use dialogue and inquiry to name and challenge oppression. This approach frames human rights and justice as lived experiences that are co-constructed in community, rather than intellectual constructs imposed from above.

Together with this, Ladson-Billings' framework holds pedagogy to a higher standard, in that pedagogy must recognize and position students' cultural and linguistic identities as assets, rather than deficits. This is especially important in African multilingual contexts where colonial schooling has historically positioned indigenous languages as inferior.

Collectively, these traditions legitimize the curriculum's three foci:

1. Dialogic learning: Lessons are designed to promote dialogue and inquiry, while respecting students' voices and experiences as sources of knowledge.
2. Experiential methods: Storytelling, role play, debates, and community mapping direct learners' considerations of rights concepts to their lived reality.
3. Cultural grounding: Local proverbs, oral traditions, festivals, and community knowledge become entry points for exploring the principles of human rights and allow learners to understand these principles as culturally relevant rather than foreign concepts.

These foci are neither gratuitous nor random; they are the result of combining the principles of critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy to African multilingual classrooms. When taken as a whole, they create a pedagogical framework around which to affirm identity, develop critical consciousness, and prepare learners to actively produce local and global struggles for justice.

Although integrating HRE and SJE into MTB-MLE may have transformative potential, it is not guaranteed. The feasibility of implementing the framework hinges on several mediating factors: meticulous preparation and training of educators in both pedagogical methodologies in their native language and the integration of rights-based content into the curriculum; participatory curriculum development that incorporates community perspectives while avoiding the perpetuation of exclusions; the availability of sufficient materials and resources for educators and community organizations; and supportive policy environments that facilitate the continuation and enhancement of educational programs through collaborative initiatives. In the absence of these conditions, the MTB-MLE implementation may be a tokenistic or elite reform rather than a rights-based alternative



For this reason, the framework must be read as a necessary enabling model for reducing barriers to rights learning, and not as a remedy on its own.

Sample Curriculum Modules

The following sample modules illustrate how Human Rights Education and Social Justice Education can be integrated into Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education through culturally responsive curricular design. The examples draw upon established pedagogical principles and practices that incorporate local languages, cultural values, and community-based knowledge.

Introduction to Human Rights

Students explore the concept of rights through Akan proverbs, community stories, and local experiences. Concepts such as dignity and fairness are linked to cultural values like Sankofa (learning from the past) and Abusua (family/community solidarity).

Dignity and Equality

Through storytelling and role play, students examine scenarios involving dignity and equality, reflecting on how these values are practiced within their own communities and cultural traditions.

Justice and Fairness

Students participate in mock traditional court proceedings, drawing on local models of restorative justice. They analyze how customary practices align with or challenge modern human rights frameworks.

Cultural Identity and Rights

A Cultural Marketplace activity allows students to explore the relationship between cultural identity and rights, using Ghanaian festivals, crafts, and oral histories to understand how cultural preservation intersects with human rights.

Empowerment and Community Engagement

Students engage with themes of empowerment through music (such as Yen Ara Asaase Ni) and collaborative projects. They identify local human rights issues and develop action plans to address them.

Assessment Strategies

Assessment within this framework is formative and reflective, emphasizing growth in understanding and critical consciousness. Strategies include:

- Reflective journals documenting personal connections to rights concepts.
- Storytelling and community mapping projects.
- Group presentations and dialogues.
- Community-engaged projects addressing local human rights concerns.

Curricular Innovations

This approach differs from traditional rights education in several ways:

- It localizes rights discourse through the use of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge.
- It positions learners as active agents rather than passive recipients.
- It explicitly addresses intersectionality, exploring how language, gender, class, and culture intersect in shaping rights experiences.
- It connects classroom learning to community action, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency.

Toward a Justice-Centered Language Education

By centering human rights and social justice education within mother tongue-based instruction, this curriculum framework offers a pathway toward educational equity and linguistic justice. It affirms that African languages are not barriers to human rights education but powerful tools for fostering critical awareness, cultural pride, and transformative action.

In the following section, the paper turns to the role of teacher preparation and professional development in supporting this approach, recognizing that transformative curricula require equally transformative pedagogical practices.

DISCUSSION: TEACHER CAPACITY AND SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

The successful integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) hinges on the preparation of educators who are not only linguistically competent but also critically conscious and pedagogically equipped to deliver transformative curricula. Too often, language-in-education reform initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa falter not because of poor policy design, but due to inadequate investment in teacher capacity. For justice-centered language education to take root, teacher

preparation must address both technical and ideological dimensions of pedagogical practice.

