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## What shapes parents' attitudes towards bilingual education? Evidence from Mozambique

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# What shapes parents' attitudes towards bilingual education?

Evidence from Mozambique

Sara Alhola,<sup>1</sup> Feliciano Chimbutane,<sup>2</sup> and Ritva Reinikka<sup>1,\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study explores parental attitudes towards bilingual education in Mozambique. To improve foundational learning, several countries in sub-Saharan Africa have re-evaluated their language-of-education policies and experimented with bilingual education. Community buy-in is essential for a successful bilingual programme, particularly in contexts where former colonial languages retain socioeconomic prestige. Despite variation across schools, our findings, based on focus group discussions in Maputo and Nampula provinces, show that a majority of parents support bilingual education. Initial scepticism often shifted when observing their children learning to read. However, parents consistently expressed concerns about their children not learning adequate Portuguese, the most common reason for opposing bilingual education. Furthermore, parents lacked information about the rationale, practices, and benefits of bilingual education—for which a remedy would be the school providing full and regular information. Apart from parental buy-in (demand side), for a successful bilingual programme effective implementation (supply side) is indispensable to produce robust learning results—the most critical factor shaping parental attitudes.

**Key words:** bilingual education, language of instruction, parental attitudes, education policy, implementation, focus groups, Mozambique

**JEL classification:** I21, I29

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# 1 Introduction

Despite the impressive expansion in enrolment in recent decades, many school children around the world spend years in school without significantly improving their literacy and numeracy skills. This learning crisis is estimated to affect about half of the learners in low- and middle-income countries. (UNESCO 2017; World Bank 2017).

Basic literacy and numeracy are foundational skills that all children should be able to acquire in early grades. Foundational skills are indispensable for any further learning as well as success in the workforce. Foundational learning is also more than rote learning—it requires conceptual understanding for problem-solving (RISE Research and Communications 2023).

This paper focuses on Mozambique, a low-income developing country that faces an enormous task in ensuring universal mastery of foundational skills in early grades. In a national learning assessment in 2016, only 4.9 per cent of Grade 3 students achieved the reading and writing skills as required in the curriculum (INDE/MINEDH 2017), a decline from an already very low achievement rate of 6.3 per cent in 2013 (INDE/MINEDH 2014).<sup>1</sup> Another source of nationally representative evidence on foundational learning is the Service Delivery Indicators survey, which showed that, in 2018, less than half of Grade 4 students were able to recognize simple words, and less than 20 per cent were able to read a paragraph in Portuguese (Bassi et al. 2019).

Many reasons have been suggested to explain the poor learning outcomes in Mozambique. These include, among others, an exceedingly rapid expansion of the education system, high levels of student and teacher absenteeism, inadequate pre-service and in-service training opportunities for teachers, dominance of monolingual (Portuguese-only) basic education, poor nutrition, hunger, and poverty (UNESCO 2023).

According to research evidence, teacher quality is one critical factor in learning. Out of observable characteristics, subject-specific teacher skills have most consistently had a positive impact on student achievement. Most of this research, however, originates in high-income countries. For example, in a sample of 31 OECD countries, Hanushek et al. (2019) found that the increase of 1 standard deviation (SD) in teachers' literacy and numeracy skills was associated with a significant increase in student performance of 0.10–0.15 SD.

Using data from the 2014 SDI survey, which tested both Mozambican Grade 4 students for learning and their classroom teachers for literacy (Portuguese) and numeracy skills, Holvio (2022) estimated the causal impact of teacher content knowledge on student learning. In Mozambique, unlike in OECD countries, teacher content knowledge had little or no impact on student learning, on average. Yet, there was considerable heterogeneity in the results. Specifically, raising teacher content knowledge by 1 SD improved student achievement by 0.14 SD for students whose home language was Portuguese, similar to results in the OECD countries (Hanushek et al. 2019). Portuguese-speaking students were able to benefit from teachers' higher content knowledge, whereas the average

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<sup>1</sup> The latest national learning assessment was carried out in 2024 but results have not been published at the time of writing. Some stakeholders have recently expressed a concern about the tests used in the Mozambican national assessments, specifically how accurately these tests are able to measure foundational skills.

