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'Parental choice in the learning of Mauritian Kreol at school: the motivational factors'[1]

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ABSTRACT

Against a backdrop of doubt, fear[2] and contestation regarding language dynamics, we studied the motivational forces underpinning the decision of about 20% of Mauritian parents to enrol their children for the study of Mauritian Kreol (KM) as an optional subject for six years. A narrative methodology was used. The deployment of narrative inquiry allowed us to obtain rich, textured data from 11 participants and afforded us deep insights into the factors underlying their decision-making process. Biographical interviews conducted over a period of three months brought to the fore a plethora of individual experiences that had influenced the parents' decisions. The findings revealed that, even though the collective factors pertaining to ancestry, ethnicity, identity, culture and religion could not be negated, the choice of KM as optional language subject was notably influenced by personal factors. The first of these wasthe degree of academic support or coaching parents felt they could provide to their children. Second,parents' own language experiences and notions of language learningplayed a role. Third,parents felt they could attempt to reverse adverse patterns and representations that they had internalised during adolescence.

Keywords: Mauritian Kreol; Creole; parent choice, narrative inquiry, motivational factors.

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[2]The fear pertained, for example, to the fact that the learning of Mauritian Kreol (a French-lexified Kreol) would affect the learning of French, a compulsory subject at school until Grade 11.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2012, the Mauritian educational landscape was marked by a revolutionary development: KM was introduced as an optional language subject with similar status as the heritage languages in Mauritian schools like Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Modern Chinese[3]. Through this decision, the then government was fulfilling one of its electoral promises made to Creole[4]speakers (Nadal & Anacoura, 2014). Presumably this was also a victory for all the individuals (writers, political activists, academics) and associations that had been agitating for decades for the recognition of the KM language in education and for its promotion in the cultural and political spheres of the Mauritian landscape.

Six years after the introduction of KM as an optional subject in the formal educational curriculum, and upon completion of the cycle of primary education[5] by the first batch of pupils who studied the subject, we sought to examine, retrospectively, the decision exercised by some parents. These pioneers in the area had an extremely influential role since they had chosen the subject on behalf of their children, and thereby set up the possibility for subsequent generations of learners to opt for KM. This article provides insights into the factors that motivated the parents' decision. As the import of such a decision is best understood against a complex local linguistic backdrop, we proceed to delineate this.

'KREOL' WITHIN A COMPLEX MAURITIAN LANGUAGE ECOLOGY

Notwithstanding that Mauritian literature in Kreol dates back to the early 19th century (with the publication of François Chrestien's 'Les Essais d'un Bobre Africain' in 1822), the use of the language in writing for the whole of the

[3]The 2010 electoral campaign in Mauritius witnessed an unprecedented political pressure by Afro-Mauritian lobbyists vis-à-vis the two major competing blocks in favour of the recognition of KM as the ancestral language of the local Creole (Afro-Mauritian) ethnic group. The lobbyists founded their claim on the fact that the Kreol language (a vernacular form that was developed during the colonisation period) had been bequeathed to the nation as a legacy of the days of slavery during the 17th& 18th centuries. KM was eventually inscribed as the heritage language of Afro-Mauritians in the addendum to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for primary education, even though the NCF does acknowledge that the language holds relevance for the population at large as the mother tongue of an overwhelming portion of the Mauritian population (Mauritius Institute of Education, 2012). As such, it was a simultaneous recognition that the language transcends all ethnic considerations.

[4] Note 'Creole', denotes an ethnic group, while 'Kreol' refers to the most popular language spoken in Mauritius.

[5] The Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC) examinations in Mauritius were organised for the first time in 2017 as replacement for the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations, which mark the end of the six years of primary schooling.

20th century was limited to individuals, for example, the linguist and writer Dev Virahsawmy, or to a few cultural, political and preschool organisations, for example, Ledikasyon Pu Travayer, Lalit and Playgroup. At the start of the 21st century, the local Catholic church also became a prominent advocate of the Creole cause, even though in this particular case, the focus was not only on the promotion of the language, but also on the upliftment of the Creole ethnic group. Nonetheless, a marked turn was effected in the celebration of the liturgy, for instance, with the translation of prayers in Kreol, the composition of religious hymns in Kreol, and the translation of the Bible, with the collaboration of the Bible Society of Mauritius.

