

# Public perception of early childhood language policy in Ghana: an exploratory study

Joyce Esi Bronteng, Ilene R. Berson & Michael J. Berson

To cite this article: Joyce Esi Bronteng, Ilene R. Berson & Michael J. Berson (2019) Public perception of early childhood language policy in Ghana: an exploratory study, *Early Years*, 39:3, 310-325, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2019.1631759](https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2019.1631759)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2019.1631759>



Published online: 18 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 229



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Public perception of early childhood language policy in Ghana: an exploratory study

Joyce Esi Bronteng<sup>a</sup>, Ilene R. Berson <sup>b</sup> and Michael J. Berson <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana; <sup>b</sup>College of Education, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA

### ABSTRACT

This article explores current public perceptions in Ghana about the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP), a mother tongue-based bilingual medium of instruction (MTB-BMol) policy for early childhood education. The researchers conducted an exploratory study of public reactions towards the Minister for Education's statement on revamping the program made at the Shared Prosperity Forum held in Accra, Ghana. The article includes an overview of the history of early childhood education language of instruction (LoI) in Ghana and the rationale for the NALAP. Conversations with education officers and parents about their views on the NALAP were analyzed. The findings reflect strong negative feelings about the program among many Ghanaians who express a preference for English-only LoI. The paper discusses the importance of bilingual LoI in early childhood as well as the need to obtain public support, especially among parents, to facilitate full implementation of the program in Ghana. Recommendations for public engagement are proposed.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 June 2018  
Accepted 11 June 2019

### KEYWORDS

Language policy; mother tongue-based bilingual medium of instruction (MTB-BMol); early childhood; Ghana

## Introduction

Language represents a primary modality for communication, and thus plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process (ADEA 2004, 2017; Ouane and Glanz 2010; Shin et al. 2015). Quality education is best achieved when it is transmitted in a language familiar to the learners (Castro, Ayankoya, and Kasprzak 2011; Han 2012; UNESCO 2016; Zepeda, Castro, and Cronin 2011). As a result, researchers suggest that the choice of language of instruction and language policy in schools, especially in the early years, is critical for achieving educational outcomes (Littlewood and Yu 2011; Ouane and Glanz 2010; Shin et al. 2015; Trudell 2016; UNESCO 2016).

Many children throughout the continent of Africa have continued to receive instruction in an unfamiliar language, leading to discontinuities between home and school contexts and gaps in learning outcomes (African Union 2016). To address these educational challenges, regional policies have reiterated a commitment to indigenous languages in early years education. The 2017 triennale convening of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa affirmed that 'learners, especially in basic and

preschool education, literacy and non-formal education produce best results when the teaching is done in the mother tongue or in the language they understand better' (ADEA 2017, 36). The recommendations of the 2018 Pan-African High Level Conference on Education similarly promoted local languages in instruction and asserted that 'children must be taught in a language they can understand' (African Union 2018, 11).

Ghana is among the nations that has had a contentious history regarding language of instruction (LoI) in early childhood. The republic of Ghana in West Africa is situated along the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. Ghana is made up of different ethnic groups, including Akan, Ga-Dangme, Guan, Ewe, Mole-Dagbane, etc. (Ansah 2014), and there are over 46 languages spoken throughout the nation. Prior to the current language policy, when children enrolled in formal education at primary one, they learned English, the official language of the nation and the language of the colonial masters who historically governed the nation. Throughout the nation's history there has been a long struggle between the use of English-only medium of instruction and mother tongue-based bilingual medium of instruction (MTB-BMol) with English-only receiving higher preference (Edu-Buandoh and Otchere 2012; Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond 2011) since the advent of formal education (Opoku-Amankwa, Edu-Buandoh, and Brew-Hammond 2015; Owu-Ewie 2006). In Ghana, typically when there is a change in government there is often a change in the early childhood education language policy (Adika 2012). The only early childhood education language policy that has survived three different successive governments is the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) that was implemented in the 2009/2010 academic year and remains in effect.

Ghana implemented the NALAP language policy to help curb alarming early language and literacy development issues that negatively affected learners as they advanced the educational ladder. A large proportion of children struggled to read any words written in English, the language of instruction. Most learners not only had difficulty with reading and writing but also performed poorly when solving basic numeracy problems even after completion of their basic education, hence the introduction of the MTB-BMol (MoE 2006). An MTB-BMol uses a language in which the learner is proficient to teach beginning literacy (reading and writing) and curricular content subjects such as math, social studies and science. The first/home languages (L1s) are mostly used in the early years during which the second language (L2) is introduced to learners and gradually used alongside the L1 as the instructional medium (MoE/USAID 2010). This systematic process begins with oral communication, so that learners can transfer literacy and knowledge from the familiar language to the learning of the new language(s). The process of transition usually begins whenever the learner is ready, depending on how much second or third language he or she has acquired.