Mozambican primary student—who started school with little or no understanding of Portuguese—was not. These findings were an important impetus for this paper and our focus on bilingual education as a potential way to bridge the language gap in early grades and, by doing so, significantly improve foundational learning in Mozambique.

The language of instruction is an important policy choice in education for any country. This is especially true in sub-Saharan Africa where there is a high degree of linguistic diversity, and where most countries are multilingual with an ex-colonial language—English, French, or Portuguese—chosen as the official language. Large majorities speak non-dominant languages at home but must learn in the official language at school or use it in other formal domains. Many countries have, therefore, opted for a transitional bilingual education policy, that is, teaching first in the home language (L1) and later introducing the second (dominant, ex-colonial) language (L2). This approach—often started as a pilot scheme—is based on education theory that recommends that, for the best learning results, schooling should begin in the language the child knows best (Ouane and Glanz 2010, 2011; Walter and Benson 2012). It also argues that education is most effective when teachers and students speak (well) the same language. In this transitional model, L2 becomes the only language of instruction in upper grades, whereas L1 remains as a subject.

Since independence in 1975, as in the earlier colonial era, Portuguese has been the language of instruction at all levels of education in Mozambique. The purely monolingual orientation of the first post-independence years began to give way to some form of multilingualism introduced in the early 1990s, especially in the new constitution and the National Education System Law (Chimbutane 2011). Bilingual education was launched, on an experimental basis, in 2003, and has expanded considerably in recent years mostly with foreign aid funding. However, bilingual education is yet to be offered universally in Mozambique.

Despite two decades of experimentation and expansion of bilingual education, Portuguese continues to enjoy the status of the language of socioeconomic mobility and sociocultural prestige in Mozambique (Chimbutane 2013; Chimbutane et al. 2022). These can be thought of as *ultimate* causes for attitudes towards bilingual education. But attitudes can also be shaped by *intermediate* causes, such as weak implementation (e.g., see Trudell and Piper 2014 on Kenya) or insufficient resources. Scarcity of trained bilingual teachers or lack of learning materials in African languages are often manifestations of such intermediate causes. There can also be little advocacy and engagement to obtain parental and community buy-in and participation in the design and implementation of education based on African languages (Stroud 2001; Chiatoh 2011 for Cameroon).

Poorly implemented and under-resourced bilingual education programmes, which have little or no community and parental buy-in or participation, do not offer an environment where students learn foundational skills effectively (Ouane and Glanz 2011). Such a weak learning environment may explain, at least partly, why parents<sup>2</sup> have often preferred to opt out from bilingual education in Mozambique (Chimbutane 2011) and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Bunyi 2008 for Kenya;

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<sup>2</sup> In the Mozambican context, many children have guardians, often grandparents or other relatives, who interact with the school as their parents may be away as migrant workers, or deceased. In this paper, we use ‘parents’ to refer to both parents and guardians.

Rubagumya 2003 for Tanzania). This can create a negative feedback loop and prevent mainstreaming of bilingual education into the country's education system.

This study focuses on community and parental buy-in and participation in bilingual education at the school level in Mozambique. Specifically, using semi-structured focus group discussions, we provide an exploratory investigation into parents' attitudes towards bilingual education and factors that shape their attitudes. We pose the following research questions based on a set of assumptions:

- (i) *Assumption:* Parents' attitudes are an important factor in mainstreaming of bilingual education, its successful implementation, and, consequently, for improving foundational learning.  
*Question:* Are Mozambican parents' attitudes towards bilingual education positive, negative, or indifferent? Have these attitudes changed over time?
- (ii) *Assumption:* Available information influences attitudes. The more information parents have on (the benefits of) bilingual education, the more positive are their attitudes.  
*Question:* How much information do parents have on bilingual education? What do parents expect from their children's school in terms of information and community mobilization?
- (iii) *Assumption:* Children's learning results and labour market prospects influence parents' attitudes towards bilingual education.  
*Question:* How do parents see the role of bilingual education in terms of their children's learning results and labour market prospects?
- (iv) *Assumption:* Effectiveness of implementation can affect attitudes towards bilingual education. The better the implementation of the bilingual programme, the more positive parents' attitudes.  
*Question:* How do parents perceive implementation of bilingual education at the school level, especially, regarding learning materials and teaching? What can parents' observations tell us about the effectiveness of implementation of bilingual education in Mozambique?
- (v) *Assumption:* General attitudes or sociocultural factors towards local languages affect parents' attitudes.  
*Question:* What are parents' general attitudes towards local languages and how are these reflected in their attitudes towards bilingual education?

