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Language and student learning

Evidence from an ethnographic study in Mozambique

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Abstract: This ethnographic study explores the implementation of bilingual education in Mozambique: how it is understood, adapted, and resisted by school directors, teachers, and local officials. Bilingual education uses local languages in early grades before a gradual shift into Portuguese, which most Mozambican children do not speak when entering school. Our study confirms that students participate actively and understand content better in bilingual classes. Regardless of education policy, school directors decide whether or not to form bilingual classes. They report pressure from parents for Portuguese-only instruction because of misunderstanding about the nature of bilingual education, poor resourcing, and fears about students failing tests. Some teachers demonstrate an impressive ability to provide bilingual education despite a lack of training and materials. Others resist and do little to hide their negative attitude. District officers are not able to supply schools with basic materials for local-language teaching. We conclude that bilingual education has lost momentum in Mozambique.

Key words: bilingual education, local-language teaching, education policy, implementation, ethnography, Mozambique

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1 Introduction

Mozambique has made remarkable progress in expanding access to primary education. From independence in 1975 the number of primary schools increased from around 5,000 to 13,800 in 2021, while enrolment increased seven-fold to 8.8 million students (Johnston 1984; MINEDH 2022). The civil war (1977–92) destroyed half of the country’s primary schools, but they have since been rebuilt. Thousands of new schools and classrooms have been added to provide education for all, especially as each cohort of primary school-aged children has been bigger than the previous one. School fees have been abolished, free textbooks are provided, and teacher training has been expanded countrywide. The steep upward trend in enrolment will continue over the coming decades due to fast population growth, requiring a continued expansion of the education system.

However, what has not improved with increased access to schooling, unfortunately, is educational quality—quite the contrary. In a national test in 2016, for example, only 4.9 per cent of third-graders achieved the reading and writing skills as required in the curriculum (INDE/MINEDH 2017), a decline from an already very low achievement rate of 6.3 per cent in 2013 (INDE/MINEDH 2014). These national tests are in Portuguese only. According to the Service Delivery Indicators (SDIs) in 2018, similarly, less than half of grade 4 students were able to recognize simple words, while less than 20 per cent were able to read a paragraph in Portuguese (Bassi et al. 2019).

Another piece of evidence of declining education quality comes from the Demographic and Health Surveys which are comparable across time and countries, and which include a simple literacy test for repeated cross-sections of women¹ born between 1950 and 2000 (Le Nestour et al. 2022). This long-term analysis of a total of 87 countries includes Mozambique. Practically all Mozambican women born in 1955 and who had completed five years of schooling were literate. More recently, only 42 per cent of women born in 1998, after having completed five years of schooling, could pass the simple literacy test—that is, were able to read one sentence in the language of their choice. The overall literacy rate has still increased in Mozambique over the past decades thanks to massive schooling expansion.² However, at the same time, education quality offered in primary schools—defined as literacy, conditional on completing five years of schooling—has declined markedly over the years.

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain the poor learning outcomes. These include very high levels of student and teacher absenteeism, low teaching quality, inadequate training opportunities for teachers, and the choice of Portuguese as the language of instruction. In this study we focus on issues related to the language of instruction, especially bilingual education.

Like most sub-Saharan African countries Mozambique uses its former colonial language, Portuguese, in education, even if it is not spoken either at home or in the community by the majority of the population. Primary school students must learn in Portuguese even if they are not familiar with the language before entering school, especially in rural areas. As part of its response to this situation, the government has been expanding bilingual education based on local languages for the past two decades. In its approach the language of instruction is the child’s mother tongue in the early grades of primary school. Portuguese is introduced gradually and becomes the language

¹ In some cases, men are also included.

² According to the Mozambican census data, the country’s literacy rate was 37 per cent in 1997, 49 per cent in 2007, and 61 per cent in 2017.

of instruction in the higher grades of primary school (see section 2 for details). Secondary schooling is in Portuguese-only.

After independence in 1975 Mozambican politicians were guided by a socialist ideology—especially the need ‘to create *homem novo*, a new man’, a citizen free of colonial and bourgeois mentality and also free of ‘backward’ traditional values such as superstition (Chimbutane 2018; República de Moçambique 1992). Leaders also considered education of the masses as essential for the unity of the new country. Consistent with this political ideology and with the nation-building project, Portuguese—constructed as the language of national unity—was maintained as the sole language of formal education. More pluralistic politics, after the end of the civil war in 1992, have allowed more space for using local languages in education (Chimbutane 2011).

While schooling has continued to expand massively and has been given priority in both domestic public spending and foreign aid, the importance of education has diminished in the political discourse. A recent study of the Mozambican middle class, for example, hardly mentions public education or its poor quality. Instead, private education and educational opportunities abroad feature as important issues to the Mozambican middle class today (Sumich 2018).

1.1 Recent education reforms

Since the end of the civil war in 1992, schooling expansion has been accompanied by constant reforms of the education system. The most recent endeavour—codified in the Law of the National Education System 18/2018 (República de Moçambique 2018)—revised the structure of basic education in the country. Basic education was previously made up of seven grades of primary and three grades of lower secondary school. In the new structure primary school has only six grades, followed by three grades of lower secondary school.³ Entry into 1st grade is at six years of age.

In the revised structure subject teachers in primary school—typically only in grades 6 and 7—are being phased out. All primary teachers will be classroom teachers. Subject teachers currently teaching in a primary school who do not want to become classroom teachers can try to find a placement in a secondary school, provided their qualifications meet the requirements.

Bilingual education based on local (Bantu) languages was first introduced in 2003. It has been an important area of reform since then. The most recent strategy for bilingual education expansion covers the 2020s (MINEDH 2019). Section 2 summarizes the reforms in bilingual education and available evidence on its implementation and impact.

The primary school curriculum has also been reformed since 2017, with the aim of making it more integrated and focused on foundational skills (MINEDH 2020). This is in recognition that many learners leave primary school without basic skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy. Implementation of the revised curriculum, which started in 2017 from grade 1, has moved ahead one grade per year. Simultaneously, the previous curriculum is being superseded. The revised grade 6 curriculum was introduced in 2022. The revised grade 7 curriculum is being adopted in 2023, thus extending the reform to lower secondary education.

The curriculum is organized around three areas of study, namely communication and social sciences; natural sciences and mathematics; and practical and technological activities (MINEDH 2020). Seven separate subjects are included within these three areas of study. To reserve more time for foundational skills, English language and music education have been dropped. Visual education and crafts are introduced in grade 5.

³ There were another two years of higher secondary after ten years of basic education and before university entrance. Higher secondary will be extended to three years in the revised structure (grades 10, 11 and 12).

Within the two primary cycles⁴ promotion to the next grade continues to be independent of the student's grades. A student can only be held back once within a cycle after the teacher has presented a justification to the school director and, if necessary, to the district administration. However, a student can be held back due to extended absences.

Teacher training has gone through frequent changes over time, resulting in a range of qualifications among teachers. Earlier models included 7+3, that is, primary school completion plus three years of teacher training, and 9+3, which required lower secondary school plus three years of teacher training. In 2007 the Ministry of Education and Human Development (MINEDH)⁵ abolished the former primary teacher training centres (CFPPs)⁶ and introduced teacher training institutes (IFPs)⁷ across the country to help address teacher shortages, increase entrance requirements, and shorten the time required for teacher training. The IFPs offer a single training programme—known as the 10+1 model—which requires trainees to have completed grade 10 (lower secondary) and to spend one year in teacher training. Nearly half of all lower primary teachers today possess this qualification. Given concerns expressed by civil society and others about the quality of teacher training, the Ministry added a 10+3 programme. In 2021 it replaced the 10+1 model with the 12+1 model.

Given these recent reforms and numerous previous ones over the years, a major challenge for the Mozambican education system is to ensure that the reforms are internally coherent so that they reinforce rather than undermine each other and support student learning.