Empirical studies of multilingual societies have demonstrated the viability and efficacy of MTB-BMol (Brock-Utne 2007, 2010; He 2012; Limon and Lukanovič 2016; Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele 2016; Seid 2019; Trudell 2007, 2009; UNESCO 2016). For instance, in studies conducted in Tanzania (Brock-Utne 2007) and Kenya (Hungu et al. 2018), researchers concluded that students who received instruction in Kiswahili (a local, national language) comprehended instruction better than students taught in English only in the secondary school and preprimary, respectively. Similarly, Seid's study of Ethiopia (2019) found that primary school students' initial instruction in the mother tongue resulted in better outcomes in mathematics and overall academic success when students transitioned to English instruction. Alongside the provision of comprehensible

education delivered in an indigenous language, MTB-BMol fosters family-school connections that honor students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Caffery, Coronado, and Hodge 2016; Swadener et al. 2013; Taylor 2009).

Despite the overall benefits, researchers have also identified potential implementation barriers associated with mother tongue education (MTE) that have led to failures in the national scale-up of programs (Piper et al. 2018). Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele (2016) randomized control study in Kenya explored real world implementation of mother-tongue and English-based instruction in primary 1 and 2 classes, assessing students' literacy outcomes. They noted that students receiving the Mother-tongue based treatment who were taught in English and Kiswahili showed improvement in oral reading fluency and reading comprehension; however, despite evidence of improved mother tongue literacy outcomes, diffusion of successful pilot programs in Kenya is continuously plagued by inconsistent implementation.

Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele (2016, 2018) assert that implementation is weakened when expectations for educational outcomes in oral reading fluency are not clearly communicated and monitored. Resistance to MTE by key stakeholders (i.e. educators, families, and community leaders) may emanate from beliefs about how best to prepare students for the future and ensure their readiness for careers in a global marketplace where English is privileged as the language of commerce. Even when teachers are receptive to MTE, they require professional development for implementation success and resources that support and align with the educational outcome goals. Poorly communicated policies and insufficient resources exacerbate logistical constraints. Many teachers lack requisite English language skills to deliver quality instruction, suggesting that teachers' English use/proficiency may be a critical barrier to students' academic outcomes. Moreover, teachers may lack language proficiency in the mother tongue implemented in the curriculum. This mismatch is pervasive in language heterogeneous regions that face difficulties in choosing an appropriate local language for instruction since they serve children from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Given the implementation challenges embedding indigenous languages into the school curriculum, for such MolS to thrive and achieve their purpose in a highly multilingual nation such as Ghana, with English as its official language, it is important to educate the general public to whom the policy will apply, such as parents, and also train teachers adequately to win their support before the roll out (Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele 2016; Piper et al. 2018; Trudell 2007). Due to the heavy colonial language influence on former colonized nations like Ghana, most citizens tend to prefer the specific colonial language (Edu-Buandoh and Otchere 2012; Owu-Ewie 2006). As a result, public sensitization is crucial to the success of MTB-BMol implementation.

Nevertheless, these key stakeholders in education (i.e. parents and teachers) are often neglected when it comes to Mol planning and implementation. The key concern of this article is to examine the perceptions and perspectives of the Ghanaian public regarding NALAP to inform policy decisions that help promote the full implementation of the program.

### **Why NALAP?**

In Ghana, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the choice of appropriate Mol in the early childhood level of education, which pre-dates the nation's independence. The

opposing views have focused on whether the nation's Mol in early childhood education (KG1 through Grade 3) should be English-only or MTB-BMol (Adika 2012; Edu-Buandoh and Otchere 2012; Owu-Ewie 2006; Owusu-Ansah and Torto 2013). NALAP was enacted to help curb the consistently poor performance of primary school students on the National Education Assessment (NEA) and School Education Assessment (SEA) over the last decade (MoE 2006, MoE 2008; MoE/USAID 2009; MoE 2016). To ensure that students establish the foundational skills needed for subsequent academic success, the Minister of Education implemented NALAP nationally in the 2009/2010 academic year after a pilot study conducted in the Ga-West and Mfantseman districts yielded positive results. The students in the pilot programs were able to achieve literacy proficiency in both English and the chosen local language and retain understanding of other content subjects after 3 years (Darvas and Balwanz 2014).

The NALAP supports a quasi late-exit transitional approach to BMol. Implementation is intended to promote a smooth transition of students' heritage language to the school's English language instruction, thereby enhancing students' early literacy acquisition and subsequently optimizing success in school (UNESCO 2016). The policy specifies that a familiar local language (i.e. the most common Ghanaian language in the school's community) is used for initial academic instruction during the first five years of schooling (from Kindergarten to Primary 3), and teachers introduce children to English language (L2) as part of the curriculum. Then from Primary 4 upwards, the Mol transitions to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMol) for the rest of the child's education. Even though there are over 46 languages spoken in Ghana, only 11 major languages (Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, Dagaare, Dagbani, Dangme, Ewe, Fante, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, and Nzema) have been selected to be used alongside English language for the NALAP. That is, in all the 16 regions in Ghana, schools can select any one of these languages in addition to English for its Mol, depending on its location and learners' proficiency in the language. For instance, schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis, a predominantly Fante speaking area, typically combine Ewe and English within their MTB-BMol. It is in these languages that early childhood education textbooks, teaching and learning materials, and other instructional resources have been prepared.

The goal of NALAP is two-fold. First, the policy ensures that young learners are gradually and smoothly transitioned into the EMol in the upper primary grades and beyond (MoE/USAID 2010). The second goal is to preserve the cultural heritage of the learners and fulfill the learner's fundamental right stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It is envisaged that if the policy is well implemented, it would facilitate functional academic success and foster heritage pride, which in turn would promote patriotism in the citizenry (EQUALL 2010; MoE/USAID 2010; Seidu et al. 2008).