Throughout the 20th century, the growth of Kreol as a language was not only curtailed by the absence of political will to promote the language on the part of successive governmental regimes, but also by the absence of concerted actions by those militating for the language. For example, different orthographies were used for the writing of the language, which added to the confusion and public perception that Kreol was a difficult language in which to read and write. In 2004, however, a great step was made for the harmonisation of existing writing systems, with the publication of the 'Grafi Larmoni' report (Hookoomsing, 2004). The long-awaited and much-needed harmonised writing system was instrumental in allowing a number of subsequent significant steps in the valorisation of the language. The first was the monolingual Kreol dictionary, produced in 2009, followed by the revised orthography of Mauritian Kreol, and its grammar codified by the *Akademi Kreol Morisien (AKM)* in 2011. All of these endeavours culminated in the writing of textbooks for the introduction of the language for education in 2012.

KREOL AND/IN LOCAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Prior to the introduction of KM as school subject, some moves had already been initiated by the relevant authorities, for example, making explicit references to the multilingual profile of the Mauritian learner in policy documents, such as the Strategy Plan 2008-2020 (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2009). Indirectly, The Pre-Primary National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources, 2009) mentioned the importance of "home and environmental languages" (p. 42), without explicitly making a claim for mother-tongue-based instruction. There was also in 2014, the implementation of the Foundation Programme, a bilingual

(English & French) curriculum[6] for literacy and numeracy development aiming at creating a smooth transition from the pre-primary to the primary level (Nadal et al., 2017). At secondary level, a mother tongue-based curriculum was introduced for students facing learning difficulties and enrolled in the Pre-Vocational[7] sector. Still concerning this sector, a bilingual (Kreol and English) literacy and numeracy programme was offered in some Catholic colleges as from 2004. Known as the PrevokBEK, this programme featured among the finalists for the 2012 Commonwealth Education Good Practice Awards (Diocese of Port-Louis, 2012).

Even though the new policy offered as a non-compulsory subject, it was not yet a fully-fledged course of action towards the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction (MOI) as it was still considered a consequential move by even the most optimistic and fervent supporters of the language (Groëme-Harmon, 2018). As is the case in many postcolonial societies, the resistance to a mother tongue-based education in Mauritius had grown over the years, despite ample evidence from the literature about problems associated with learning in mediums of instruction other than the mother tongue (Bruthiaux, 2002; Chimbutane, 2011; Cummins, 2007; Kyeyune, 2003; Mashiya, 2011; Msila, 2011; Setati et al., 2002 & Smitherman, 2004).

Moreover, the idiosyncrasy of the Mauritian situation is that policy makers somehow managed to conveniently ignore the fact that spoken Kreol is largely used for academic pursuits in most schools of Mauritius, from the pre-primary to the secondary level. This situation was observed both in low-performing and in elite schools over a number of years (Bissoonauth & Offord, 2001; Foley, 1995; Rajah-Carrim, 2007), with Mauritian teachers copiously making use of French and/or Kreol in their classes as a strategy to render their instruction more inclusive. The dual language strategy was in a sense, in defiance of the archaic provision of the 1957 Education Act stipulating that all classroom instruction should be carried out in English only from the upper primary level onwards. Particularly witnessed during the explanation of complex and technical concepts and theories, this phenomenon occurred in various degrees, depending on the linguistic capacities of learners (Sonck,

[6] The programme also encouraged the recourse to the mother tongue as support language.

[7] The Pre-Vocational stream catered for secondary school students who face learning difficulties and who twice failed at the end of primary cycle exams. With the adoption of the Nine-Year Schooling programme as from 2018, the Pre-Vocational stream will gradually phase out and will progressively be replaced by another curriculum, known as the Extended Programme.

2005) and the profiles of teachers and schools.

REPRESENTATIONS OF KREOL LANGUAGES

A study carried out by Bavoux (2002), from the nearby island of Reunion, helps to better understand some of the representations and attitudes expressed vis-à-vis languages in Creole contexts. Bavoux effectively sums up some of the most frequent manifestations towards Kreol languages around the following six axes:

- Representations of Kreol languages will differ depending on whether their speakers are monolingual Kreol speakers or bilinguals.
- The discourse on social representation of Kreol languages is often articulated around three poles: the academic, the militant, and the popular.
- There is still an ongoing debate on the status of Kreol languages: are they (and should they be/become) fully-fledged languages?
- Representations vis-à-vis Kreol languages are strongly linked with ideologies.
- There is a thin margin between 'creolophilia' (sympathetic manifestations towards Kreol languages) and 'creolophobia' (fear of Kreol languages).
- Representations towards Kreol languages are related to people's perceptions about the languages' use and relevance to day-to-day situations.