This study complements an earlier study that investigated bilingual education at the school level in Mozambique, specifically regarding the roles, attitudes, and actions of school directors, teachers, and local education officials—the 'supply side' of bilingual education (Chimbutane and Reinikka 2023). In contrast, this paper explores the 'demand side,' again, at the school level.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes recent literature on the (quantitative) impact of bilingual education on foundational learning in sub-Saharan Africa, including Mozambique, as well as findings on attitudes towards bilingual education across the world. Section 3 focuses on the Mozambican institutional context, including the sociolinguistic context, bilingual education policy and implementation, and community mobilization. Section 4 discusses the method, fieldwork, and data of the study. Section 5 presents our results. They cover parents' attitudes towards bilingual education and factors influencing these attitudes. The latter include information parents possess on bilingual education and views of the role of the school in informing parents; children's learning results and labour market prospects; implementation of bilingual education, especially

learning materials and teaching; as well as sociocultural aspects. Section 6 discusses the findings, while Section 7 summarizes and concludes.

## 2 Literature review

In this section we review, first, quantitative empirical evidence on the impact of bilingual education on foundational learning in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>3</sup> and, second, literature on attitudes towards bilingual education across the world. Both reviews include available studies from Mozambique.

### 2.1 Impact of bilingual education on foundational learning

What is the impact of bilingual education on foundational learning? Can the use of children's home language in school make a difference for acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills? In this section we review several quantitative impact evaluations from sub-Saharan African countries that allow causal inference. Although somewhat less robust in terms of identification strategies, a few impact assessments are also available for Mozambique.

In neighbouring South Africa, Mohohlwane et al. (2024) present evidence on cross-linguistic transfer<sup>4</sup> between home language (L1) and second language (L2), using results of two randomized evaluations of structured pedagogy programmes. These large-scale programmes targeted early grade literacy by a package of measures to improve classroom teaching. Both programmes had the same design, implementing organization, and duration. Both programmes were effectively implemented. The key difference was that one programme targeted the teaching of reading in L1, whereas the other targeted L2, which was English.

Both interventions had a positive effect on the language the programme targeted. The L1 intervention improved reading proficiency in L1 by 0.25 SD, whereas the L2 intervention increased reading proficiency in L2 by 0.11 SD. Interestingly, there were also impacts on the other language that was not targeted by the intervention. The L1 programme was found to improve reading proficiency in L2, too, but the L2 programme affected reading in L1 negatively (although only for lower-performing students). Based on these results, it seems cost-effective to prioritize learning to read in L1, even if becoming proficient in L2 is also an important policy objective.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Many more countries in sub-Saharan Africa have adopted bilingual/multilingual education programmes than discussed here; we only include the programmes evaluated—quantitatively and causally—for impact.

<sup>4</sup> Cross-linguistic transfer embodies learners' use of linguistic knowledge of their first language to leverage the learning of a second language.

<sup>5</sup> A small caveat is that these results are derived from two experiments in two different populations. Although the two groups of students were similar in terms of socioeconomic status and education outcomes, their home language was different and, therefore, could potentially have had somewhat different responses to the treatment.

In Cameroon, Laitin et al. (2019) evaluated an experimental L1 programme for impact on foundational learning.<sup>6</sup> This was also a transitional programme implemented by an international non-profit organization. The evaluation found that, compared with the control group, participating students exhibited large gains in both maths and the second language (L2), which was English and taught as a subject in early grades. The gains amounted to 1.17–1.71 SD (maths) and 0.68–1.53 SD (English). The authors explain these (unusually) large impacts by primary teachers' poor English skills, which meant that learning in monolingual (English-only) classes was 'shockingly low'. In Grade 5, however, when all students attended monolingual classes, any advantage bilingual students had gained in early grades seemed to have dissipated, and students' test scores for both the treated and control group were low.