Test results on the National Education Assessment (NEA) 'revealed that most pupils across Ghana's public schools were finishing P2 without even basic literacy skills, let alone the ability to read with fluency and comprehension' (MoE 2016, 27). To better align the assessment with the nation's language of instruction policy, in 2016 the Ghana Education Service revised the NEA to assess primary students in fourth grade rather than third grade so that the findings would reflect students' English competencies after they fully transitioned to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4 (see Table 1 for comparative NEA results). Although NEA results have revealed an upward trend in the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency, there has been a decline in the proportion of students performing at the minimum

**Table 1.** Percentages of Pupils Meeting Minimum Competency and Proficiency Levels.

	Third Grade/Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Minimum competency	Proficiency	Minimum competency	Proficiency
<b>English</b>				
2005	50.5%	16.4%	63.9%	23.6%
2016	33.5%	37.2%	33.7%	37.9%
<b>Mathematics</b>				
2005	47.2%	18.6%	42.7%	9.8%
2016	32.8%	22.0%	45.9%	24.9%

Sources: MoE (2006) and MoE (2016)

competency level. The majority of primary school students demonstrate a very weak foundation in English literacy, and policymakers have attributed the massive failure to students' inability to read and write in English (MoE 2006; MoE/USAID 2009; MOE 2016). Students' poor performance on the primary school examinations (MoE 2006, 2008, 2016) have had negative repercussions on students' pass-rates on the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), a terminal examination in Junior High School. The BECE determines whether a student may pursue further education; it is a ticket to Senior High education and beyond. Students who fail the BECE bring their education to a premature end.

Even though the components of NALAP (instructional design, public advocacy campaign, policy dialogue, and research) focused on instructional materials, pre- and in-service training of teachers, public education, and allocation of qualified teachers prior to its roll out, it was not devoid of implementation challenges faced by other former colonized countries (Owusu-Ansah and Torto 2013; Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele 2016). Aside from inadequate professional development for teachers that could equip teachers with instructional strategies for classrooms that serve students with diverse linguistic backgrounds and insufficient instructional materials to foster effective instruction, stakeholders' resistance has been a key issue battling the full implementation of the program. As suggested in Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele (2016) study, Ghanaian education stakeholders would need adequate understanding and empirically validated positive outcomes before they would give their maximum support to an MTB-BMol like NALAP.

## Methodology

In this exploratory study, we used both researcher-found and researcher-generated data (Prosser 2010; Rose 2012). To investigate Ghanaian citizens' perspectives and perceptions about NALAP, we analyzed public reactions towards the Minister for Education's statement on supporting full implementation of NALAP, which was delivered at the Shared Prosperity Forum held in Accra, Ghana on 16 October 2015. The purpose for this forum was to assemble relevant national and international stakeholders and high level opinion leaders from both public and private sectors to identify causes for underdevelopment in low- and middle-income countries (such as Ghana) and explore channels by which extreme poverty could be ended by 2030. It was in this context that the Minister, comparing the Ghanaian situation to the situation in countries such as South Korea and Japan, attributed Ghana's underdevelopment issues to the use of English-only medium of instruction in primary schools. Data collected from the four main online news outlets: ghanaweb, graphic.com, MyJoyonline, and vibeghana included online Op-eds with their respective comments from readers. These news outlets

were chosen due their credibility and high patronage as well as wide scope and accessibility. The Minister's statement attracted 11 Op-eds (e.g. Amekudzi 2015; Baffoe and Amoah 2015; Bokor 2015; Duodu 2015; Frazier 2015; "What has language got to do with poverty" 2015) and 566 comments. All the Op-eds were analyzed; however, when the comment section included personal attacks rather than reactions to the policy, these responses were excluded. In all, 487 comments were analyzed.

The researcher-generated data consisted of a structured interview conducted via telephone. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of the interviewees, who included education officers and parents. Selection only included education officers who had received training on the NALAP prior to implementation because they were equipped with the knowledge and skills to support teachers through workshops and school visits. Parents who had their children at the lower primary (KG1–P3) in schools around the Metropolitan enclave were included since teachers in such school were more likely to receive additional training on the program due to proximity. This sampling strategy fostered the selection of participants from diverse L1 backgrounds. In all, 11 people were interviewed; two education officers and 9 parents (6 mothers and 3 fathers) from the Western and Central Regions participated.

### **Analysis**

Rogoff's (2003a, 2003b) socio-cultural theory provided a relevant conceptual lens from which to understand early childhood education as a reflection of the cultures and societies of which it is a part. According to Rogoff (2003a), different socio-cultural groups have unique beliefs and values that are expressed and reflected differently in their educational systems.

In our content analysis of the Op-eds and the interviews, we used both first and second cycle coding methods to extract the emerging themes from the data. In the first cycle coding, we read and re-read all 11 Op-eds with the comments and the interview transcripts. This initial data analysis brought out the broader emerging themes. The second cycle coding assisted us in reducing the data into labels and fine-tuning the organization of the categories into specific themes (Grbich 2013; Saldaña 2015). After generating codes and themes, we extracted the trends and patterns in the data.