Whilst all of the above observations are relevant to the Mauritian situation, two dimensions stand out. First, the ideological dimension is quite strong, given the language-ethnicity associations. Also, the last observation about representations of the language being linked to its perceived usefulness calls for attention. As long as there was no real and no formal engagement for the introduction of Kreol as an academic subject in Mauritian schools, the social representations with regard to the language were rather dispassionate. But the announced decision to give a different status to Kreol through its introduction in schools literally ignited a series of forceful and often unfavourable reactions vis-à-vis Kreol, for example, in the media (Nadal, 2014; Florigny, 2015).

It is therefore against such a background intermingling expectations, doubt and contestation that KM made its formal entry at school in 2012, with 3400 parents opting for their children to study the subject. This figure made of KM the

second most popular optional language (quantitatively speaking) after Hindi. Nonetheless, the decision to give the status of optional 'ancestral' language to the mother tongue of an overwhelming portion of the Mauritian population brought about a one-of-a kind situation that differs from the use of Kreol in other contexts (Mahadeo-Doorgakant, 2017). Citing Siegel's three-tier categorisation of Kreol languages (1999) used in education[8], Mahadeo-Doorgakant argues that offering a Kreol language as an optional language subject "at par with Asian languages/Arabic" (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2014, p. 2)constituted an uncharacteristic case in point.

Language, heritage, and ethnicity

As evidenced above, it is virtually impossible to dissociate Kreol from any ethnic bearing in Mauritius, but this intricate link between culture and ethnicity is not limited to the local context. Despite being popularly used as and understood to be primarily a tool for communication, language is in fact a crucial determinant in the way we perceive ourselves in society. As Lee (2002, p. 119) opines,

Language has been noted as one of the most prominent factors in the competency of a culture since it is always used within a cultural environment, acts as a salient indicator of a group's identity that is transmitted from generation to generation, and serves as the main tool to internalise culture.

Several studies focus "on the important role that a separate language tied to ethnic identity can play in defining an ethnic group" (Fought, 2006, p. 21). For instance, studies dealing with immigrant people highlight the importance attributed to learning or preserving the heritage language. The latter is, amongst others, viewed as a unifying factor and a medium to transmit the values of the heritage culture in a foreign land (Kim& Chao, 2009; Blackledge & Creese, 2008; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Lee, 2002; Phinney et al., 2001). These studies reveal that, even though learning the lingua franca is necessary to integrate effectively into the country of adoption, being conversant in the heritage language allows, especially the younger generation, to feel closer to their community (Phinney et al., 2001). They are also better able to maintain links with their grandparents and cultural roots. Interestingly, Lee (2002, p. 132) even found that "…those who were more proficient in the heritage language tended to be more bicultural". This prompted him

[8]As i) initial mediums of instruction; ii) support languages, and iii) language subjects taught for comparative purposes.

to conclude that "in order to enable individuals to experience the benefits of their bicultural identities, it is imperative that we also make provisions to promote the teaching of heritage languages" (Lee, 2002, p. 132).

The significance of language in the construction of group identity is even more striking in multilingual and multicultural postcolonial contexts, where languages are inextricably linked with ethnicity and culture. Though the advent of colonisation propelled, in most cases, English to a privileged status, native or ancestral languages still serve to demonstrate affiliation to particular communities. They also indicate ethnic appurtenance, as can be seen in a number of African and Asian countries. While this is to an extent, also true in Mauritius, the island harbours a particularity that reflects how intricate language ecologies can be, with ethnic bound to demarcated areas and languages being highly 'ethnicised'. Though "the Creole language is an emblem of the Mauritian nation because nearly all Mauritians use it and because KM symbolises a mixing of peoples and traditions that one day might yield a unified Mauritian nation" (Eisenlohr, 2007, p. 983), it reflects a salient element for the awakening of a consciousness for the Afro-Mauritian/Creole community in particular (Harmon, 2017). In such a context where language is a key consideration in all attempts to define the individual and his or her place in society, examining the role of parents in gearing their children towards the study of KM was insightful, as revealed in the next few sections.

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION/MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING

The nature of parental involvement in their children's education is quite varied, one of the most common forms being the parent-school partnership. This comprises "volunteering at school, communicating with teachers and other school personnel, assisting in academic activities at home, and attending school events, meetings of parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and parent-teacher conferences" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 161). Studies have revealed that this type of collaboration allows both parents and schools to benefit. This is because parents become better empowered to support their children while schools can rely on the support of parents to promote appropriate behaviour and expectations. The social capital that this collaboration constitutes has led to an increasing number of schools upholding policies that encourage such partnerships. The phenomenon of parental involvement in their children's education has long been under the lens of researchers

(Tsurkan, 2016; Domina, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Steinberg, 1992). According to research findings, parental involvement is not only a strong precursor to academic attainment (Wilder, 2014; Lee & Bowen, 2006) and educational aspirations (Pagliarulo McCarron & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2006), but also has wide-ranging positive effects that include the development of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Fan & Williams, 2010). It even counters the impact of deficient schools and broken homes on children (Jeyne, 2003).

