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"School-level politics, zones of mediation and the struggle for equity - minded change in South African schools: the case of a Gonubie primary school."

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ABSTRACT:

Issues of controversy at school level have often taken the form of admission problems, school fee conflicts, differences over discipline, and so forth. As of late, however, school level struggles have taken a new turn with the development of a new curriculum policy, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, CAPS, (2011). The key issue at play is that of language, particularly the first additional language. Language in education has been an especially difficult focal point as it has been a key political issue in South African education for the past two hundred years. From the inception of formal education and English with the missionaries, up to learner protests over Bantu Education's choice of Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching (Kallaway 1986, p.20).

As a result after the first democratic elections in 1994 and the second in 1999, widespread concerns with issues of redress and equity in education were expressed. This is particularly the case as schools are powerful generators, justifiers and transmitters of race, gender and class bias thoughts, actions and identities. Therefore the challenge is to shift the 'roles, rules, social character and functioning of schools' (Nkomo, Chisholm & McKinney, 2004:3) and stimulate new ways of being, thinking and practicing that are in keeping with ideals of equity and justice as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

The purpose of this study then, is to contribute to an understanding of the localised patterns of political conflict over language. Thus this research proposal will make use of a school as an instance in which problems of this nature are being experienced. In the case of Gonubie Primary School, parents with children enrolled in the Foundation Phase, learnt for the first time in a CAPS assessment meeting, that the Department of Education required a First Additional Language as part of the new syllabus (2011). The issue of concern necessitating the meeting stems from the fact that Gonubie Primary School had decided on and adopted Afrikaans as their first additional language, without duly consulting the parents (*Sunday Times*, January 2011). This decision was effective as of January 2012, and its consequences have been that Afrikaans was introduced from Grade 1 as the school's official First Additional

Language and that any learner who fails Afrikaans will repeat that grade, no matter how well they do in all other subjects (*Sunday Times*, January 2011).

Whilst this may have been a completely justifiable curriculum policy decision, it had an unanticipated consequence for a small group of Quintile Five English home language schools. Over the past fifteen years, privileged public schools such Parkview Junior Primary in Johannesburg and Grove Primary School in Cape Town had begun teaching two additional languages in the Foundation Phase. In Johannesburg, the two additional languages tended to be Afrikaans and isiZulu, in the Western Cape it was Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Although teaching of these additional languages was often limited to the oral language, i.e. listening and speaking by Grade Three some reading and writing had begun to be introduced.

The decision taken by the Gonubie Primary School stakeholders is considered most unfair for many reasons, one being that firstly this is a primary school based in the Eastern Cape which caters to many Xhosa First Language speakers for whom learning Afrikaans in addition to English for the first time will be an enormous task. Secondly as the parents of such learners were not considered when this significant decision was taken, it cannot be considered as having the best interests of all learners [who make up the school] as the foremost priority. Since this school has brought the issue of the first additional language policy to light, other schools in other provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal have come to the fore with their concerns regarding the fairness of such decisions.