### **Limitations**

Despite the qualitative nature of the study, one significant limitation is the small sample size of interviewees and, therefore, the limited representation across the diverse geographic contexts of Ghana. Although interview participants reflected a range of L1 backgrounds, the typicality of the interviewees is unclear, thus potentially limiting the representativeness of the findings. Future studies that expand the sampling area and involve a larger number of participants (including teachers and other key education stakeholders) would capture a wider view of the opinions of the Ghanaian populace and deepen our understanding of the topic.

### **Research findings**

The findings make clear the challenges in realizing the intent of NALAP, even though the policy has survived three successive governments. We highlight the key themes that emerged from our analysis of the Op-eds and stakeholder interviews.

## Op-eds

Out of the 11 Op-eds, only two expressed favorable views toward the NALAP with the remainder of the editorials conveying disparaging remarks regarding the program. The two proponents indicated how the NALAP would foster students' academic success as well as promote national development. One of them made the following assertion to buttress his opinion:

*... as far back as 1872 Arithmetic was taught wholly in Twi and Ewe in the Mission schools. History clearly showed how the products from such schools in the Gold Coast were. Not only were they brilliant, they were patriotic as well. How many Dr. Ephraim Amus do we have today?*

An analysis of the comments submitted by readers in response to the Op-eds indicated a similar trend in that the majority of respondents were opposed to the policy, with only 33 out of 487 supporting the Minister's view. The findings are presented around key themes.

### **Strong language: a surrogate for negative feelings and emotions**

A prominent finding revealed the public's intense negative feelings toward the NALAP policy. Nine Op-eds and 454 comments had language reflecting the heightened emotional state of the writers. The contributors often used pejorative terms to share their level of frustration and disapproval. Several Op-ed titles also reflected harsh sentiments. Examples included:

*English no more the medium of instruction in Ghanaian schools? Crap!!  
Ministry of Education is too important to make capricious decisions.  
The tot, her mother tongue and poverty.*

Almost all the Op-eds included strongly worded submissions with derogatory language in their content and the respective comments they attracted. Even the 2 Op-eds that were in favor of the Minister's proposal attracted comments with condemning statements. Examples of such statements were:

*Failures are always ready to come out with thousands upon thousands of excuses to explain their status ... Our problem is bad leadership. We have leaders who lack vision ... who are criminally wicked by their corrupt nature.*

*I do not think that the Minister of Education gave even one-minute thought to her bizarre wish to conduct our education in local languages. If she had, she would not have considered- much more, come up with this ridiculous and near-insane idea ... Come on Education Minister, be serious!*

*Twi my foot! I will never allow my kids to attend any school that use that language to instruct.*

*This is Stupidity and Idiocy, BLINDNESS! The Minister is not serious.*

*Just one word to encapsulate my revulsion: CRAP!! I hope what the Minister said isn't coming from the government. If it does, woe betide it.*

Words such as 'Stupidity', 'shame' 'fool', 'crap', and even profanities, which are regarded as offensive and therefore rare in typical Ghanaian speech, frequently appeared in the comments. These findings clearly convey the passion of writers on the NALAP and show how emotional some Ghanaians can be when dealing with MTB-MoI issues.



### **Preference for English-only: the golden rule**

A preference for an English-Only Mol emerged as a common theme evident across multiple data sources (9 Op-eds, 454 comments, and 7 parent interviews). Participants overtly and subtly conveyed their aversion for the NALAP and the Minister's decision to revamp the policy. Several comments lamented the improbability of full implementation of the NALAP with some writers using upper case fonts to emphasize their remarks. Examples include:

*Mark my words: Using a local language WILL NOT HAPPEN IN THE NEXT 50 YEARS!  
STOP wasting our time with this idiocy of using local language.  
English must be used! Please for God's sake, don't kill our education.*

*REMOVE THE MINISTER FROM OFFICE ASAP, BEFORE SHE DESTROYS GHANA FOR GOOD. IF PEOPLE WHO THINK THIS WAY ARE IN LEADERSHIP, THEN WHERE CAN WE GO FROM HERE? BACKWARDS. LEARN IN TWI, FANTI, GA, DAGOMBA, FRAFRA, BRONG, HAUSA, EWE, ETC? WHICH ONE IS THE MOTHER TONGUE????*

A few comments that supported the Minister's opinion included:

*This is a good idea which will go a long way to help the development of the nation as the minister has indicated, the whole system of education in Ghana has been chew-pour-pass and forget without a proper understanding of the various concepts thought or learnt.*

*THE BEST STATEMENT AND MOVE MADE BY AN EDUCATED GHANAIAIN IN MORE THAN A DECADE ... NOW LET THE AFRICAN AND GHANAIAIN START REASONING PROPERLY IN THEIR OWN GOD GIVEN LANGUAGE.*

These participants, like the two Op-eds, based their argument on how the MTB-BMol fosters comprehension of instruction and promotes national development. Using a similar tactic found among opponents, proponents often commented in all-capitals to emphasize their points and convey the intensity of their tone.