While the impact of parental involvement is well-documented in the literature, it can be noted that the role of parents in the subject choice of their children has not gained as much attention. It is also on this account that the present study investigates the motivational factors behind the choice of KM as an optional language subject by parents on behalf of their children studying at primary level. As discussed above, given the peculiar circumstances in which the most used language in Mauritius was introduced as a language of teaching and learning, it became important for us to find out whether the language, identified along socio-historical and ethnic lines, constituted a potent agent for parents who opted for their children to study KM.

Also, the literature about parental involvement in education does not shed much light on the process of subject choice. Instead, parental involvement in educational matters seems to have been researched mainly in relation to aspects like career guidance or the establishment of the school-home link for smoother and more concerted actions between these two spheres. Whenever it has been done, the discussion of the connection between parental influence and language choice has mostly related to the experience of migrant communities settling in new geographical and linguistic environments (for example, Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; Kheirkhah, 2016 & Yu, 2014), but not to 'regular' situations involving parents and the school community.

Moreover, research carried out until now on the study of KM has not focused thoroughly on parents, but mostly on the use of the language in the school context (see Mahadeo-Doorgakant, 2017) or on heritage language and identity construction (see Harmon, 2017), even if in the latter case parents did feature among the respondents. We, therefore, believe that this research could contribute to better understanding some of the dynamics that come into play in the decision-making process of either opting – or not – for the study of the language.

Also, the debate surrounding MK is often marked by the discourse of dismissal, deficiency and repression (see Bartens, 2001; Bissoonauth & Offord, 2001; Florigny, 2015; Harmon, 2015; Mahadeo-Doorgakant, 2012; Rajah-Carrim, 2007; Sambajee, 2016; Sauzier-Uchida, 2009; Sonck, 2005; Tirvassen, 1999). Our survey of the literature revealed that research in this area tended to focus on the different ways in which the indigenous language is pitted against western languages such as English and French, which are viewed in the domestic context as being more prestigious and more useful for formal pursuits(Frank, 2007; Mühleisen, 2001).We, therefore, wanted to adopt a different stance, by focusing instead on people who had, through the act of opting for Kreol, expressed faith in the policy decision to introduce the dominant Mauritian vernacular[9], despite the atmosphere of doubt and fear prevailing at the outset. For the purposes of the research at hand, we selected parents who had taken the decision to enrol their children for KM in the very first batch of pupils who studied the subject when it was introduced in 2012 and who adhered to the decision until the end of the primary school cycle in 2017.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, undertaken in collaboration with the Service Diocésain de l'Education Catholique (SeDEC), we focused on five primary schools respectively located in the capital city Port-Louis, in three other major towns (Rose-Hill, Vacoas and Curepipe), and finally in a small coastal village in the South West region of Mauritius. These five research sites are indicated in figure 1 below.



Figure 1

Like the other 41 RCA[10] schools of Mauritius, the selected five are public, in the sense that they: i) align themselves to the national education programme; ii) are non-fee paying, as they are subsidised by the government; iii) are attended by

[9]Bhojpuri is the other vernacular language of Mauritius. Compared to Kreol (whose number of speakers has risen from 70% to 85% between the last two national population censuses), the number of Bhojpuri users is declining steadily: from 12% of the population according to the 2000 population census to 5% in 2011.

[10] The abbreviation for 'Roman Catholic Aided', referring to primary schools owned by the Catholic Church but subsidised by the government.

children of all religious and ethnic backgrounds; and iv) are served by a mixed staff that is representative of the Mauritian population at large. Whilst the Catholic primary schools welcome some 18,000 pupils (representing about 20% of the total primary school population of the island), the study of KM is notably popular in these schools. In 2012, for instance, 36% of the total number of pupils who opted to study KM came from Catholic schools. This is very probably due to the fact that these schools welcome in their midst a majority of children of Christian faith, and these children are mostly Creoles, the ethnic group that identifies itself the most with KM for socio-historical and politico-cultural reasons.