1.2 (Quantitative) evidence on the role of language in learning

Using data from the first nationally representative SDI survey⁸ in 2014, which tested both Mozambican grade 4 students and their classroom teachers in mathematics and Portuguese, Holvio (2022) estimates the causal impact of teacher content knowledge on student learning. Earlier research established that teacher quality matters greatly for learning and found that, out of all observable characteristics, teacher content knowledge has most consistently had a positive impact on student achievement. Most of this research, however, comes from high-income countries. In Mozambique, a low-income country, teacher content knowledge was found to have little impact on student learning, on average.

But there was considerable heterogeneity in the Mozambican results. Specifically, raising teacher content knowledge by 1 standard deviation (SD) was associated with an increase in student achievement of 0.14 SDs for students whose first language was Portuguese—a significant effect.⁹ In terms of learning, Portuguese speaking students were able to benefit from teachers' better content knowledge, while the average Mozambican primary student was not. These findings are an important impetus for this study.

⁴ Grades 1 to 3, and grades 4 to 6 in the new structure.

⁵ *Ministério da Educação e Desenvolvimento Humano*.

⁶ *Centro de Formação de Professores Primárias*.

⁷ *Instituto de Formação de Professores*.

⁸ <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2754>

⁹ For comparison of effects, Evans and Yuan (2020) examined close to 300 randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies of various interventions in low- and middle-income countries, including new pedagogies, inputs, teacher training, technology, constructing schools, promoting accountability, and many others. The median effect size was found to be 0.10 SD on learning. The 30th percentile of effect sizes was just 0.03, while the 70th percentile was 0.17.

There are other (quantitative) studies on the role of language in learning both from developing and OECD countries (World Bank 2021). For example, a study across 48 high- and middle-income countries that participated in the literacy skills assessment of the Program on International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2011 found that grade 4 students who did not speak the language of the test before starting school had much lower average achievement, scoring 479 versus 516¹⁰ (Mullis et al. 2012). These assessments are based on nationally representative samples.

Another cross-country analysis—based on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007—showed that the mathematics scores of students who ‘never’ (368) or ‘sometimes’ (438) spoke the language of the test at home were lower than those who ‘always or almost always’ spoke the language at home (483) (Martin et al. 2008). As in PIRLS in 2011, no low-income countries participated in TIMSS in 2007.

An experimental local-language programme during the first three years of schooling was evaluated for impact in Cameroon¹¹ (Laitin et al. 2019). The study found that participating students exhibited large gains in both English and maths of 1.4 to 1.1 SDs in grades 1 and 3, respectively compared to the control group. In a study in Mali on the country’s *pédagogie convergente* programme, children who began schooling in their first language (L1) scored 32 per cent higher on French proficiency tests at the end of primary school than those in French-only programmes (Traoré 2001).

In the OECD countries one of the largest longitudinal studies in bilingual education was conducted in the USA. It covered 36 school districts in 16 US states, with 7.5 million student records for 32 years. The study followed English learners (of all language backgrounds) from kindergarten to grade 12. It showed that English-only and transitional bilingual programmes of short duration only closed about half of the achievement gap between English learners and native English speakers. However, high-quality, long-term bilingual programmes closed all of the gap after five to six years (Collier et al. 2017).

1.3 The scope of the study

This ethnographic study explores, first, the role of bilingual education based on local languages in Mozambican primary schools today; how its scale-up has taken root; and how it is being implemented in practice. This study is not a policy evaluation. Instead, it examines how bilingual education is understood, adapted, and resisted on the frontlines of the education system. Second, we investigate how a number of other recent reforms in basic education—affecting both bilingual and monolingual (Portuguese-only) education—are being implemented in practice; whether they are coherent with the objectives of bilingual education; and, where possible, how internally coherent these reforms are with the rest of the education system. Section 3 provides further details of the purpose, design, and method of the study.

As Aiyar et al. (2021) suggest, we believe that success in education reforms depends on how the frontline of the education system—schools and local governments—perceive and implement these reforms. The reform agenda intersects with beliefs, cultures, values, and norms that shape the education ecosystem. The coherence, or lack thereof, of reforms in the education system depends largely on what happens on the ground. While the role of parents and communities—the demand side—is equally important, in this study, we are only able to cover the supply side, i.e. schools and local governments.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes the national policy for bilingual education in Mozambique and explores previous (qualitative) research findings on its

¹⁰ Score 500 is the PIRLS centerpoint.

¹¹ In Boyo division of north-western Cameroon.

implementation. Section 3 discusses the purpose, design, and method of the study, as well as how the field work was carried out, including participant and classroom observations and in-depth interviews in schools and local government education offices. Section 4 presents the findings regarding bilingual education. Section 5 highlights findings regarding other recent education reforms which affect all primary schools, including bilingual classes. Finally, section 6 concludes and makes suggestions for a future research agenda.

2 Local (Bantu) languages in primary education

In line with previous legislation the Mozambican Constitution of 2004 designates Portuguese as the national language. In addition it states that ‘the State shall esteem national languages as cultural and educational heritage, and shall promote their development and increasing use as languages that convey our identity’. Of a total Mozambican population of 29 million, as of the 2017 national population census, 16.6 per cent reported Portuguese as their first language (L1) and an additional 41.4 per cent reported it as their second language (L2) (Chimbutane 2022; INE 2019).

According to linguistic scholars the number of local languages spoken in Mozambique ranges from 20 to 43, depending on the definition used for language and language variety (Terra 2021). Local languages are widely used in daily interactions across the country, especially in the rural areas. Portuguese is used in government, the education system, and urban settings. Unlike in the neighbouring countries, local Bantu languages have not been accorded an official status in Mozambique. Nonetheless they are making inroads in some formal settings, including education.

This section summarizes, first, the bilingual education policy in Mozambique and, second, earlier (qualitative) research findings of bilingual education on schooling and learning in Mozambique.

2.1 Policy for language of instruction

Since independence in 1975, as in the earlier colonial era, Portuguese has been the language of teaching and learning from primary to tertiary level. However, many students, especially in rural areas, start their schooling with little understanding or speaking ability of Portuguese. Teachers, however, are all expected to speak Portuguese. In practice this may not be the case, although systematic evidence is not readily available.¹²

In 2003, based on positive results from an earlier pilot,¹³ the government introduced a change to the primary curriculum to include bilingual education based on local Bantu languages. The pilot had demonstrated improvements in both the relations between teachers and students and the school performance of students. Although limited in scope, the pilot demonstrated that bilingual education can be successful in delivering literacy and numeracy skills to early grade children in the Mozambican context and hence offered a possibility to improve the quality of education.

After the successful pilot, the bilingual programme was expanded, starting in 2003, to selected schools throughout the country, using Portuguese and 16 Bantu languages in teaching and learning. The decision on the choice of local languages was based on political considerations and whether

¹² An indication of teachers’ weak Portuguese language skills comes from the 2014 SDI survey. Grade 4 classroom teachers’ average score on the Portuguese language test was 32 out of 100, indicating that teachers mastered only about one-third of the subject matter in the lower primary curriculum. There were no significant differences in test scores between urban and rural teachers, and only slight differences between regions (Molina and Martin 2015).

¹³ The experimental Bilingual Education Project (PEBIMO) was implemented in Xichangana and Portuguese in Gaza province and in Cinyungwe and Portuguese in Tete province in 1993–97 (Benson 2000).

their orthographies had been standardized. From the language-in-education policy point of view, the curricular change in 2003 included the following alternative modalities in primary education:

1. **Mother-tongue bilingual education**, which applies a transitional model. Specifically,
 - During the first two years of primary education, 60–80 per cent of teaching was expected to be in a Mozambican language (L1). Portuguese (L2) and mother tongue (L1) were both taught as subjects, although in the first two grades L2 was limited to oral language only.
 - Initially, the transition to learning to read and write in Portuguese started in grade 4 when Portuguese became the medium of instruction. The mother tongue only supported the learning process and continued to be taught as a subject.
 - Recent reforms, however, brought the transition to L2 (i.e. reading and writing) forward by one year, starting now in grade 3. At the same time the transition to L2 was made more gradual. Specifically, natural sciences are taught in L1 in grade 4 and social sciences in grade 5. L1 continues as a subject throughout primary school. As before, the rest of the subjects (Portuguese, mathematics, physical education) are taught in L2.
2. **Monolingual** programme in Portuguese, i.e. L2 is used in all instruction (in all subjects and in all primary grades), with the local language used as a resource only (i.e. in situations where students have difficulties in understanding L2).