### **Interviews**

The analysis of the parents' and education officers' interview data also reflected a preference for English-only Mol. Seven of the parent participants (4 mothers and all the 3 fathers) out of the 9 regarded the English-only Mol policy as the panacea for students' academic achievement and connectivity to the outside world. Comments included:

*I prefer English language only because it is a global language. After all, we use Ghanaian language at home, market places and elsewhere. So when they go to school, English should be used so that they would be able to use it. All the textbooks are written in English so what is the essence of wasting their time with the language they already know? (Father interview response)*

*I have already shown my position on this. I want my children to be taught in only English, the global language. (Mother interview response)*

*How can my child go to school and learn the language that will take him nowhere. I sometimes don't understand these policy makers. I will never let my child attend school that will use local languages to teach him. (Mother interview response)*

These excerpts reflect how some participants express clear and firm preferences for English Mol. Though the two Education Officers were in favor of the NALAP, they acknowledged that not all the public schools in their locality use the mandatory MTB-BMol. They acknowledged some parents' strong sentiment in support of English-only instruction and noted that teachers also conveyed negative perceptions about the policy.

### ***Inadequate human and material resources***

The interviewees identified insufficient human and material resources as a key barrier to implementation. During the interviews, the two Education officers indicated that some early childhood education classrooms are being taught by teachers untrained in NALAP due to the transfer of teachers who previously received professional development. The interviews with Education Officers also revealed minimal monitoring of NALAP implementation from the education office inspectorate unit due to logistical challenges, such as inadequate means of transport, stationery, funds for organizing workshops, etc.

'Some of those trained for the program have changed location or are on transfers ... and there are no funds to train those who did not get the opportunity to be trained'

(Education Officer interview response)

Interview participants indicated that teaching and learning resources in the Ghanaian languages were woefully inadequate. Three parents even stated that there are no Ghanaian language books in schools that their children attend.

### ***Inadequate understanding of the NALAP: the fruit of inadequate sensitization***

The interview data indicated that both parents and education officers participants in the study were aware of the NALAP but had scant knowledge about it. When asked to explain what the NALAP was, they gave the full form of the acronym and only said it is the current language policy without explaining the significance of the program. For instance, one officer gave this as her response: '*National Literacy Acceleration Programme. It is the current language policy*'. The other officer who tried to explain it further had this to say:

*National Literacy Acceleration Programme came about as a result of children's inability to write criterion referenced test and school exam assessment. NALAP was introduced to help children in their recognition of words and pronunciation and help them to read better and be fluent in their speech.* (Education Officer Interview response)

When asked about the implementation of the program in their locality, the officers contended that most schools are partially applying NALAP while others completely abandoned it when the teachers who had been trained in the policy were transferred to other school sites. The Education Officers indicated that, apart from the first nationwide workshop that preceded implementation, there had neither been refresher workshops to update teachers' knowledge nor public information campaigns to educate parents about the policy. On the question of whether parents supported the implementation of the NALAP in their locality, this is what one officer said:

*Some parents do support it, but most do not. A few parents do express their interest in the program, reasoning that it shows the respect we have for our Ghanaian culture and languages. Parents who are not in favor and can afford to do so remove their children from the public schools to private schools where their children would be taught with only English. Those who can't afford to move them complain that teachers are not teaching well because the children already know the language and that it is a ploy to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. (Education Officer interview response)*

Among the eight parents interviewed, all that they could say about the policy was that Ghana has changed the language of instruction from English to Ghanaian language. Five parent participants even interpreted the NALAP to mean that the English medium of instruction has been abolished, indicating their scant knowledge about the intent of the program.

## Discussion and implications

This study explored Ghanaians' views about the current early childhood education Mol via the examination of people's reaction towards the Minister for Education's comments on revamping NALAP in the public schools and interviews of parents and education officials. The findings revealed that most participants in the study (81.82% of Op-eds., 93.22% of comments, 77.78% of interviewees) expressed strong negative perceptions toward an instructional policy that promotes use of mother tongue language in early childhood education and contested the benefits of fostering literacy acquisition through the NALAP.

Our findings align with existing studies that report negative attitudes toward the use of MTB-BMol in Ghana and other African countries (Adika 2012; Erling et al. 2016; Swadener et al. 2013) and a preference for the use of their colonial language over local language in educational and official settings (Brock-Utne 2010; Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele 2016; Trudell 2009). Although a UNESCO (2016) study reported that most West African children struggle in education because they are instructed in unfamiliar languages, in Ghana, English Mol is generally viewed among the public as the panacea to achievement and success. Taylor (2009) suggests that these attitudes may lead to 'linguicidal' effects (killing of unfavored languages) and what Skutnabb-Kangas (2006) also calls linguistic genocide. Studies conducted in Tanzania and South Africa demonstrate that when learners are taught in an unfamiliar language, not only do they miss concepts, but they are compelled to discard the funds of knowledge that they bring from home due to lack of competency in the classroom language and in this way may become passive learners (Brock-Utne 2007; Swadener et al. 2013).

The findings suggested that the participants in this study lacked adequate information about the NALAP and its educational benefits, resulting in the question: 'How can people buy into a policy that they do not understand?' The report of the first national assessment of the NALAP by USAID noted that the marketing of the program was inadequate and that this served as an impediment to the full implementation. USAID (2011, 19) recommended that:

... continuing to solicit support from parents and the community for NALAP is key to its success. ... Because NALAP addresses teaching literacy in a way that is not familiar to most parents, making an explicit deal with them that pupils will be better readers overall and better readers of English specifically because of NALAP would give parents and the community at large incentive to support their children's participation in NALAP. ... Community education on how early mother tongue instruction leads to better English outcomes later is essential to accomplish this.