We would also like to point out here that, as heads of schools and teachers had been enlisted as research collaborators for this research[11], great care was taken in negotiating power relations between them and the parents they were researching. In the eyes of most parents, the Headmaster and/or the teacher conveys an image of authority, and in the qualitative research tradition, inconveniences inherent to these vertical power relations should be minimised (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2010; Riley et al., 2010). Co-researchers from the school context, therefore, were trained to subtly negotiate their rapport with parents, for instance, by refraining from carrying out interviews in settings that connote too strongly the image of authority associated with school resource persons, such as the classroom or the Headmaster's office. Instead, they were encouraged to meet and talk with the parents in more 'neutral' spaces, such as the school yard, a public space, or – if the participants so agreed – at the parents' residence.

Prior to starting the research, the participants' informed consent was sought. The nature and implications of the research were explained in Kreol and/or French, and participants were requested to sign a consent letter written in one of the two above-mentioned languages, depending on their language proficiency and preference.

Twenty-three parents from the different research sites were initially selected for this narrative production exercise on circumstances that led to the choice of KM as optional language subject for their children. However, due to various reasons (ranging from the absence of sustained commitment on the part of certain respondents and research collaborators to the hollowness of certain insights shared), we ended up with a sample of eleven respondents. The latter were requested to share stories related to

[11] This was done with an objective of capacity building in mind, in accordance with the agreement worked out with the Diocesan Service of Catholic Education.

the decision-making process as well as anecdotes about their experience of and involvement in their children's learning of this new subject. These stories and anecdotes constituted the raw data that was eventually processed into individual narratives. Eventually, common themes were extracted for the organisation of the 'Findings and discussion' part. Table 1 provides some background information about six parents from whose narratives extracts have been drawn for this paper.

Table 1

Name	Age	Place of Residence	Family Situation	Profession
Patricia	45	Port-Louis (capital city)	Mother of two children; married to a ship captain of 49 years	Housewife
Chantal	51	Vacoas (normally referred-to as a town, but presents certain 'urban' features, mostly because of its green landscapes)	Mother of four children; divorced	Company Manager
Priscilla	39	Roche Bois (suburban region of the capital city)	Mother of two children; married to a welder of 41 years	Housewife
Hélène	41	Baie du Cap (coastal village)	Mother of three children; married to a mason of 47 years	Maid
Patrick	44	Vacoas	Father of four children; married to Arielle (see below)	Laboratory Attendant
Arielle	41	Vacoas	Mother of four children; married to Patrick (see above)	Typist

We would here like to point out that for the writing of this article, the narratives of participants (Fig 1) were selected, as they offered varied perspectives in terms of geographical location, gender, age and occupation.

To gain deeper insights about the parents' decisions and their involvement in their children's learning of KM, we chose to conduct life history research, as it allowed us to access the world of the participants as they perceived it. Guided by the fact that there is no single truth, it was important to allow for breadth of experiences and realities, as decision-making is often based on an individual's personal experiences. Life history research thus provided our participants with the scope to shape their stories to reflect the interpretation of their lived experiences.

As Sosulski, Butchanan and Donnell (2010, p.37) asserted, "(l)ife story techniques introduce the opportunity to collect rich data textured by respondents' own interpretations of their experiences and the social circumstances in which their story has unfolded, and the ways in which they continue to be active agents".

In addition, with subjectivity and positionality being privileged in life history research (Reissman, 2000), the focus was not merely on the events, but on the participants' understandings of these (Kouritzin, 2000). Following this choice of approach, we opted for narrative inquiry as the research methodology, since it provided our participants with the discursive space to interpret and explain their choice in the context of their lived experiences in a particular social, political and historical setting. Given the laden history behind the inclusion of KM in the school curriculum, the emotionally-charged nature of the experience could not be sanitised and a mere factual account would have been hollow. We deemed that the participants needed the liberty to tell their story from their vantage point. It was important for them to retain their individuality as "human actions are unique" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 7) and experiences subjective.

Further, since human beings lead "storied lives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 145), we were of the view that through narrative inquiry, biographical experiences that may have –consciously or unconsciously – motivated the parents' decision would be more easily evoked, and distant memories would resurface. The use of biographical interviews allowed us to foster parameters like interactivity, subjectivity and structure (Bornat, 2008). Respondents were invited to broadly 'tell us the story of how [they] came to opt for the study of KM on behalf of their ward', and every effort was made to preserve the natural flow of insights shared by them, in their own words, at their own pace, and according to the structure that seemed the most pertinent to them. However, in some few cases, such as when parents were invited to share perspectives about the nature of academic support provided to

their children in the learning of KM, artefacts like the KM textbooks were used as prompts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present and discuss findings by grouping under six different headings the common themes that emanated from the narratives of the six parents.