In Guinea-Bissau and Niger, Hovens (2002) compares test scores in foundational skills of experimental bilingual schools with those of monolingual schools.<sup>7</sup> In Guinea-Bissau the bilingual pilot programme used an abrupt transition from local language to Portuguese in Grade 3, whereas in Niger the transition to French was gradual. In both countries, resources were similar in both types of schools; only parents' socioeconomic status was lower in bilingual schools, which could act as a disadvantage in learning. The study found little difference in learning between bilingual and monolingual schools in Guinea-Bissau. In Niger, pupils who started in L1 could read and write better both in L1 and L2. In both countries, rural children and girls gained most from bilingual education. The country comparison also suggested that the earlier the bilingual programme starts teaching L2, and the later it introduces L2 as the medium of instruction, the better the results.

Ethiopia offers an example of late-exit bilingual programme in which English was introduced as the medium of instruction after Grade 8 and, in some cases, after Grade 6. Heugh et al. (2007) compare the scores of Grade 8 students in the national assessment in regions which used local language as the medium of instruction to those who were taught in English.<sup>8</sup> They show that students in mother tongue education performed better in mathematics and sciences than students in English-medium education. Furthermore, Heugh (2009) shows that students with eight years of mother tongue education had higher overall scores across the curriculum than students with six years, although the latter performed better in English. These results underscore the advantages of an extended use of L1 as medium of instruction compared with submersion (in which use of L1 is prohibited), L2-based monolingual models, and early-exit transition models of bilingual education.

In Mozambique, the earliest experiment of bilingual education<sup>9</sup> was implemented in the 1990s. A qualitative evaluation during its final two years (Grades 4 and 5) demonstrated that students had benefited greatly in terms of classroom participation, self-confidence, and biliteracy (Benson 2000).

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<sup>6</sup> The allocation of control and treatment status was not assigned randomly but, instead, through a heuristic matching procedure. It produced treated and control schools and students which were balanced along the available set of characteristics.

<sup>7</sup> In Guinea-Bissau a total of 1,214 early grade students were tested in 32 schools, while in Niger 1,664 students were tested in 36 schools. Students were selected randomly and independently from their teachers. The tests were implemented both in L1 and in L2.

<sup>8</sup> The study compares student scores in the upper cycle of primary education. All schools had mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the first cycle of primary education (Grades 1–4).

<sup>9</sup> *Projecto de Escolarização Bilingue em Moçambique* was implemented in Gaza (Changana-Portuguese) and Tete (Nyanja-Portuguese) provinces in 1993–97.



Although the quantitative evaluation of this experiment faced design issues—non-random selection of participants, abrupt transition from L1 to L2, and implementation hick-ups—it still provided enough useful evidence encouraging government to launch its first bilingual programme in 2003. When tested for learning, the majority of bilingual students earned passing scores in L1. In the written Portuguese test in Grade 4, bilingual students were clearly behind monolingual students, although top performers in both groups had similar scores. However, one additional year made a difference for bilingual students. When tested again in Grade 5, in one province bilingual students averaged slightly higher than their monolingual peers. In the other province, while remaining behind, bilingual students cut the prior year's difference in half.

Ngunga et al. (2010) assessed the learning achievement of Grade 3 bilingual and monolingual students in Mozambique.<sup>10</sup> This (small) study included the assessment of oral, reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Overall, bilingual students achieved better results in reading, writing, and mathematics (tested in L1) than their peers in monolingual education (tested in L2). In contrast, monolingual students demonstrated better oral skills in Portuguese.

To conclude, impact assessments confirm that bilingual programmes, typically experimental and externally funded, have delivered significant gains for early learning in sub-Saharan Africa. The Cameroon study—where the unusually large positive effects dissipated in upper grades—gave us a hint of the realities that experiments can face when mainstreamed. Therefore, one must ask: How do experiments scale-up as part of the country's education system, with domestic finance? What about parents' attitudes towards expansion of bilingual education beyond experiments? Do they support or resist it?