Negative public perceptions of the NALAP may be indicative of an inadequate public advocacy campaign prior to its implementation. When parents in this study were asked if they would like their children to be instructed in both English and local languages if their child encountered difficulty understanding concepts taught, most responded affirmatively. Parents who had a better understanding of how NALAP might enhance their child's educational experience conveyed positive attitudes towards the policy and expressed full support of it. For example, a father who supported the NALAP gave this reason for wanting his child to be taught in a Ghanaian language:

*Enough research evidence had shown that children who begin formal learning in their mother tongue before switching to a foreign language perform better in later years of learning. In other words, it is better to use the child's first language as the medium of instruction at the early stage of learning. As such I will like my child to be taught in Ghanaian language and then later switch to the use of English language. (Father interview response)*

### **Why the need for revamping public education?**

The support of both the general public and of parents regarding the NALAP is crucial to its full implementation and sustainability, not least because they are major the stakeholders of the education system. Their patronage determines the success or the failure of the program, therefore the need to revisit public awareness of the NALAP. Bilingual Mol is a key to early literacy that opens doors to a quality education (MoE 2008; UNESCO 2016) and successful academic endeavors (Caffery, Coronado, and Hodge 2016; Kraft 2003).

NALAP may not only optimize children's success in school (UNESCO 2016), but the policy also may reduce school dropout and truancy that is currently prevalent in early childhood classrooms throughout Ghana. UNESCO education statistics for Ghana report that nearly 900,000 kindergarteners drop out of school before Primary 1 (UNESCO Education Statistical Data n.d.). Conversely, studies in countries such as Timor-Leste and South Africa have found that bilingualism fosters student retention (Caffery, Coronado, and Hodge 2016; Swadener et al. 2013) and protects the learner's heritage, which promotes positive self-identity and high self-confidence (Castro, Ayankoya, and Kasprzak 2011; Han 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas 2006), vital elements to achieving academic success. Consequently, even though the NALAP is faced with implementation challenges, when the Ghanaian public and key stakeholders have adequate understanding and give their full support to implementation, children may flourish.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Our goal was to develop an emerging understanding of the challenges and opportunities in Ghana regarding early language learning approaches. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations as a way forward to increasing public sensitization of the NALAP as well as informing policy regarding early childhood teacher preparation and professional development of ECE teachers in the classrooms.

There is a need for bilingual education and early childhood education advocates to inform the general public on the importance of NALAP in educating twenty-first century bi/multi-lingual students through the organization of public advocacy campaigns with extensive community outreach. Regular marketing on TV or radio could be aired immediately before

or after popular programs, such as the evening news and soap operas. Face-to-face information sessions need to include local community meetings, church pulpits, and social media. Some of these channels would give us the opportunity to have direct contact with the key stakeholders of education, such as parents, and create platforms for clarifying issues of concern. Intentional outreach must address the negative attitudes of African elites towards mother tongue-based bilingual education (Brock-Utne 2010; Trudell 2007, 2009).

Providing nation-wide in-service training for all current teachers and all mainstream education officers on the NALAP would ensure that they are well equipped to continue the public sensitization. It would also help solve the reshuffling and transfer issues that are currently impeding the effective implementation of the NALAP. More so, it would enhance the appropriate monitoring of the program as well as the organization of refresher workshops for early childhood education teachers.

Moreover, the NALAP concepts need to be infused into teacher education at all levels in Ghana so that pre-service teachers are equipped with the knowledge of the program before they start teaching. When teachers have the requisite knowledge and skills on the NALAP, they may increase the bilingual labeling of their classroom displays and similar supportive practices.

Language experts with bilingual expertise should be encouraged to write bilingual books and also facilitate the training of community volunteers to help in the NALAP advocacy program. This may widen the scope of the advocacy and sensitization of the program and expand available resources for teachers to integrate into their classroom instruction.

The importance of mother tongue-based bilingual medium of instruction (MT-BMol) in Ghana, particularly in the early years, cannot be overemphasized. It is hoped that if the above recommendations are put in place, we may win the support of Ghanaians and prepare early childhood education teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to enact the NALAP appropriately. Widespread implementation of NALAP has the potential of equipping multilingual learners with early literacy acquisition skills that may increase school retention rates and enhance students' academic success.

We should bear in mind that language choice in schools should not be based on what is popular, but rather be driven by the needs of the learners as language is a key vehicle for transporting knowledge. Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) 'encourage emergent bilinguals to use their home languages to think, reflect, and extend their inner speech' (63). Therefore, we conclude this article with the following lines of Dr. Ephraim Amu's patriotic song titled *Asem yi di ka* and its call for fulfilling our obligation as advocates:

Asem yi di ka, edi ka  
 Hena beka?  
 Me ara o, me ara,  
 Ennye obiara o me ara  
 Adwuma yi di ye, edi ye  
 Hena beye,  
 Me ara o, me ara,  
 Ennye obiara o me ara

### **English translation**

This issue needs to be said, it really needs to be said,

Who will say it?  
 It's I; yes it's me;  
 It's no one else but me.  
 This work needs to be done, it's really needs to be done,  
 Who will do it?  
 It's I; yes it's me;  
 It's no one else but me.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the Spencer Foundation New Civics Grant for their support of this research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Spencer Foundation [New Civics Grant Program].