The recent decision to start the transition to L2 earlier may reflect some other elements in the education reforms, especially the shortening of primary education from seven to six years. There seems to be a perception that, although likely to strengthen students' foundational skills, a later transition to L2 could carry a risk of students who complete grade 6—and thus primary school in the new structure—doing poorly in the Portuguese-only final exam and thus reducing their chances to transition to secondary education.

As Altinyelken et al. (2014) showed for Uganda, there can indeed be a systemic misalignment between the language of instruction and language of assessment. How pupils are assessed can play a major role in how languages are used in the classroom. When assessment is in L2 only, it can adversely affect students' school careers, specifically in rural areas where children are disadvantaged in their access to learning and practising Portuguese (English in Uganda). Therefore language in education requires alignment between instruction and assessment to minimize unintended consequences.

The new Bilingual Education Expansion Strategy 2020–29 issued by MINEDH recognizes that the bilingual education programme—implemented in 1,900 schools, covering all provinces—faces major implementation challenges. The strategy refers in particular to a lack of teacher training in bilingual education and teaching and learning materials. It acknowledges that parents and guardians often resist enrolling children in bilingual education.

The new strategy paper also sets out the steps required to address these challenges. First, linguistic mapping should be carried out to assess the language situation of the area that the school serves. Second, the availability of human and financial resources and teaching and learning materials is to be assessed and, as needed, beefed up. Third, all schools will require an authorization from the district and the province for their language-of-instruction choice. Finally, active community involvement and sensitization are called for.

It is worth noting that the new strategy is written in a passive voice, leaving open the questions: Who is supposed to take the required actions and how is implementation to be funded?

As our findings (sections 4 and 5) demonstrate, the new Bilingual Education Expansion Strategy is spot on both in terms of the challenges bilingual education faces today in Mozambique and the actions required at the school level and beyond to overcome these challenges. At the same time,

while it may be easy to catalogue the challenges and necessary steps in a strategy paper, it is a completely different matter to ensure that such actions are taken in practice across the whole education system—in other words, to get its countless actors at various levels to respond in such a way that the system as a whole delivers improvement in student learning.

The contribution of our study is to highlight the gaps between aspirations (as expressed in the strategy) and reality. We do this by demonstrating how bilingual education and other (related) education reforms are being implemented by those working in schools and local government education offices. We also highlight incentives, beliefs, attitudes, and norms that underpin the behaviours of various (frontline) actors in the education system. It is our hope that a better understanding of these aspects will help to improve policy designs and their implementation.

2.2 Past (qualitative) school-level evidence on bilingual education

The research evidence available on bilingual education in Mozambique is qualitative. In two separate school-level studies, Chimbutane (2011) and Chambo (2018) reported evidence from two contrasting cases: a supportive and communicative learning environment in local language (L1) and L1-medium subject classes as opposed to a constrained environment in Portuguese (L2) and L2-medium subject classes. In L1 and L1-medium learning contexts, pupils were actively involved in the lessons, could challenge their teachers, and demonstrated willingness to learn thanks to their familiarity with the languages used.

In contrast, in Portuguese (L2) and L2-medium contexts, the learning environment was more constrained and the asymmetry of power between teachers and pupils was more visible as the teachers had greater control over Portuguese and associated cultural resources. Pupils were less willing to participate in class and, when they did participate, their contributions were more limited both linguistically and content-wise. The language barrier was aggravated by the paucity of teaching and learning resources and the constraints on teachers' abilities to deploy appropriate L2 teaching strategies to help minimize the effects of that barrier. Similar findings were also reported in Chimbutane and Benson (2012).

Chimbutane's study (2011) also showed that learning and teaching materials, both in Portuguese and in local languages were lacking or in short supply, as was support for the professional development of practitioners so that they could be better acquainted with bilingual education philosophies and pedagogical practices.

Another qualitative study carried out in central Mozambique in 2010–11 investigated the gap between curricular intentions and actual practices in bilingual education (Terra 2021). Using interviews and observational data, it explored how *teacher beliefs* and *incentives* affected the implementation of bilingual education. It found that, overall, teachers tended to favour the Portuguese-based monolingual programme and that bilingual teachers also demonstrated a preference for Portuguese by bringing L2 into the mother-tongue lessons earlier than was expected in the curriculum.

The 'early-exit' bilingual education model assumes that L2 can be taught and learned as a subject in lower primary so that pupils obtain adequate literacy and communication skills to make the transition to L2. Altinyelken et al. (2014) showed for Uganda that Ugandan students did not have proficiency to start instruction in English at grade 4. Teachers pointed to a set of underlying problems such as high absence rates, large class sizes, hunger, disease, and lack of teaching and learning materials. This model also assumes that teachers themselves have a good command of L2, know children's first language, and have adequate knowledge to teach the second language. In Uganda there was a significant mismatch between policy assumptions and actual practices and attitudes at the school level, which is certainly not unique to Uganda.

As highlighted by both Chimbutane (2011) and Terra (2021), another source of systemic incoherence was the absence of standardized local language teaching materials and teacher training in bilingual education, undermining the bilingual programme.

Terra's (2021) study also found that teachers were often not speakers of the local language used in the school, complicating successful implementation of L1 instruction even further. In other words teacher deployment was not coherent with effective bilingual education. While this continues to be an issue, a recent study in two populous provinces, Nampula and Zambézia, found that 83 per cent of teachers had the same L1 as their school. Moreover, anecdotal evidence indicated that many teachers whose L1 was different from the school frequently spoke the school's L1 as they had learned it after having lived in the community (USAID 2020).¹⁴

In sum, bilingual classes were found to be more supportive and interactive in many cases. Yet many teachers were found to implement the bilingual curriculum only partially and integrate Portuguese sooner than expected (often for test success). This reinforced notions of the superiority of Portuguese over the mother tongue. Successful implementation of the bilingual programme was also found to be hindered by lack of teacher training and L1 teaching and learning materials, and teachers' own limited knowledge of L1 used in the school.

3 Purpose, design, and method of the study

The purpose of this study is to obtain a detailed picture of the implementation of recent education reforms in Mozambique, with a focus on bilingual education. This is important, first, because the language of instruction plays a critical role in student learning. As discussed earlier, students who did not speak the language of instruction before starting school have much lower test scores. The second reason is because local language experiments both in Mozambique and elsewhere have demonstrated large positive impacts on learning. In this study on Mozambique we ask: How well do the experiments scale up? How well do they get implemented? Do they have staying power?

Mozambique now has two decades of experience of scaling up bilingual education. While there have been a number of (qualitative) analyses over the years, in many cases their data dates back a decade, if not more. In addition most studies have focused on teachers. Given the context, the purpose of this study is to update the status of the scale-up and to expand the analysis so that, in addition to teachers, we include school directors and local government education officers and their interactions.

Specifically, the study was designed to:

- Map, describe, and explore the current state of affairs in bilingual education on the frontline—in schools and local government education offices. Have things changed compared to the earlier evidence? If yes, how?;
- Understand the factors that enable or constrain (e.g. trigger resistance or cause misunderstandings in) the implementation of the bilingual programme from the perspectives of frontline actors in the education system, especially school directors, teachers, and local education administrators; and

¹⁴ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) worked in 2016–20 to improve primary students' (grades 1, 2, and 3) reading fluency and comprehension in the local languages in Nampula and Zambézia provinces. The project's (*Vamos Ler!*) teacher training enabled teachers to teach local language literacy. The project trained more than 5,000 teachers who are currently teaching grades 1 and 2 bilingual classes.

- Assess whether other (related) education reforms are coherent with the bilingual education programme and, more broadly, internally coherent in terms of the rest of the education system, and whether they support student learning.

Lastly, we expect this study to help generate policy-relevant hypotheses/research questions that can subsequently be studied quantitatively by collecting and analysing micro-level data on key issues affecting local language teaching and learning.