Similar questions are also posed in a recent review paper of several francophone West African countries (Ball et al. 2024). Importantly, the review argues that successes (or failures) in scale-up depend on the context. What works in one country or community may not work in another. To realize the benefits of bilingual education, its scale-up faces a broad range of social, cultural, and political factors, and institutional capacity issues specific to the country or community. All these factors influence programme design, implementation, and parents' attitudes.

## 2.2 Attitudes towards bilingual education

Bilingual education has produced mixed reactions from parents and communities worldwide, ranging from high demand to complete rejection. In cases where a language is considered to be of lower social standing than another (dominant) language, high demand for bilingual education tends to be associated with *integrative motivation*, such as acquiring cultural knowledge or wanting to belong to a group. Low demand for bilingual education using a low-status language tends to be associated with (lack of) *instrumental motivation*, such as (expected) poorer performance in examinations, limited opportunities for career advancement, or lower earnings (e.g., Chimbutane et al. 2022; Chonane 2024; Moses 2000; Terra 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> The programme was implemented in Gaza province with the support of UDEBA-Lab, a non-governmental organization, in 2003–09.

Limited support for bilingual education has been observed in many multilingual contexts. These include the United States (Moses 2000), India (Sridhar 1994), Malaysia, and Singapore (Gupta 1997). In sub-Saharan Africa, studies from Kenya (Bunyi 2008; Trudell and Piper 2014; Manyoni et al. 2016), South Africa (Banda 2000; Phindane 2015), and Tanzania (Rubagumya 2003) show similar results. Parents felt that the use of a low-status language in education delayed or hampered their children's integration into the dominant language and culture, which was perceived as a prerequisite for socioeconomic mobility. In other words, according to research evidence, *instrumental motivation* seems to have dominated attitudes. In extreme cases, parents equated bilingual education to inferior education or saw it as a way to deny their children access to the language of privilege (Bamgbose 1999; Gupta 1997). Instrumental motivation may help explain why many parents in post-colonial contexts, such as Mozambique, prefer to enrol their children in public or private schools that teach in European languages. It is considered the fastest and most effective way to assimilate into the dominant language and culture. Especially urban and middle-class parents demonstrate this preference (Chimbutane and Gonçalves 2023; Sumich 2018).

However, there are also studies that show how the use of African languages in education helped bridge the gap between rural schools and surrounding communities. For example, following the introduction of first bilingual classes in Mozambique, Kitoko-Nsiku (2007) showed how bringing together teachers, students, and parents, and making the school a participatory centre for learning, affected attitudes about the entire educational environment positively. The use of local language enabled classroom interaction and facilitated the mobilization of community knowledge. Chimbutane (2015) showed similar findings nearly a decade later.

In Mozambique, a few studies have asked whether sociocultural gains<sup>11</sup> are enough to sustain bilingual education in the post-colonial context. Chimbutane (2013) found that, to gain status and flourish, bilingual education must be effective and successful not only in local languages but also in Portuguese, which is seen as a gateway to employment opportunities, economic advancement, and power. In other words, bilingual education can sustainably succeed if it is able to deliver not only sociocultural but also academic benefits that lead to socioeconomic gains (e.g., Chimbutane 2011, 2013; Mataruca 2014). Uneducated parents—who have not gone to school—were found to be more supportive of bilingual education, whereas educated parents supported monolingual education, emphasizing the importance of learning Portuguese (Henriksen 2014).

### 3 Institutional context

In this section we discuss, first, the sociolinguistic context of Mozambique; second, the government's bilingual education policy and its implementation, and third, experience in community mobilization to support bilingual education.

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<sup>11</sup> In terms of sociocultural gains, bilingual education can help legitimize marginalized languages and cultures, maintain and develop local languages, and integrate local knowledge and communities in schools (Chimbutane 2011).