## ORCID

Ilene R. Berson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8114-7474>

Michael J. Berson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-5851>

## References

- Adika, G. S. 2012. "English in Ghana: Growth, Tensions, and Trends." *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication* 1: 151–166. doi:10.12681/ijltic.17.
- African Union. 2016. *Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025* (CESA 16-25). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/29958-doc-cesa\\_-\\_english-v9.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/29958-doc-cesa_-_english-v9.pdf)
- African Union. 2018. "Conference Report." In *Pan-African High Level Conference on Education (PACE)*. Nairobi, Kenya. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000367711.locale=en>
- Amekudzi, K. 2015. "Open letter to the Minister of Education." November 5. <http://graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/52829-open-letter-to-the-minister-of-education.html>
- Ansah, G. N. 2014. "Re-Examining the Fluctuations in Language Education Policies in Post-Independence Ghana." *Multilingual Education* 4 (1): 12–27. doi:10.1186/s13616-014-0012-3.
- Association for the Development of Education in Africa Secretariat (ADEA). 2004. "The Quest for Quality: Learning from the African Experience." Proceedings of the ADEA Biennial Meeting, Grand Baie, Mauritius, December 3–6. <http://www.adeanet.org/adea/downloadcenter/publications/rap%20bie%2003%20eng.pdf>
- Association for the Development of Education in Africa Secretariat (ADEA). 2017. "General Synthesis." *Triennial Education and Training in Africa Meeting*. Dakar, Senegal. [http://www.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/2018.02.06\\_general\\_synthesis\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_2017\\_triennale\\_final\\_eng.pdf](http://www.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/2018.02.06_general_synthesis_report_on_the_2017_triennale_final_eng.pdf)
- Baffoe, I., and A. K. Amoah 2015. "Using Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in schools." <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Using-Ghanaian-language-as-medium-of-instruction-in-schools-390375>

- Bokor, M. J. K. 2015. "English No More the Medium of Instruction in Ghanaian Schools? Crap!!" <http://vibeghana.com/2015/10/16/english-no-more-the-medium-of-instruction-in-ghanaian-schools-crap/>
- Brock-Utne, B. 2007. "Language of Instruction and Student Performance: New Insights from Research in Tanzania and South Africa." *International Review of Education* 53 (5–6): 509–530. doi:10.1007/s11159-007-9065-9.
- Brock-Utne, B. 2010. "Research and Policy on the Language of Instruction Issue in Africa." *International Journal of Educational Development* 30 (6): 636–645. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.03.004.
- Caffery, J., G. Coronado, and B. Hodge. 2016. "Multilingual Language Policy and Mother Tongue Education in Timor-Leste: A Multiscalar Approach." *Language Policy* 15 (4): 561–580. doi:10.1007/s10993-015-9393-8.
- Castro, D. C., B. Ayankoya, and C. Kasprzak. 2011. *The New Voices-Nuevas Voces- Guide to Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Early Childhood*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing.
- Darvas, P., and D. Balwanz. 2014. *Basic Education beyond the Millennium Development Goals in Ghana*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Duodu, C. 2015. "Ministry of Education is Too Important to Make Capricious Decision." <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Ministry-of-Education-is-too-important-to-make-capricious-decision-389726>
- Edu-Buandoh, D. F., and G. Otchere. 2012. "'Speak English!' A Prescription or Choice of English as A Lingua Franca in Ghanaian Schools." *Linguistics and Education* 23 (3): 301–309. doi:10.1016/j.linged.2012.06.003.
- EQUALL. 2010. *NALAP Implementation Study*. Accra, Ghana: EDC.
- Erling, E. J., L. Adinolfi, A. K. Hultgren, A. Buckler, and M. Mukorera. 2016. "Medium of Instruction Policies in Ghanaian and Indian Primary Schools: An Overview of Key Issues and Recommendations." *Comparative Education* 52 (3): 294–310. doi:10.1080/03050068.2016.1185254.
- Frazier, J. 2015. "The Tot, Her Mother Tongue and Poverty." <http://graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/52959-the-tot-her-mother-tongue-and-poverty.html>
- Garcia, O., and J. A. Kleifgen. 2010. *Educating Emergent Bilinguals: Policies, Programs, and Practices for English Language Learners*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Grbich, C. 2013. *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Han, W. J. 2012. "Bilingualism and Academic Achievement." *Child Development* 83 (1): 300–321. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01686.x.
- He, A. E. 2012. "Systematic Use of Mother Tongue as Learning/Teaching Resources in Target Language Instruction." *Multilingual Education* 2 (1): 1–15. doi:10.1186/2191-5059-2-1.
- Hungi, N., J. Njagi, P. Wekulo, and M. Ngware. 2018. "Effects of Language of Instruction on Learning of Literacy Skills among Pre-Primary School Children from Low-Income Urban Communities in Kenya." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 46 (2): 187–199. doi:10.1007/s10643-017-0850-1.
- Kraft, R. J. 2003. *Primary Schools in Ghana: A Report to USAID*. Accra, Ghana: USAID/Ghana Ministry of Education.
- Limon, D., and N. S. Lukanovič. 2016. "Does Bilingualism Have an Economic Value in the Ethnically Mixed Regions of Slovenia?" *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 8 (8): 656–670.
- Littlewood, W., and B. Yu. 2011. "First Language and Target Language in the Foreign Language Classroom." *Language Teaching* 44 (1): 64–77. doi:10.1017/S0261444809990310.
- Ministry of Education. 2006. *Report on 2005 Administration of National Education Assessment Primary 3 and Primary 6 English and Mathematics*. Accra, Ghana: GES.
- Ministry of Education. 2008. *2007 National Education Assessment Report*. Accra, Ghana: GES.
- Ministry of Education. 2016. *2016 National Education Assessment Report*. Accra, Ghana: GES.
- MoE/USAID. 2009. *National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP) Baseline Assessment*. Accra, Ghana: EDC.
- MoE/USAID. 2010. *Let's Read and Write*. Accra, Ghana: GES.