Language ideology and subject choice

One of the most prominent findings was that language ideology underpinned parental decision with respect to their choice. In the case of this study, since the 'subject' was a language that had an overt ethnic affiliation, it was not surprising to note that ancestry mattered in the choice of KM as optional language by parents of Afro-Mauritian origin. Whilst it cannot be averred that all parents interviewed showed a systematic ideological inclination towards ethnicity and ancestry, such an affinity did surface on a few occasions, as in the case of Hélène:

> I learned about KM as a school subject on TV, and I said to myself that our language is worth something [...] This language has been created and passed on to us by our slave ancestors […] It's my roots [...] The miseries endured by slaves are reflected in this language […] I am proud of it. It's a good thing that it's being valorised at school […] I try to convince others to opt for it, even if they sometimes laugh off the suggestion. (Extract from Hélène's narrative)

What is particularly striking in Hélène's words is the strong emotional undertone as she mentions the suffering of her slave ancestors. Hélène's thinking appears to be aligned with the cause of the lobbyists who fought for the official recognition and valorisation of Kreol, as she mentions that she even attempts to convince other parents to follow her example and opt for the language on behalf of their children.

On the other hand, ancestry and heritage did not constitute the initial drive for Patrick and Arielle's decision to choose KM. However, the realisation that the subject afforded the possibility of better discovering certain features of their ancestors' life in Mauritius provided an impetus to make the child stick to the study of KM till the end of their primary schooling.

For other parents, the link between KM, ethnicity and religion was unequivocal and justified the decision to opt for the language:

> We're Catholics, and at church we sing songs in Kreol. I don't think this is the case for other religions in Mauritius. So, it makes sense that my child learns this language, in the same way as children of other religious faiths learn the language in

which they pray. (Extract from Patricia's narrative).

The religious dimension was even more evident in Hélène's justification:

I've always felt that when I recite the psalms in Kreol, it's as if I'm talking directly to God, and now there's a book of psalms translated in Kreol, as well as the New Testament [...] I took all these things into consideration while making out whether my child should study KM or not [...] My daughter who's in Grade 6 can read the psalms in Kreol at the altar […] The priest encourages her a lot.

Her words reveal that Kreol is not merely a medium to transmit religious knowledge and values but rather, a means of experiencing these.

Language ideology concerning ancestry/heritage/ethnicity has emerged as a significant shaper of the parents' decision. This finding, which is in line with studies that bring out the strong connect between language, ancestry/heritage/ethnicity and identity (See Fought, 2006; & Harmon, 2017), gains an added dimension with the inclusion of the religious element that also served as a motivating factor. It draws our attention to the fact that in multicultural settings like Mauritius, religion cannot be dissociated from identity.

PARENTAL SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

While the literature survey had revealed that parental involvement in their children's education was mostly evidenced through the links they established with the school, this study brought out another level of parental commitment to their children's education, namely, the need to be able to support them in the learning process, for instance, by assisting with homework. Priscilla confided that:

I grew up in a rural area and picked a few words of Hindi, but these will hardly suffice for me to assist my daughter with her homework… I was encouraged in my decision upon learning that a dictionary of Mauritian Kreol exists. This meant that I would be able to help my daughter learn KM.

Some parents went to the extent of learning components of KM that they were not conversant with, such as the orthography, so that they could help their children. Two participants, namely Patrick and Arielle, revealed that they had initially found it difficult to help their child, as they themselves did not know the orthography of Mauritian Kreol. However, after having learnt it from their child's textbook, or from the child herself – as in the case of Hélène ("Mo tifi fer Miss ar mwa!") – they were better able to guide them. Interestingly, this led the parents to

develop their own proficiency in KM, so much so that Patrick and Arielle can now detect language mistakes on posters or official government notices written in Kreol!

Parental commitment to the education of their children is by no means a new finding, even less so in a context such as Mauritius, where a highly competitive spirit prevails in the educational sphere and where academic achievement is crucial for a successful career path. What is striking, however, is the fact that such commitment is noticeable with respect to Kreol, a language that is generally perceived as carrying little or no weight as far as career options are concerned. From this perspective, it became interesting to observe parents displaying the same fervour they would show for other subjects. In doing so, they revealed that they valued the subject KM no less.