A foundational element of professional development for MTB-MLE lies in building teachers' competencies in multilingual and intercultural education. Many African educators were themselves schooled in monolingual, colonial-language environments and may lack formal training in delivering instruction through indigenous languages. Therefore, teacher education programs must include robust coursework and practicum experiences in mother tongue instruction, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and translanguaging strategies. These components not only strengthen linguistic proficiency but also affirm the legitimacy of African languages as vehicles of academic and critical discourse.

Equally important is the cultivation of teachers' capacities to integrate HRE and SJE into their classroom practice. This involves moving beyond rights education as a set of abstract principles and toward a pedagogy that fosters critical inquiry, empathy, and civic agency. Professional development should engage teachers with the philosophical underpinnings of human rights and social justice, encouraging them to reflect on their own positionalities and to recognize the ways that language, identity, and power intersect in educational spaces. Through workshops, collaborative learning communities, and reflective practice, educators can develop the skills to facilitate dialogue, mediate classroom tensions around justice issues, and connect rights education to students' lived experiences.

Community involvement is also integral to teacher preparation in this model. In many African contexts, elders, cultural practitioners, and local leaders are vital custodians of indigenous knowledge and languages. Creating avenues for teachers to engage with these community resources enriches both their cultural competence and their pedagogical repertoire. Partnerships between schools and local communities can foster a more holistic and grounded approach to human rights education, ensuring that classroom learning resonates with broader social and cultural realities.

Addressing structural challenges in teacher preparation remains a significant concern. Many education systems in Africa face shortages of qualified teachers, especially in rural areas where linguistic diversity is greatest. Furthermore,

existing teacher training curricula often prioritize preparation for colonial-language instruction and national exams, leaving little space for mother tongue-based or justice-centered pedagogy. Policy interventions must therefore support the development of specialized teacher training programs for MTB-MLE and provide incentives for teachers to work in linguistically diverse settings. Models such as cascade training and peer mentorship can also help build capacity at scale, especially when combined with ongoing professional support and resource development.

Ultimately, the transformation envisioned by this integrated approach to language education cannot be achieved through curriculum alone. It requires a parallel transformation of teacher education, grounded in the recognition that educators are not mere implementers of policy, but key agents of change. By investing in their linguistic, cultural, and critical capacities, education systems can empower teachers to enact an inclusive and justice-oriented vision of schooling, one that affirms the dignity and voices of all learners.

SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

This conceptual analysis affirms that integrating Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) offers a powerful, justice-centered approach to educational reform in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through the synthesis of linguistic human rights, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and multilingual education research, the analysis demonstrates that language policy and curricular innovation can play a transformative role in advancing educational equity.

One key conclusion is that cultural and linguistic relevance significantly enhances the effectiveness of rights learning. When human rights education is delivered through learners' mother tongues and connected to local cultural values and practices, it fosters both deeper understanding and stronger personal engagement. Participatory pedagogies, such as storytelling, community mapping, and dialogic teaching, further support this process by helping students connect abstract rights principles to their lived experiences and community contexts.

The integrated framework also promotes important academic and civic outcomes. In addition to supporting cognitive development and literacy, the approach cultivates empathy, agency, and a





commitment to social justice. However, the success of such initiatives depends heavily on teacher preparation. Robust professional development and meaningful community collaboration are essential to ensure that educators are equipped to implement justice-oriented, culturally responsive pedagogies. Teachers must be supported as reflective practitioners and cultural mediators who can navigate the complex linguistic and cultural dynamics of African classrooms.

Overall, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship advocating for justice-centered language education. It underscores that the continued marginalization of African languages in education constitutes a profound equity concern, with implications for identity, citizenship, and social inclusion. Re-centering these languages through integrated HRE and SJE offers a promising pathway for decolonizing education systems and advancing linguistic human rights.

The following section outlines concrete suggestions for policy and practice, identifying strategies to support the scalable and sustainable implementation of this integrated framework.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice

The integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has significant implications for educational policy and practice in Sub-Saharan Africa. As this conceptual analysis suggests, advancing linguistic human rights through justice-oriented curricula requires not only shifts in classroom practice but also broader structural reforms. The inclusion of HRE and SJE in MTB-MLE is best understood not as a technical reform, but rather as part of a larger struggle around epistemic justice. It also requires humility: no single framework or model can solve the deeply ingrained hierarchies that operate in African education systems. Yet, at the same time, the horizon it opens is important—an education that affirms local languages and identities while also allowing learners to engage in critical issues of justice and power.