- Opoku-Amankwa, K., and A. Brew-Hammond. 2011. "Literacy Is the Ability to Read and Write English: Defining and Developing Literacy in Basic Schools in Ghana." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 14 (1): 89–106. doi:10.1080/13670051003692857.
- Opoku-Amankwa, K., D. F. Edu-Buandoh, and A. Brew-Hammond. 2015. "Publishing for Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education in Ghana: Politics and Consequences." *Language and Education* 29 (1): 1–14. doi:10.1080/09500782.2014.921194.
- Ouane, A., and C. Glanz. 2010. *Why and How Africa Should Invest in African Languages*. Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Owu-Ewie, C. 2006. "The Language Policy of Education in Ghana: A Critical Look at the English-Only Language Policy of Education." In *Selected Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, edited by J. Mugane, J. P. Hutchuson, and D. A. Worman, 76–85. Massachusetts: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Owusu-Ansah, L. K., and R. T. Torto. 2013. "Communication of Language Attitudes: An Exploration of the Ghanaian Situation." *The International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World* 2 (1): 65–75.
- Piper, B., J. Destefano, E. M. Kinyanjui, and S. Ong'ele. 2018. "Scaling up Successfully: Lessons from Kenya's Tusome National Literacy Program." *Journal of Educational Change* 19 (3): 293–321. doi:10.1007/s10833-018-9325-4.
- Piper, B., S. S. Zuilkowski, and S. Ong'ele. 2016. "Implementing Mother Tongue Instruction in the Real World: Results from a Medium-Scale Randomized Controlled Trial in Kenya." *Comparative Education Review* 60 (4): 776–807. doi:10.1086/688493.
- Prosser, J. 2010. "Visual Methods and the Visual Culture of Schools." *Visual Studies* 22 (1): 13–30. doi:10.1080/14725860601167143.
- Rogoff, B. 2003a. *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogoff, B. 2003b. *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, G. 2012. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE.
- Saldaña, J. 2015. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.
- Seid, Y. 2019. "The Impact of Learning First in Mother Tongue: Evidence from a Natural Experiment in Ethiopia." *Applied Economics* 51 (6): 577–593. doi:10.1080/00036846.2018.1497852.
- Seidu, A., K. Mereku, M. Avoke, E. Ekumah, E. Tamanja, V. Adzallie-Mensah, and A. Hartwell. 2008. *Report on Teacher Capacity for Local Language Instruction*. Accra, Ghana: National Centre for Research into Basic Education, University of Education.
- Shin, J., M. Sailors, N. McClung, P. D. Pearson, J. V. Hoffman, and M. Chilimanjira. 2015. "The Case of Chichewa and English in Malawi: The Impact of First Language Reading and Writing on Learning English as a Second Language." *Bilingual Research Journal* 38 (3): 255–274. doi:10.1080/15235882.2015.1091050.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. 2006. "Linguistic Genocide? Children's Right to Education in Their Own Languages." *Communicating Development Research* 5 (3). <http://www.eldis.org/document/A46628>
- Swadener, B. B., L. Lundy, J. Habashi, and N. Blanchet-Cohen, eds. 2013. *Children's Right and Education: International Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Taylor, S. K. 2009. "Tongue-Tied No More? beyond Linguistic Colonialization of Multilingual Children in the Public School System." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12 (3): 417–426. doi:10.1080/13613320903178337.
- Trudell, B. 2007. "Local Community Perspectives and Language of Education in Sub-Saharan African Communities." *International Journal of Educational Development* 27 (5): 552–563. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.02.002.
- Trudell, B. 2009. "Local-Language Literacy and Sustainable Development in Africa." *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 (1): 73–79. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2008.07.002.



- Trudell, B. 2016. "Language Choice and Education Quality in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Review." *Comparative Education* 52 (3): 281–293. doi:10.1080/03050068.2016.1185252.
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1989. <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>
- "What has language got to do with poverty?". 2015. <http://graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/51768-what-has-language-got-to-do-with-poverty.html>
- UNESCO. 2016. "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?" *Global Education Monitoring Report, Policy Paper 24*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO Education Statistical Data. n.d. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=120>
- USAID. 2011. *NALAP Formative Evaluation Report*. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.
- Zepeda, M., D. C. Castro, and S. Cronin. 2011. "Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work with Young Dual Language Learners." *Child Development Perspectives* 5 (1): 10–14. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2010.00141.x.