ACADEMIC BENEFITS OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Another key finding in this study, which is in line with the plethora of research on mother tongue education, is that "children taught in their mother tongue are likely to develop literacy more easily" (World Education Blog, 2018). Patrick and Arielle commented on how the ease and progress displayed by their child in the learning of KM was unparalleled in other subjects:

Our son struggles to reach 150 words for an English or French composition, but in Kreol, he goes up to 300 words […] We are proud of his achievements in KM; of the way in which he can read texts fluently [...] He scored A+ for the second term internal exams! We hope that one day he can write a book in Kreol or that he even becomes a KM teacher…

The pride in Patrick and Arielle's voices could also be detected in that of Priscilla who, talking about her daughter, revealed that:

With her teacher's help, she did something I would have never thought or dreamt of: she wrote a small book in KM as a birthday gift for her brother. I feel proud to hear my 9-year old child read fluently in a language that even highly educated adults sometimes struggle to read!

The sense of achievement that these parents experienced at the taste of success undoubtedly acted as an impetus for their child to pursue learning KM. The advantage of mother tongue education, however, was not restricted to literacy development, but spanned across the curriculum, as brought out by Priscilla: "The KM book contains reading texts about how life was in the past; and so, this

helps my daughter better understand topics that she comes across in her History & Geography class."

This observation – reiterated by Hélène, Patrick and Arielle – becomes especially significant in the light of CPE examinations'[12] reports, which, more often than not, attribute poor performance in subjects like Maths, History, Geography and Science at primary level to the fact that they are taught in English. Here, it can be noted that the cross curricular approach adopted by KM curriculum developers was considered to have provided the children with some grounding in History and Geography before they were taught the concepts in English.

Notions of language learning

It was interesting to note that the participants, who came from diverse walks of life, demonstrated a sound understanding of factors that support language learning. Indeed, a salient finding that emanated from the study was that the parents' decision was driven by the understanding that the language had to be meaningful for their children. Before the introduction of KM in the school curriculum, parents sometimes chose one of the other languages being offered, even though it was not their ancestral language. Also, the fact that their children hardly encountered or used that language in their daily life impacted negatively on the learning process. As Patricia revealed, having witnessed the struggle of her two older children, she was not willing to make her third child undergo the same experience:

My eldest daughter had chosen Urdu and was able to write a few sentences after a few years, but the language is not present at all around us, and when she left school she forgot everything she had learnt in Urdu [...] I saw the same pattern with my second daughter, who had studied Tamil [...] So, when the class teacher advised me to opt for the new subject KM for my third child, as this would help him, I said 'Why not'?

The fact that KM is commonly used on an everyday basis not only makes learning purposeful, but also facilitates the process. Unknowingly, Patricia echoes Vygotsky's constructivist theory of learning which highlights the role of social interaction.

Chantal was another parent whose choice was driven by pragmatism. The fact that other languages being offered were

[12]CPE examinations: Until 2016, the Certificate of Primary Education examinations assessed pupils at the end of primary schooling. A secondary school was then allocated to them on the basis of grades obtained at the CPE exams. In 2017, the CPE was replaced by the PSAC (Primary Schooling Achievement Certificate), but the modus operandi regarding secondary school allocation remained more or less the same.

unknown to her prompted her to move off the beaten track and opt for KM:

At the RCA school where my child was enrolled, I had the choice between the study of KM and Modern Chinese, but as I don't know anything about Modern Chinese, I didn't opt for it. So, on admission day, when we had to communicate our choice to the office, it was a straightforward and instantaneous decision for me. *Pa ti ena nanye pou reflesi*[13] *][...* As often in the Creole community, a cousin of mine had chosen Modern Chinese for his son, but this did not influence my decision.

Both Patricia and Chantal show us that functional considerations regarding language learning and language use are key in decision-making. It must be pointed out that their practical approach offsets the more affective motives underlying choices related to ancestry/heritage.

Language interference was another feature that came under the spotlight. Due to the obvious level of lexical similarity between KM and French, the possibility of KM impacting negatively (Migge et al., 2010) on the learning of French, a language that connotes prestige in Mauritius, did feature in various narratives. Some parents admitted that this fear had occurred to them while deciding whether they should enrol their children for the study of KM or not. Others pointed out that when they observed instances of confusion or negative transfer from KM to French[14], they wondered whether they should deregister their children from the KM class. However, these behaviourist notions did not hold the parents back as opinions concurred about the fact that confusion and negative transfers are short-lived, especially if they are systematically corrected. It may be said that the parents' experiences of language learning as bilinguals have led them to develop constructivist understandings of the process.