First, ministries of education should adopt language policies that explicitly recognize the role of indigenous languages in promoting educational equity and justice. Rather than viewing local languages as transitional tools or secondary to global languages, policies should position them as

central to cognitive development, cultural identity, and civic empowerment. This requires sustained investment in developing curricular materials, teacher training programs, and assessment tools in African languages.

Second, teacher education programs should integrate coursework on linguistic human rights, multilingual pedagogy, and social justice education. Preparing teachers to implement integrated HRE-SJE-MTB-MLE frameworks necessitates moving beyond technical language instruction toward a broader understanding of the cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of language in education. Professional development initiatives should also foster partnerships with community elders and cultural practitioners to enrich curricular content and pedagogical practice.

Third, educational leaders should promote participatory curriculum development processes that engage teachers, students, families, and community members. Such collaborative approaches ensure that curricula reflect local realities and cultural knowledge systems while fostering community ownership and support. They also help bridge potential tensions between global human rights frameworks and local epistemologies.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems should be reoriented to prioritize equity, cultural relevance, and learner empowerment. Standardized assessments that privilege dominant languages and narrowly defined academic outcomes risk undermining the goals of justice-centered language education. Alternative assessment models that value linguistic diversity, critical thinking, and community engagement can better capture the transformative potential of integrated HRE and SJE.

In sum, advancing this framework requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to educational reform. It is not enough to introduce new curricular content or shift the language of instruction. Systemic change must address the underlying power dynamics that shape language hierarchies and educational inequalities. By centering indigenous languages and justice-oriented pedagogies, African education systems can move closer to realizing the promise of linguistic human rights and educational equity.

Appendix A: Curriculum Table

Module Title	Key Concepts	Sample Activities	Learning Outcomes
Introduction to Human Rights	Dignity, Fairness, Sankofa, Abusua	Proverbs, storytelling, community stories	Understand rights as embedded in cultural values
Dignity and Equality	Equality, Respect, Collective Responsibility	Role plays, story analysis	Reflect on dignity and equality in local contexts
Justice and Fairness	Restorative Justice, Fairness	Mock traditional courts, community dialogues	Compare customary and modern justice practices
Cultural Identity and Rights	Cultural Preservation, Identity Rights	Cultural Marketplace, oral histories	Recognize the link between cultural identity and human rights
Empowerment and Community Engagement	Agency, Community Action	Song analysis, action projects	Develop and implement local rights-based projects

Appendix B: Full Sample Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan 3: Justice and Fairness (60 minutes)

Overview

This lesson immerses students in Ghanaian cultural practices, such as storytelling (Anansesem), mock traditional court proceedings, and community dispute resolution, to explore the concepts of justice and fairness. Students will actively participate in cultural simulations to understand these concepts and apply them to their lives.

By connecting justice and fairness to Akan values, such as Nyansa boni ye fe, nanso enye cdc (Cleverness without kindness is not good), the lesson highlights the role of wisdom, kindness, and collective well-being in resolving conflicts.

Essential Questions

1. What is justice, and how does it differ from fairness?
2. How do Akan cultural practices teach justice and fairness?
3. What can we learn from traditional dispute resolution methods?
4. Why is fairness essential for maintaining peace in a community?
5. How can we apply the values of justice and fairness in our daily lives?

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Define justice and fairness and explain the difference between them.
2. Analyze the role of traditional Ghanaian practices in resolving conflicts.
3. Participate in a mock court to apply the principles of justice and fairness.
4. Reflect on the importance of fairness in building trust within their communities.
5. Commit to resolving conflicts using justice and fairness in their daily interactions.

Curriculum Glossary and Concepts

- Justice: Justice refers to what individuals deserve based on their actions or circumstances. (Fletcher, 2005)
- Fairness: Fairness, on the other hand, relates to equal treatment and procedural consistency. miscellaneous
- Anansesem: Traditional Akan storytelling featuring Ananse the spider, often used to teach morals.
- Customary Law: Customary law refers to traditional justice systems that operate outside of formal state legal structures. International Development Law Organization.
- Nyansa: Wisdom or intelligence.

Materials for Teachers and Students

Teachers:

- Ananse storybooks or oral narratives.
- Props for the mock court (e.g., headscarves for elders, sticks for authority).
- Large poster paper and markers for the Fairness Tree.

Students:

- Notebooks for reflections.
- Handouts explaining key terms (justice, fairness, customary law).

Formative Assessment Strategies

1. Mock Court Reflection: Students write about their experience, focusing on what they learned about justice and fairness.
2. Fairness Tree Review: Teachers assess students' understanding based on their

contributions to the tree.