As in Aiyar et al. (2021), the method we apply in this study can be called ‘policy ethnography’, consisting of classroom and stakeholder observation and individual in-depth interviews.

3.1 Field work

The field work for this study was carried out during two months (February and March) in 2022 in the Manhiça and Matutuíne districts in Maputo province, southern Mozambique. Closely guided by the authors, especially by Feliciano Chimbutane in the country, a team of three research assistants with extensive experience in field work related to education and language in Mozambique carried out a series of classroom and stakeholder observations and in-depth interviews. One member of the field research team was ‘embedded’ for over a week in each of the two districts observing the workflow and interactions in the district education office (SDEJT)¹⁵ and interviewing the chief of general education and education technicians (officers) working in the SDEJT. During the 18 days spent in the district headquarters, a total of 11 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Two members of the field research team also spent about a week in each of the four schools included in the study carrying out classroom observations and in-depth interviews of school directors, deputy directors, and teachers. All four schools selected for the study were complete primary schools, i.e. they had a full set of primary grades (from 1 to 7). During the 20 days spent in the four schools, a total of 36 classroom observations¹⁶ were completed to capture classroom interactions. In addition a total of 45 in-depth interviews were completed: 39 teachers, four school directors, and two deputy directors were interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1: In-depth interview and classroom observation statistics

District	School	In-depth interviews			Classroom observations
		School director/deputy	Teacher	District education officer	
Manhiça	School 1	1	7	4	5
	School 2	2	18		21
Matutuíne	School 3	1	9	7	5
	School 4	2	5		5
TOTAL	4	6	39	11	36

Source: authors' elaboration.

One of the four schools—School 2—was considerably larger than the three others and, therefore, many more interviews and classroom observations were carried out there. Detailed field work diaries as well as a written report (in Portuguese) from every classroom observation and in-depth

¹⁵ *Serviço Distrital da Educação, Juventude e Tecnologia.*

¹⁶ As our classroom observations were not intended to identify ‘effective teachers’ but to capture classroom dynamics more generally regarding the language of instruction, we did not employ specific teacher observation instruments such as SDI, stallings, or The World Bank’s *Teach* (Filmer et al. 2020).

interview carried out both in the district education offices and schools were produced by research assistants.

In addition research assistants participated in two in-service teacher training events (each for one day). One of the events was held at a primary school, targeted at all grade 6 teachers in the district and organized by the district education service in collaboration with a local IFP. The purpose of the event was to introduce the revised grade 6 curriculum. The second training event was on the same topic but held at a teacher training institute—a different IFP from the first event—and targeted at its teacher trainers. The latter was organized by the *Instituto Nacional do Desenvolvimento da Educação* (INDE) in collaboration with the district education service and the IFP. We will reflect on the views and feedback—mostly from teachers and teacher trainers attending the two seminars—together with the findings from the interviews and classroom observations.

The district education offices and schools were supportive of, even enthusiastic about, our study. Many interviewees ‘poured their hearts out’, providing deep insights into Mozambican education and their role in it. We encountered a few teachers, however, who were not fully cooperative with the classroom observation, perhaps assuming that it had to do with school inspection (despite the school director’s assurances). For example, when a research assistant was observing their classes, non-cooperative teachers would give students exercises, reading assignments, or tests instead of teaching a normal class. This occurred, fortunately, relatively infrequently.

4 How is bilingual education faring today?

This section explores how bilingual education is faring today, based on our classroom and participant observations and in-depth interviews (detailed in section 3).

As district education offices (SDEJT) are the all-important link between schools and the rest of the education system, we begin with their viewpoint. The SDEJT is expected to provide guidance to schools, often by organizing training events. This is a critical function in the frequently shifting policy environment that characterizes Mozambican primary education. The SDEJT is also the channel of publicly funded human, material, and financial resources that schools rely on. The office monitors and supervises schools and helps solve their problems, and it feeds back information from schools to the higher levels of the education hierarchy.

But, of course, teaching and learning happen in schools. Therefore we highlight at length both school directors’ choices and constraints as well as teachers’ experiences and beliefs regarding bilingual education.

The section concludes by asking: How does it all add up. How have things changed? Is the bilingual education programme internally coherent? Is it coherent with other education reforms that have been undertaken? If not, where are the biggest gaps?

4.1 Viewpoint of district education officers

Chief education officers in the districts spoke eloquently in favour of bilingual education, which, in their view, had made students more active, allowed them to express themselves more freely, and generated better learning results. This is consistent with findings from earlier studies (e.g., Chambo 2018; Chimbutane 2011, 2021; Ngunga et al. 2010; Terra 2021). Chief education officers also welcomed the new, more gradual transition to L2.

In one district, a research assistant challenged the chief education officer by pointing out that its 18 schools were offering bilingual education in an inconsistent way. Some schools had no early grade bilingual classes as they had stopped forming them in recent years. In others bilingual classes

were missing in many grades, as in those years the schools had not offered a bilingual class in grade 1.

The chief education officer identified the teaching force as the main constraint. First, the policy that a teacher can apply for any opening in the whole country had led to many cases where teachers did not speak the local language used in the school where they worked. Second, a lack of pre-service training in bilingual education aggravated this system-related incoherence created by teacher deployment policies.

Unavailability of bilingual learning materials, especially textbooks, had become an even bigger problem recently according to one chief education officer. He attributed it to the curriculum reform which required changes in textbooks. Districts had previously received their textbooks in January, before the start of the school year, but this was no longer the case.

As discussed earlier, implementation of the revised curriculum was supposed to progress one grade per year but the education system had not been able to keep up this pace. Consequently, in 2021—the year when the revised curriculum for grade 5 was introduced—new textbooks only reached schools by the end of September. Similar delays were expected in 2022 with textbooks for grade 6.

Education technicians working in the district office viewed support to and supervision of schools as their main responsibility, including bilingual education. They maintained regular contact with schools by phone, text messages, and WhatsApp, primarily to handle problems that came up.

School directors confirmed that communication with district education officers was frequent. The COVID-19 pandemic had improved electronic communications between the district and schools, reducing the need for in-person visits to the district office, but such visits continued to occur, nonetheless. Many school directors came personally to district headquarters to request textbooks as many schools had not received them even if the school year was well underway. School directors also came to handle human resource issues, such as leave requests or transfers of teachers. During these encounters district education officers encouraged school directors and teachers to talk to parents about grade 7 becoming part of secondary school in 2023, ushering in many changes.

Other time-consuming tasks for district education officers were reporting on the previous year's activities to the province and planning monthly activities for the school year. School inspections were also being planned but were delayed due to lack of transport and funds.

In one district a major effort was underway to collect education statistics 'as soon as possible', including on bilingual education, at the request of the provincial director. The provincial governor was about to visit, so the district needed to update its data. One of the officers remarked: 'We have to prioritize this because it is linked to politics'.

District officers recommended to schools that bilingual education be given priority when resources were limited, especially when the number of enrolling students did not allow formation of more than one class in grade 1.¹⁷ This single class should preferably be bilingual. But not everyone was on message. A bilingual education technician working in a district said: 'It doesn't really matter whether the child starts in a monolingual or bilingual programme ... at the end what stands out is Portuguese'.

As interviews in schools indicated, in practice, the final decision about whether or not to offer bilingual classes rested with the school, particularly with the school director (see section 4.2).

¹⁷ In schools offering bilingual education, the recommendation is to form equal numbers of grade 1 bilingual and monolingual classes each year. However, if the number of students enrolled is not enough to form two grade 1 classes comprising a minimum of 35 students each, then the bilingual class should be given priority.

According to district education officers, parents were attentive mostly to textbooks, especially moral and civics books, but not much else. Interaction with communities arose only when there was a problem or official documents were needed. In the view of a school director, however, district officers did not engage with communities as ‘they were always too busy’.

4.2 School directors’ choices and constraints

In-depth interviews with school directors (and deputy directors) were a key part of the field work. Despite a small number of schools (four), located in two districts of one province, there was a surprisingly large variation in the schools’ approaches to bilingual education.