### 3.1 Sociolinguistic context

Mozambique is a multilingual polity, with over 20 Bantu languages<sup>12</sup> spoken across the country, in addition to Portuguese and a few foreign languages. According to the 2017 national population census, 82 per cent of the population reported speaking a Bantu language and 58 per cent Portuguese (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2019). About 80 per cent of the citizens speak a Bantu language as their mother tongue in contrast to 16.6 per cent whose mother tongue is Portuguese.

Despite this sociolinguistic profile, Portuguese, a former colonial language, maintains its privileged status as the sole official language of the country. In contrast, no official status has been granted to Bantu languages that continue to be confined to informal domains and functions. The argument for the choice of Portuguese as the official language at independence in 1975 was to ensure national harmony, modernization, and internationalization. The unifying ideology underpinning this choice was epitomized by the declaration of Portuguese as *língua da unidade nacional* (i.e. the language of national unity).

Consistent with this choice, Portuguese is the de facto language of formal education, socioeconomic mobility, and social distinction, notwithstanding some changes taking place since the 1990s (see Section 1). This may explain, by and large, why many parents, in particular urban and middle-class parents, prefer to socialize and formally educate their children exclusively in Portuguese, even if they continue to be socioculturally attached to their ancestral languages and cultures (Chimbutane and Gonçalves 2023).

### 3.2 Bilingual education policy and implementation

Bilingual education in Mozambican primary schools was introduced two decades ago on an experimental basis. Since then, the programme has expanded gradually, from 14 schools in 2003 to 3,225 schools in 2021 (UNESCO 2023). Currently, almost a quarter of all 13,800 primary schools offer bilingual classes (MINEDH 2022). Despite the substantial expansion—particularly in the two most populous provinces, Nampula and Zambézia, thanks to a series of projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—country-wide coverage remains uneven.

The Mozambican government's *Bilingual Education Expansion Strategy for 2020–29* lays out the framework for a gradual expansion of bilingual programme throughout the country (MINEDH 2019). Today bilingual education is offered in 19 local languages. The strategy calls for expansion to linguistically homogeneous communities, identification and training of teachers, community mobilization to ensure understanding and buy-in from parents and community leaders, and training of school directors and district education officers for effective management of the bilingual approach.

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<sup>12</sup> These languages are also referred to as 'Mozambican languages' or 'local languages'.

The primary school curriculum was also reformed recently to focus more on foundational skills (MINEDH 2020).<sup>13</sup> This is in recognition that many learners leave primary school without basic literacy and numeracy. Implementation of the revised curriculum, which started in 2017 from Grade 1, moved ahead one grade per year. The revised Grade 6—the final year of primary school today—curriculum was introduced in 2022.

Mozambique uses the transitional bilingual education model that starts in the early grades with home language (L1) as the medium of instruction along with lessons in Portuguese as the second language (L2). In Grades 1 and 2, as shown in Table 1, students learn reading, writing, and maths in local languages but Portuguese only orally. In Grade 3, students begin to read and write in Portuguese. With each grade, instruction time in Portuguese increases, with local languages maintained as a subject.

**Table 1: L1 to L2 transition in bilingual education, Grades 1–6**

Discipline	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Portuguese language	L2 oral	L2 oral	L2 oral + L2 reading and writing	L2 reading and writing	L2 reading and writing*	L2 reading and writing*
Mozambican languages	L1	L1	L1	L1	L1	L1
Mathematics	L1	L1	L1	L2*	L2*	L2*
Social sciences	—	—	—	L1	L1	L2*
Natural sciences	—	—	—	L1	L2*	L2*
Visual education, arts and crafts	—	—	—	—	L1	L2*
Physical education	L1	L1	L2	L2	L2	L2
% L1	80	80	67.7	43.3	16.7	6.7
% L2	20	20	30.3	56.7	83.3	93.3

Note: \* indicates that a similar teaching programme and books as for monolingual students are used.

Source: authors' compilation based on MINEDH (2020).

Most bilingual teachers in Mozambique have been trained to teach in the monolingual programme and have to adapt to teach in Mozambican languages. In an early study of teacher preparedness, Patel (2006) notes that teachers were unfamiliar with the theories of bilingual education and lacked the command of the curriculum. A decade later, bilingual teachers still lacked pedagogical knowledge and skills in bilingual education (Terra 2021) and continued to use monolingual pedagogies (Chimbutane 2015). This has also been a concern of Mozambican parents (Mataruca 2014).