On the other hand, Patrick's comment concerning the issue of confusion and negative transfer was rather interesting. According to him, though confusion between Kreol and French does occur, its impact remains minimal in the local context given the dearth of print in Kreol. The textbook is one of the rare books in KM that children come across in their study of the language. It is noteworthy that Patrick views an adverse feature of language learning, namely the absence of corpus, as an asset! At one

[13] "There was nothing to reflect about."

[14] Even though the two languages 'sound' rather similar, there are some marked differences in the writing. For instance, French makes use of accented characters, while Mauritian Kreol doesn't. Moreover, all letters are pronounced in Mauritian Kreol, which is not the case in French.

level, this could be construed as evidence of parental decision being based on misconceptions regarding language learning since exposure to print is but one of several factors that lead to language interference (Lekova, 2010). At another level, however, Patrick's words may be indicative of the fact that when parents are convinced of the benefits of the language for their children, obstacles are overlooked and hurdles minimised.

FIGHTING INNER DEMONS…

As the parents dwelt upon reasons that prompted them to choose KM for their ward, it emerged that, at times, they could be combatting their own demons or the prospective demons their children may have to face. Arielle explained how a necessity she felt for herself drove the choice that she made for her son:

I work in the typing pool of a secondary school, and once I had to type a questionnaire in KM… Since there is no spellchecker for this language, I found it really hard to type the texts. The fact that I struggled a lot somehow reinforced my conviction that knowing a language – whether local or international and whether prestigious or not – is always a good thing. I can say that this incident has partly prompted me in encouraging my son to study KM.

As yet another illustration that opting for KM on behalf of one's child may be motivated by very personal factors, Hélène explains how the process of enrolling her daughter for the KM class was a means for her to reverse language patterns and representations that she had internalised as a result of what she had seen and heard her own mother do and say about the relative worthlessness of the mother tongue:

I remember that my mother didn't like it when we used certain words, like 'dilo' or 'douri'[15]. She used to scold us and said it's an unrefined language [...] But now she sees that I behave differently with my children and she's starting to understand my point […]

By assertively exercising this choice vis-à-vis herself, her children and her relatives, Hélène is indirectly combating the creolophobia (Bavoux, 2002) that she had witnessed and had, to a certain extent, imbibed.

Through Arielle and Hélène, we realise that personal motivations emanating from biographic experiences of a language exert substantial force on current day decisions. The parents, through the decision taken, wish to protect their children from similar experiences and hence, learning Kreol is viewed as a means of empowering their offspring.

[15] In Mauritian Kreol, these words are considered as being rather unrefined versions of 'delo' (water) and 'diri' (rice).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we set out to investigate the motivational forces behind the choice of Mauritian Kreol as an optional school subject at primary level. To that end, we focused on parents, as they are the ones who effect this decision on behalf of their children. Whilst we did not proceed from any assumption or hypothesis, we were conscious that such an endeavour would necessarily bring us in contact with a discourse that is heavily marked by the ethnic rhetoric, given the peculiar socio-political circumstances surrounding the introduction of the subject in the official school curriculum. Indeed, to an extent, the findings echoed the discourse prevalent in the literature, namely, concerning language ideologies and their link with ancestry, ethnicity and heritage. It therefore was not surprising to hear the participants speak of the need to recognise, valorise and promote Kreol. By choosing to make their children study this language, they contributed to a cause they espoused. Similarly, parental commitment was another finding that resonated with studies in the area of parental involvement in the education of their children. Further, the study also reaffirmed the benefits of Mother Tongue education.

However, a plethora of findings allowed us to go beyond what the extant literature has brought out concerning parental involvement in education and educational choices made by parents on behalf of their children. When it comes to language study, this literature tends to relate mostly to choices and decisions made by parents who have migrated to other countries and who therefore are concerned by issues of acculturation and heritage preservation. This study helped to widen the debate by considering the case of a majority language enjoying relatively low prestige in a small island context. If on the one end, we saw the 'discourse of ethnic appurtenance' as a motivating factor, it was interesting to observe that some parents broke away from emotional reasoning and adopted a more practical stance, considering instead the benefits of learning Kreol in the present (as opposed to reasons related to the past).

At another level, we noticed how the past of the parents and the present of their children became enmeshed, with parents taking steps to remedy what they had lived through earlier. As such, we learnt how, in a context where the use of KM is often regulated, forbidden or looked down upon, signing up for the study of Kreol became both an affirming and a liberating act from painful linguistic experiences from the past. This cathartic element brings out how deeply language experiences are embedded within the self. Along the same line of thought, the

connection made between language and religion in a context of parental decision for subject choices is a powerful commentary on how language permeates different dimensions of our lives.

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