School 1

This school had only one single bilingual class (out of 13 classes). The director explained reasons for the near-absence of bilingual education in his school:

We had difficulties in introducing bilingual education. Initially, there was little guidance but a lot of pressure from the province and the district. So, we formed a bilingual class without knowing the criteria—it has now reached grade 4. Many parents argued that their children already spoke the local language, and that the reason they sent them to school was for them to learn Portuguese. Many parents transferred their children to another school because of bilingual education. Our bilingual class started with 40 students, but had only 30 by the end of the first year. As time went by, the class lost even more students. (School 1 director, interview)

Apart from parents’ attitudes, another constraint was a lack of teaching and learning materials. The teacher in the school’s only bilingual class had to work without any local language materials whatsoever—no lesson plans, manuals, or textbooks.

Despite only a modicum of teaching in a local language, the school director ‘always promoted bilingual education’ in community and school council meetings because it would ultimately ‘improve local language skills in the population and preserve culture and traditions’. But, in his view, to get parents and guardians onboard with bilingual education would require much more than meetings. According to him, it would require a momentous effort to make parents understand and appreciate the benefits of bilingual education.

All told, the primary constraint in the school director’s opinion was the demand side—parents and guardians stood in the way of increased local language teaching in his school. This was despite the fact that teacher interviews and research assistant observations confirmed that Xichangana was the only language students spoke among themselves in the classroom and schoolyard.

School 2

This school presented a different story: it was implementing its fifth year of bilingual education (grades 1 to 5). With a much larger teaching force than the three other schools (44 teachers), it also offered monolingual education in all primary grades (from grades 1 to 7). The school director considered it important to master one’s mother tongue, and the school had an important role to play in it.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interestingly, the deputy director in school 2, with 25 years of teaching experience, was much more circumspect and guarded in her (separate) interview. In her view, a school’s main responsibility was compliance. She did not question the reforms nor focus on implementation constraints.

The school had initially allocated students into bilingual classes randomly. But this strategy had led to numerous complaints from parents and guardians who wanted their children in Portuguese monolingual classes. Some argued that their children did not speak the local language used in the school's bilingual programme. Others claimed that their children could not get any help at home as all older siblings had attended Portuguese-only classes.

In recent years the school had used the student's home language as the criterion for placement into bilingual or monolingual classes. Nevertheless hardly any parents or guardians volunteered their child to be enrolled in a bilingual class. Despite this the school had stuck to the chosen criterion (language spoken at home) and kept explaining the advantages of bilingual education to the community.

Again, a lack of teaching and learning materials, including syllabi, manuals, and textbooks was the main constraint. In the director's view this lack concretely demonstrated that, in reality, bilingual education was marginalized. The district, which had been unable to distribute any local language materials by the time of our field work in 2022, had advised the school to use monolingual manuals instead. In the middle of a previous school year, the director had obtained a syllabus from another district, which, to his chagrin, indicated that they were following an incorrect study plan. While some schools had taken the initiative to translate Portuguese teaching materials into the local language themselves, this school had not done so.

There had also been recent difficulties in attracting teachers to train in bilingual education or to take on bilingual classes, often due to a lack of materials in local languages. The first bilingual teachers in school 2 had been trained by ADPP Mozambique, a non-governmental organization (NGO). The second group had been trained internally—on Fridays, for several weeks, and in a spirit of mutual help—as ADPP had discontinued its work with the school. Over time teachers' interest had waned, again, largely due to lack of technical support and learning aids for the bilingual programme.

All in all the school had persisted with its bilingual programme despite constraints, that is, a lack of (i) enthusiasm among parents and guardians, and even teachers; (ii) local language materials; and (iii) teacher training in bilingual education.

School 3

The school had a total of 13 classes, of which three were bilingual (grades 3, 5, and 6) and the rest were monolingual. The absence of grades 1, 2, and 4 meant that in 2022, 2021, and 2019, respectively, the school had not formed any bilingual classes. Managing such discontinuities can be challenging. For example, as there was no grade 4 bilingual class in 2022, those bilingual students who failed in grade 4 in 2021 (say, due to extensive absences) had no choice but to join a monolingual class—not an ideal situation from the learning or pedagogical perspective.

The school director felt that many education reforms and laws that had been passed, including bilingual education, were insensitive to communities and schools' preferences. She remarked: 'They ask us to justify why we no longer have bilingual classes. I'm not stopping bilingual for no reason'.

The director listed several reasons why, in recent years, the school had stopped creating new bilingual classes. First, the school gave parents enrolling their children in grade 1 a choice regarding monolingual or bilingual teaching—many parents simply did not choose bilingual. Second, if there were not enough children enrolling in grade 1 for the school to form two classes, given the class size criteria set by the district, only a single monolingual class was formed. This had been the case in the previous two years despite the district recommendation to prioritize bilingual teaching. Third, the school suffered from a lack of teaching staff. Lastly, some families in the school's

catchment area spoke a different local language from the one used in the school's bilingual programme.

To sum up, bilingual education had lost popularity among parents and guardians in school 3, while class size requirements set by the district also worked in favour of monolingual classes. Moreover, teaching staff was in short supply, and bilingual education was complicated by the fact that more than one local language was spoken in the area. All these reasons contributed to the waning interest in bilingual education.

School 4

School 4 also offered bilingual education in three grades (grades 4, 5, and 6) out of a total of ten classes. Notably, there were no monolingual classes for these three grades, only bilingual classes. According to the school director, parents and guardians had been receptive to bilingual education. He said: 'Some parents had initially thought that bilingual education was learning in the local language only. After having explained that bilingualism combined the two languages, parents themselves gave examples of the education system in South Africa, where local languages are prioritized'.

More recently, however, parents have preferred monolingual classes when given the choice. As the total enrolment in grade 1 did not allow two classes to be formed, grades 1, 2, and 3 followed the monolingual programme.

In this school, teachers who were assigned to bilingual classes were all native speakers of the local language. But like elsewhere, teaching and learning materials were either not available or distributed late in the school year. According to the director, there were errors in the local language manuals but teachers often solved these problems themselves.

In sum, despite its earlier successes, bilingual education had lost momentum in school 4. Constraints were much the same as in the other schools: that is, parents and guardians' preferences for Portuguese only, class size requirements, scarcity of resources and materials, and lack of teacher training in bilingual education.

4.3 Teachers' experiences and beliefs

Teacher training (and their own L1)

Many teachers reported that they had received no pre-service training in bilingual education. While some had attended short in-service training courses, many others had no training at all. Some also mentioned that ADPP Mozambique, an NGO, had provided both in-service training in bilingual education and local language teaching materials in the past.

A bilingual teacher who had spent nearly two decades in the teaching profession, shared her experience in an interview:

My training to teach in Xichangana lasted for three days. I don't even speak Xichangana but Xirhonga. Yet, I teach children to read, write and count in Xichangana. Initially, it was a challenge, but I got used to it. Later on, I was trained to train other teachers. But we have to teach bilingual classes without any materials. If only I had a syllabus! The only thing I have is a grade 4 Xichangana book which I got from another school to see what was going on. (Bilingual teacher interview)

Contrary to this teacher's experience, many others found it difficult, if not impossible, to work in a local language that they could not read and write well or even speak in formal contexts such as in the classroom.

Learning and teaching materials

Practically every teacher raised lack of local language teaching and learning materials as a major constraint. A bilingual teacher explained:

I don't have any resource materials for bilingual education. Last year, I only had a brochure as the actual material never arrived. At some point I used grade 4 resources which had arrived towards the end of the school year. It is the only resource that I have even now. (Bilingual teacher interview)

This quote concretely captures the mismatch between the pace of policy reforms and implementation. In terms of supplying human and material resources, the education system is not able to keep up with the fast-moving reform agenda.

Another teacher who was in charge of distribution of books within his school was concerned about the quality of the content of bilingual books, which was poor in his view. Some books mixed two different local languages (Xirhonga and Xichangana). He speculated that this could have arisen because the content creators themselves were speakers of both languages and, therefore, were not always able to separate the two languages.