3. Class Discussion: Open discussions to evaluate how students interpret justice in their cultural context.

Lesson Plan with Estimated Time

1. Introduction Through Anansesem (15 minutes)

- (i) Begin the lesson with an Anansesem story such as The Trial of Ananse.

In this story, Ananse tricks the animals, and the village assembles to decide his punishment.

- (ii) After narrating the story, facilitate a discussion:

- Was Ananse treated fairly?
- How did the village demonstrate justice?
- (iii) Building Connections: Relate the lesson to modern justice systems, emphasizing similarities and differences, restorative over punitive, etc.

2. Justice in Action: Mock Traditional Court (30 minutes)

- (i) Organize students into roles for a mock court inspired by a Nananom Mpanyinfo (Council of Elders) session.
- (ii) Case Scenario: A student broke a communal rule (e.g., taking someone's food without permission).

Assign roles:

1. Plaintiff (victim)
2. Defendant (accused)
3. Elders (judges)
4. Community members (students providing perspectives).

Simulate the trial, ensuring students follow a process of evidence, arguments, and resolution.

- (iii) Debrief:

- Was the judgment fair?
- How was justice achieved?
- What could be done differently?

Alternative Activity: Community Dispute Resolution (30 minutes)

- Introduce the concept of Abusua Fie (family house) meetings, where disputes are resolved by elders.
- Facilitate a group activity:
Divide students into small groups and give them a conflict scenario (e.g., a disagreement over shared resources). Students act as a family resolving the dispute using fairness and justice principles. Groups present their resolutions, highlighting fairness in their decision-making.

3. Collaborative Art Project: The Fairness Tree (15 minutes)

Set up a large drawing of a tree on poster paper.

Activity:

- On the tree trunk, write Justice and Fairness.
- Each student writes a behavior or action that represents fairness on a leaf (e.g., sharing, listening, telling the truth).
- Attach the leaves to the tree.
- Discuss how these actions create a tree of peace in the community.

4. Homework Assignment

Option 1: Write about a time you or someone you know was treated unfairly.

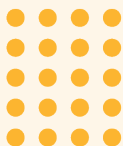
- What happened?
- How could the situation have been resolved fairly?

Option 2: Interview a community elder about how disputes were traditionally resolved and summarize their insights.

Notes for Teachers

1. Facilitating the Mock Court: Guide students to focus on fairness and not favoritism in their decisions.
2. Cultural Context: Highlight how Ghanaian practices of justice promote reconciliation rather than punishment.
3. Encouraging Reflection: Create a safe space for students to discuss personal experiences with fairness. Building Connections: Relate the lesson to modern justice systems, emphasizing similarities and differences.●





CONCLUSION

Integrating Human Rights Education and Social Justice Education within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education offers a coherent, justice-centered framework for rethinking language education in Sub-Saharan Africa. By grounding language policy in critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and linguistic human rights, this paper reframes MTB-MLE not as a technical instructional choice but as a decolonial intervention that affirms learners' identities, restores epistemic agency, and positions African languages as legitimate sites of rights-based inquiry and democratic learning.

Without this integrated approach, African children continue to receive the message that their languages, and by extension their knowledge systems and cultural epistemologies, are inadequate vehicles for intellectual work and democratic participation. The curriculum framework developed here challenges this epistemic violence while demonstrating that meaningful implementation requires sustained community partnerships, robust teacher education, and systemic policy shifts. Evidence from extended MTB-MLE programs in Ethiopia and South Africa demonstrates that such transformation is both pedagogically sound and practically achievable.

In doing so, the paper contributes to HRE by situating rights learning within culturally rooted epistemologies; to SJE by demonstrating how linguistic identity and critical consciousness can be mutually reinforcing; and to multilingual education by articulating a model that challenges language hierarchies and resists the tokenistic use of indigenous languages. While further research is needed to understand how this model adapts across diverse linguistic and political contexts, the analysis underscores a central claim: centering indigenous languages within justice-oriented pedagogies is fundamental to realizing linguistic human rights and repairing epistemic harm.

The theoretical foundations, pedagogical frameworks, and empirical evidence needed to advance this model exist. What remains is the commitment to implementing educational policies that prioritize linguistic justice alongside academic outcomes. Advancing this integrated approach offers a compelling pathway toward more equitable, culturally grounded, and decolonized educational futures in Africa. Specifically, this work contributes to human rights education by situating rights learning in culturally rooted epistemologies, to social justice education by demonstrating how linguistic identity and critical consciousness are mutually reinforcing, and to multilingual education by articulating a framework that challenges language hierarchies and resists linguistic imperialism.



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