Beliefs about language

A number of teachers were in favour of monolingual (Portuguese-only) education. They considered the local language as a resource to be used when students did not understand what was being said or asked in Portuguese. Classroom observations revealed that, in some cases, 'translanguaging' was routine—that is, the teacher switched to local language to make sure the students understood the instructions and content. This usually solved the problem (also in Chambo 2018; Chimbutane 2011, 2013, 2021). But there were other cases where the local language was not used at all during the lesson, either because of an explicit monolingual language policy or because students understood Portuguese well. The latter was less likely as, in all four schools, students spoke the local language among themselves.

It is important to note that, even when teachers disagreed with the bilingual education policy, they could hardly avoid using local languages in the classroom due to students' poor command of Portuguese. In practice, translanguaging is often the only way to enable (some) learning. One teacher even remarked that 'monolingual' and 'bilingual' were misleading terms because:

We use all the languages in the classroom, regardless of the programme. I work in a monolingual (Portuguese-only) class but use Xirhonga and Zulu as well. I have three boys in the class who have just arrived from Eswatini and who speak neither Portuguese nor Xirhonga, only Zulu. I have to explain to them in Zulu. I am glad I speak Zulu. (Teacher interview)

However, several classroom observations highlighted a commonly witnessed situation where the local language, even if used as a resource only, was associated with a negative emotion, as illustrated in one of the field reports:¹⁹

The lesson does not flow. Students cannot answer the teacher's questions. The teacher does not 'translanguage' even when she sees that the students don't understand... The teacher walked to a student who was working on his notebook trying to understand the exercise. She explained it to him in Portuguese, but he did

¹⁹ A monolingual grade 2 mathematics lesson.

not understand. Then, in a loud voice, she began to explain in Xichangana. The student answered correctly, but timidly, probably because the teacher had explained the exercise in an aggressive manner. (Field report extract)

In another class, the teacher did most of the talking.²⁰ When she asked students a few questions, it was clear that they had not understood. After repeating a question multiple times without success, the teacher angrily asked it in Xichangana. Everyone raised their hand wanting to answer.

Our evidence on teachers' experiences and beliefs highlights the importance of translanguaging as a communicative and pedagogical strategy in multilingual contexts. Other studies on bilingual education in Mozambique have also shown this (Chambo 2018; Chibutane 2011, 2013, 2021). But the evidence also confirms that teachers—and other actors—can have very different beliefs about its value (Chibutane 2013; Terra 2021).

4.4 How does it all add up?

In our study districts primary schools offered fewer bilingual classes than before—indeed, bilingual education seemed to have lost momentum. Only the largest school offered one bilingual class per grade (from grade 1 to grade 5); the rest were all monolingual (Portuguese-only) classes. The three other schools had not established any bilingual classes in recent years; in higher grades they had one to three bilingual classes per school. While the new strategy encourages gradual expansion of bilingual education throughout the country, in reality the trend seems to be declining.²¹

Our evidence showed that school directors ultimately decided whether or not to form a bilingual class at the beginning of a school year. Their role was decisive for this decision, irrespective of the national policy or district education officers' recommendation. School directors seemed to choose an approach that they felt was appropriate for the local context.

On the demand side parents and guardians were perceived, especially by school directors, not to appreciate (or 'understand') bilingual education. But parents' and guardians' preferences guided school directors' decisions about whether or not to have a bilingual class in grade 1, and their preferences were overwhelmingly in favour of Portuguese-only education.²² Considering the initial enthusiasm for bilingual education when it was first introduced, this drawback could reflect parents' and guardians' perceptions that the monolingual programme is better resourced than the bilingual one (Chibutane 2021).

However, parents' and guardians' preferences could also reflect broader and more fundamental concerns along the lines of a recent study in Zambia. Using hypothetical changes to language policy, Ramachandran and Rauh (2023) elicited preferences, both in a rural and urban setting, for former colonial versus local languages and analysed the perceived costs of and returns to different language policies.²³ Specifically, they examined beliefs regarding schooling outcomes, income, and social cohesion. Their results showed overwhelming support for the former colonial language as the official language—English in Zambia. This was despite the fact that interviewees reported

²⁰ Bilingual grade 4 natural science lesson taught in Portuguese.

²¹ However, in Nampula and Zambézia provinces, where the large USAID project *Vamos Ler!* has been operating, the number of bilingual classes is increasing.

²² It is important to note, however, that our study focused on schools and local government education offices and did not solicit views from parents and guardians.

²³ Their survey method was built on Attanasio (2009) and Delavande (2014) regarding eliciting beliefs in developing countries.

greater proficiency in another indigenous language (apart from their mother tongue) than in English. Preferences for English were not correlated with socioeconomic status.

Only 28 per cent of the individuals in the Zambian sample believed that it was easier for students to learn mathematics in their mother tongue than in English, even if less than 2 per cent of Zambians speak English as their first language and only 26 per cent as their second language. Respondents expected that earnings would be reduced by more than 30 per cent if education were provided in a local language but administration and jobs remained in English. Over 80 per cent said that designating one ethnic group's language as official would result in other groups facing discrimination in the job market. These perceived costs and benefits help explain, in part, the preference for English.

While the scope of the Zambia study was much broader and did not elicit beliefs and preferences about bilingual education—a model where mother tongue is intensively used only in early grades as the official language is being learned—its findings resonate well with our indirect evidence. According to most interviewees, Mozambican parents and guardians preferred monolingual (Portuguese-only) education. These preferences may also be associated with misunderstandings about the bilingual programme, which is sometimes assumed to be offered in local language only, but also with the perception that the programme is under-resourced compared to the monolingual (Portuguese-only) programme (Chimbutane 2021).

On the supply side—the focus of our study—there were several key findings regarding teachers. First, pre-service teacher training in bilingual education was almost completely lacking. Sporadic in-service training courses had been offered, mostly by an NGO. Enthusiasm for bilingual education among teachers seemed to be waning. Yet there were still teachers willing to take on bilingual classes and to stay with them throughout primary school. Many bilingual teachers also demonstrated a real ability to adjust to the task despite the lack of training and resources. Many monolingual teachers demonstrated remarkable flexibility too, using whatever language was needed to help learners understand the lessons.

At the same time there were many classroom teachers who did not hide their negative attitude towards using the local language in teaching, even if only as a resource in a monolingual class. This finding was consistent with those by Chimbutane (2013) and Terra (2021), based on data collected a decade earlier. In other words little seems to have changed in terms of many teachers' beliefs and attitudes as also confirmed by Chimbutane (2021).

Teacher deployment policies did not always take the needs of bilingual education into account. There were cases where teachers did not speak the local language used in the school where they were teaching. In these cases teacher deployment worked against bilingual education, creating incoherence within the education system.

Educational resources and materials in local languages were either totally lacking at the school level or in extremely short supply. Without exception all the school directors and teachers we interviewed raised this problem. The same concerns were expressed in the 2000s and 2010s as reported in the previous studies (Chimbutane 2011; Ngunga et al. 2010; Terra 2021). In addition materials had quality issues. There was also a sense that inferior resourcing compared to monolingual (Portuguese-only) education contributed to the fading enthusiasm for bilingual education. One would have to go beyond the frontline, i.e. schools and districts, to examine the production and delivery chains of local language materials to understand why this problem has persisted for a long time. The large number of local languages in the programme (16) could be a factor.

In terms of the district's role, class size requirements came up several times as a reason why so few bilingual classes were formed. When enrolment was not adequate for two classes (i.e. less than 70

students enrolling in grade 1), typically only a monolingual class was formed despite the district's recommendation to prioritize bilingual classes.

As discussed earlier, the new bilingual education strategy (MINEDH 2019) recognizes most, if not all, of the persistent problems our study identified. They seem to be well known. The strategy paper also lists the remedies required to address them, particularly at the school level. But what is less clear is how education policy makers intend to ensure that these remedies are actually implemented.

All told, while local government education officers recommend bilingual education, their recommendation has had little impact. The same officers have been unable to procure basic teaching and learning materials for the schools—these resources were sorely lacking in the classroom. School directors, who make the final decisions in practice, expect guidance and support from the district but, in their experience, these have fallen short. Teachers lack both pre-service and in-service training in bilingual education and are truly frustrated by the persistent absence of teaching and learning materials. Teacher deployment and class size requirements are not coherent with the bilingual education programme, undermining its implementation.

Based on our evidence, implementation of the new bilingual expansion strategy and its coherence with the rest of the education system and reform agenda merit a much more detailed focus than has been the case so far. Efforts are needed both on the demand and supply sides.

5 Education reforms beyond (but related to) language

This section summarizes our findings on the implementation of recent education reforms on the frontline—schools and local government education offices—beyond the language of instruction but related to bilingual education and its implementation.

5.1 The new structure of basic education

As discussed in section 1, basic education in Mozambique has been in the process of restructuring since 2018. It consists now of nine grades—six grades of primary (instead of seven grades as in the past) and three grades of lower secondary (as previously). In line with this reform, since 2023, grade 7 has been a part of lower secondary school. While this may appear like a relatively small change, our interviews and participant observations indicated that the reform is already affecting schools, teachers, and students in numerous ways. For example, will there be enough secondary school places available?

There was a group of teachers for whom this reform was a major issue—the subject teachers. Upper grades of primary school (EP2, especially grades 6 and 7 in the old system) have traditionally had specialized subject teachers. In the new structure primary schools will only have classroom teachers who teach all subjects. This may complicate bilingual classroom teachers' work too, as they can no longer rely on subject teachers in upper primary grades.

Teachers also expressed their concerns about a proposal to incorporate natural science and visual education in the final (end-of-primary) maths exam, while social science and other subjects would be incorporated in the Portuguese language exam. Most teachers and school directors thought that the proposal was completely impractical.

A lack of teaching and learning materials is not only a problem in bilingual education but it seemed to have a demoralizing effect on teachers across the board as implementation is not able to keep up with the fast pace of policy reforms.

A teacher attending a training event remarked: ‘Teachers don’t follow reforms. Constant lack of materials, such as textbooks, teacher manuals and syllabi, are reasons for this resistance’.

Another teacher with long teaching experience said: ‘These are responsibilities of our leaders. They have sat down, analysed, and decided what has to be accomplished. We don’t have a say. We can only comply’.

5.2 Ongoing curriculum revisions

During the two in-service training days for grade 6 teachers, it became clear that the teachers’ questions had less to do with grade 6 curriculum revisions (the topic of the training events) than with other reforms underway. Together with interviews the in-service training events revealed that teachers’ concerns focused on:

- semi-automatic promotion or progression within (the two primary) cycle;
- the removal of some subjects such as English and music education; and
- the mismatch between the revised curriculum and what was actually going on in schools.

A teacher’s remark summed up some of the frustration participants in the training events felt: ‘The problem is that they design curricula and other reforms without consulting us and then want us to implement them’.

5.3 Semi-automatic promotion

As mentioned earlier, teachers were concerned about the semi-automatic promotion. What this means in practice is that, within the two primary cycles, promotion to the next grade is independent of the students’ grades and that students can only be held back at the end of each cycle after a final evaluation. If a student were to be held back within a cycle, the teacher needed to present a justification to the school director and, if necessary, to the district administration. A teacher summarized her experience as follows: ‘At the end of the year the director, nevertheless, tells me that the students should be promoted’.

The final evaluation at the end of grade 3 is developed at the ZIP level,²⁴ while the final evaluation at the end of primary school (grade 6) is national. In both the bilingual and monolingual streams, every student is expected to have developed basic competencies in reading, writing, and numeracy, which are tested in the national exams in Portuguese and mathematics.

The student evaluation plan calls for the teachers to keep a performance booklet to assess their students throughout the school year. However, such performance booklets—or any other student evaluation tools—did not feature at all in either bilingual or monolingual education during our classroom and stakeholder observations or interviews. In the two in-service training events, several teachers confirmed that they were not assessing students.

School directors were clearly in favour of students not repeating classes. In their view the problem was with teachers who did not evaluate students adequately. This was particularly the case if the teacher rotated to another school where there was little information about the students for the new teacher. In the directors’ experience parents and guardians did not accept repetition, but ‘remained distant’ as there was little interaction between home and school—which would have been critical, especially when students had difficulties.

²⁴ ZIP or *Zona de Influência Pedagógica* is a school cluster zone which groups together schools that are geographically close to each other for pedagogical support to teachers.

In an in-service training event a teacher asked: ‘Last year I was assigned to a class in which the students did not know how to read and write. What should I do, knowing that we have the syllabus to follow?’

A trainer answered:

There is no justification for students to reach grade 6 without the expected competencies. You need to use exams. Have you been looking for the best strategies for each situation to help you solve these problems? Have you been talking to colleagues? You can find solutions yourselves. You are not obliged to follow the programme to the letter; it is only for guidance. (Trainer at in-service training event)

The teacher’s response underscored the competing pressures:

After I spoke to the school director, I was told to work on reading and writing. However, after some time the school director questioned why I was not following the curriculum. If I am disobeying the curriculum, will there not be sanctions when the inspector arrives at the school? (Teacher at in-service training event)

Indeed, semi-automatic promotion came across as a contentious issue. Teachers face much pressure from all corners—district education officers, school directors, and parents and guardians—to promote all learners to the next grade whether or not they master the curriculum, or whether they can even read and write at all. As highlighted by the extremely poor national learning results at the end of grade 3 (summarized in section 1), mastering foundational skills seems to be losing out under these pressures to promote every student. Student evaluation policy and practice left many questions unanswered—according to both teachers and school directors, such evaluation is not being done. National policy on evaluation or how it is addressed in teacher training was also unclear. Solving the issues around semi-automatic promotion and student evaluation could help, in part, to address the lack of student learning in Mozambique.

5.4 Textbooks

Textbooks, together with other resources and materials including those for bilingual education, featured prominently in our interviews and classroom and stakeholder observations. Textbooks are being revised because of the ongoing curriculum reform. This section summarizes the findings regarding textbooks in Mozambican primary schools, both in Portuguese and local language.

Monolingual textbooks are printed outside of the country (India) and then sent directly to various Mozambican ports (south, centre, and north of the country). They are distributed by provinces to the districts. It is then left to the districts to distribute the books further to the schools. Bilingual textbooks and learning materials are produced in Mozambique and also distributed by the districts to the schools.

As it was early in the school year, district officers were busy distributing available textbook to the schools during our field work. One of the districts took advantage of all the school directors attending a briefing in the district education office: officers handed books to directors as per their requests to take back to their schools, recording the information in a spreadsheet. In the other district, instead, education technicians had prepared a spreadsheet with the number of books allocated to each school beforehand. As textbooks were arriving late in the districts, many school directors frequently visited the district office in search of textbooks.

According to a district chief of general education, new textbooks for grade 6, which reflected the revised curriculum, were much delayed. In 2021 the district had received new grade 5 textbooks

only when the school year was almost over. This was also expected to be the case in 2022 for grade 6 textbooks.

School directors repeatedly requested teachers' manuals, only to be told that MINEDH no longer issued them and that schools were supposed to purchase teacher manuals themselves.

Classroom observations confirmed that many students had no or very few textbooks. Often the teacher was the only one with a book. The teacher then wrote long sections from the book on the blackboard or circulated it around the classroom to show students pictures of the topic they were learning about.

In one school parents and guardians organized a special meeting with the classroom teacher on how best to ensure that the students would have access at least to the Portuguese textbook, which was perceived as top priority by parents and guardians.

In another case the district had delivered textbooks for bilingual education in grades 1 and 2. However, as there was no storage available at the school, the books were transported to a nearby teacher training institute for storage, which meant that they were not easily available for students. Sometimes printing was of poor quality. According to one teacher: 'The paper is very light and easily tears. The glue they use seems to burn the paper; after a while, the pages come loose'.

In another school a teacher who was in charge of textbooks distributed them first to parents and guardians, who were requested to cover them and then return them to the school. This was in an effort to make books last longer.

A school director summed up his frustration about the curriculum reform which required new textbooks:

It's worrying what is happening in education. Today one reform is introduced, and tomorrow it is changed for another just when the teachers are beginning to get a handle on the first one. For example, a grade 3 textbook was introduced a few years ago, but it is no longer valid. Before the teachers had mastered its content, it was no longer in use. It seems that, as a country, we are not ready to decide what we really want. (School director interview)

Indeed, our evidence indicates that frequent education reforms and their lack of internal coherence represent a fundamental conundrum to the education system in Mozambique. As we have seen, frontline actors in education are constantly required to adapt to these changes. There is little time to learn from the previous experiences. In addition to internal political and administrative dynamics, competing agendas from numerous external partners add to this situation.

6 Summary, conclusions, and a way forward for research

Mozambique has expanded its education system vastly in the last 25 years, but the country faces a 'learning crisis'—using UNESCO's terminology—as many students leave primary school without foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. The government has made continuous efforts to reform the education system in order to improve learning outcomes. Over the years its development partners have added their own preferences and advice to the mix. Numerous overlapping reforms have not always been internally coherent. Instead, they have often undermined one another.

Many studies have established (quantitatively) that teacher quality matters for learning. Out of all observable characteristics, teacher content knowledge has most consistently had a positive impact on student achievement. Most of these studies, however, have been conducted in high-income

countries. A recent study in Mozambique, a low-income country, using nationally representative school survey data found that students whose first language was Portuguese were indeed able to benefit markedly from their teachers' content knowledge. But for the average—local language speaking—primary school pupils the impact of their teacher's content knowledge was negligible. The fact that a large majority of primary school students, especially in rural areas, must learn in Portuguese—a language that they are not familiar with before entering school—is suggested to be one of the reasons for the 'learning crisis'.

An experiment with bilingual education in the 1990s in Mozambique demonstrated positive results for students. This encouraged the government to introduce a bilingual education alternative in 2003, with early grades using the local language while learning Portuguese. Subsequent qualitative evidence has highlighted a supportive and communicative learning environment in local language teaching as compared to Portuguese-only classes. But research has also highlighted implementation problems adversely affecting bilingual education. These include a chronic absence of standardized local language resources and materials, and teachers resisting the bilingual model and introducing Portuguese language sooner than expected. This is not unique to Mozambique and there are similar findings from other countries in Africa as well.

A study on Uganda is particularly relevant to Mozambique (Altinyelken et al. 2014). It highlighted the critical assumptions behind the early-exit model. These include an assumption that the second language (L2; English in Uganda) can be taught and learned as a subject in lower primary grades so that students can make the transition into L2 instruction in grade 4. The study found that Ugandan pupils did not have proficiency in English by grade 4 as envisaged by policy makers. Teachers pointed to problems such as high student absenteeism, large classes, hunger, disease, and lack of teaching and learning materials.

Moreover, the early-exit model assumed that teachers themselves had a good command of L2, knew children's first language, and had adequate knowledge of how to teach L2, which is a specialized field. These assumptions did not hold true in rural areas. Instead, they created many language barriers as students moved from lower primary to upper primary.

The Ugandan situation rings true in Mozambique too. Mozambican pupils do not have proficiency in L2 by the time they are expected to transition (even if gradually) to L2 instruction, now starting at grade 3. This is confirmed by the most recent national test where 95 per cent of grade 3 pupils did not master their curriculum in reading and writing in Portuguese.

The purpose of this 'policy ethnographic' study was to obtain a current picture of the scale-up of bilingual education as well as of the implementation of related education reforms on the frontline. Specifically, we explored bilingual education and other key reforms, with a focus on local-level actors—district education officers, school directors, and teachers. We explored options available to them, constraints they faced, and behaviours they exhibited. One of the contributions of this study, compared to earlier ones, is its explicit focus on the role of school directors and district education officers (in addition to teachers) as important local actors in the education system.

In our study area—the Manhiça and Matutuine districts in Maputo province—primary schools offer fewer bilingual classes today than in the past. Indeed, bilingual education seems to have lost momentum. According to the national policy, district education officers are required to recommend bilingual classes, but they appear to have had little influence on the ground. Instead, school directors were the ones who ultimately decided whether or not to create a bilingual class at the beginning of the school year. School directors in turn felt a strong pressure from parents and guardians whose preferences were to enrol their children in monolingual (Portuguese-only) classes.

Some school directors argued that misunderstanding about what bilingual education was actually like was common and, therefore, this could explain some of the resistance. As was the case in Uganda regarding English (Altinyelken et al. 2014), there seemed to be a common misconception

that using Portuguese as the only language of instruction was the best way to learn it as a second language.

In the view of school directors, a massive community engagement effort would be required to change parents' and guardians' perceptions. As discussed throughout the paper, community resistance could also be triggered by the perception that the bilingual programme is under-resourced compared to the monolingual programme, and thus less likely to harness linguistic and cultural resources that would allow their children's academic progress and future socioeconomic mobility. Sociocultural gains associated with the acquisition and preservation of local languages is not likely to be enough to sustain bilingual education if it does not also equip the students for success in the labour market and beyond. This was shown to be the case in a recent *Zambian study* (Ramachandran and Rauh 2023), although it did not focus on bilingual education as such.

Regarding teachers, pre-service training in bilingual education continued to be lacking—not much change there to the past. No teacher had specialized training in teaching a second language. Enthusiasm for bilingual education among teachers seemed to be waning too. Yet there were still teachers willing to take on bilingual classes and to stay with them throughout primary school. Many bilingual teachers also demonstrated a real ability to adjust despite the lack of training and resources, while many monolingual teachers demonstrated remarkable flexibility, using whatever language was needed to help learners.

But there were many classroom teachers who did not hide their negative attitude towards local language teaching, even if only as a resource in Portuguese-only classes. Little seems to have changed in terms of beliefs and attitudes. As before, teacher deployment across the country did not always take the needs of bilingual education into account as there were teachers who did not speak the local language used in the school where they were teaching.

Educational resources and materials in local languages continued to be in extremely short supply. Without exception, school directors and teachers raised this as a constraint. The same concerns had already been expressed in the 2000s and 2010s as reported in previous studies. There was also a sense that inferior resourcing compared to monolingual (Portuguese-only) education could be a contributing factor in the diminishing interest in bilingual education.

Implementation falling short of the expectations explains, at least in part, why many teachers, parents, guardians, and others tend to prefer the monolingual programme and why, in many communities where bilingual education is well received and even demanded, popular enthusiasm is on the wane.

Finally, one of the purposes of this study was to identify policy-relevant research questions for focused (mostly quantitative) analyses to help in scaling up bilingual education and considerably improve its implementation on the ground. We believe that bilingual education, if it can be made coherent with the rest of the education system and resourced adequately, offers a real potential to improve student learning.

The following ideas for future research questions emerged from the study:

- Explore the demand side of primary education at the school/local level, i.e. perceptions and beliefs of parents and guardians, communities, and local politicians, using a qualitative approach as in this study which covered the supply side. Is there a misconception that the best way to learn Portuguese is to use it as the language of instruction from grade 1? Is bilingual education perceived to be poorly resourced compared to monolingual classes?;
- Assess policies and practices of community engagement on bilingual education, particularly various efforts and approaches underway to step it up, and generate quasi-

experimental or experimental evidence of their impact on local language teaching and student learning;

- Given their critical role as demonstrated by this study, assess different approaches to support school directors in a more systematic way and generate quasi-experimental or experimental evidence of the impact of this support on local language teaching and student learning. This could include exploring recent policy changes regarding the role of school directors or interventions such as coaching, peer learning, or more structured interactions with local government education officials;
- Assess (radically) new ways to provide improved resources and materials in local languages—faster and wider—and analyse quasi-experimental or experimental evidence on the impact of these measures on local language teaching and student learning; and
- Test various student evaluation tools available for bilingual education teachers, incentivize teachers to use them, and generate quasi-experimental or experimental evidence of their impact on local language teaching and student learning.

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