### 3.3 Community mobilization

In the past, language-in-education policies used to be decreed in a top-down manner, rather than taking into account the needs and opinions of parents and communities. This approach began to

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<sup>13</sup> To reserve more time for foundational skills, English language and music education were dropped from the revised curriculum.

change globally around the time when Mozambique first introduced its pilot in 2003. For bilingual programmes to be successful, Stroud (2002) suggested that community ownership, along with local input and community management, should be maximized. Bilingual education policies in Mozambique have reflected this recommendation, and various approaches have been tried out by government, civil society organizations, and development partners engaged in bilingual programmes. These include awareness campaigns, use of media such as community radios, dissemination of learning results, and involvement of local administrators and leaders (Chonane 2024; Henriksen 2014; Kitoko-Nsiku 2007; MINEDH 2020).

A key objective in these various approaches has been to change negative attitudes towards bilingual education, especially by informing communities and parents of the advantages of instruction in both African languages and Portuguese. However, several studies suggest that community mobilization efforts may not have produced a significant change in people's attitudes (Chimbutane 2011, 2013; Chonane 2024; Cumbane 2020). These studies suggest that, to achieve its goals, community mobilization efforts should be 'more dynamic and effective' than they have been so far.

For example, Chimbutane (2011, 2013) found that, when mobilization is effectively implemented, local communities in Mozambique tend to embrace bilingual education, which is primarily seen as a way to promote, preserve, and develop African languages and associated cultures. In Maputo province, Cumbane (2020) found that community participation was negligible as communities remained at the margins of teaching and learning processes; bilingual education did not contribute much towards their empowerment. Yet, community participation was significant in other areas, such as school construction and maintenance of school infrastructure.

In a recent study, also in Maputo province, Chonane (2024) found a weak effort in community mobilization. Most parents were not aware of the purpose of bilingual education, or how it was implemented in their children's school. Parents reported that it was only at the opening ceremony of the school year when parents had learnt about their children's assignment to a bilingual class.

In sum, based on available evidence, community mobilization remains weak in Mozambican bilingual education.

## **4 Method, fieldwork, and data**

As this study is exploratory in nature, we attempt to answer our research questions (Section 1) using focus group discussions. In other words, we try to understand what, broadly speaking, shapes or underlies parents' attitudes towards bilingual education in Mozambique. This also helps lay the groundwork for subsequent quantitative analysis.

Researchers using focus group discussions as their (qualitative) research method typically prepare in advance a set of targeted questions designed to elicit collective views from participants about the topic under study. Interaction is fundamentally important during a focus group discussion. Facilitators help generate in-depth conversations, enabling, to the maximum extent, everyone's participation within the group. They encourage participants to express themselves in their own language. Participants are discussing together rather than reacting to interview questions individually. Focus group data are, therefore, a sum of the structured protocol of targeted questions, presentation of the

facilitators, and the interaction with and between participants (e.g., see Parker and Tritter 2006; van Ingelgom 2020).

The purpose of focus group research is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine a range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation (Krueger and Casey 2009, quoted in van Ingelgom 2020).

Participants are invited to engage in focus groups because they have something in common with each other—in our case parents of Mozambican primary school students. In a successful focus group session, a kind of momentum is generated that allows underlying opinions, meanings, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs to emerge alongside individual experiences (Parker and Tritter 2006). At the collective level, what often emerges from a focus group discussion is a number of positions or views that capture the majority of the participants' standpoints. Focus group discussions seldom generate consensus but create a number of views that different proportions of the group support.

The fieldwork for this study was carried out during September and October in 2023 in Maputo and Nampula provinces. Each province had a (separate) team of experienced researchers who also spoke the local language. The teams facilitated focus groups using a predetermined set of themes or questions (Section 1). In both provinces, focus groups were organized in three districts, in which two schools per district were selected, resulting in a total of 12 school-based focus groups (Table 2). The school director together with teachers extended an open invitation to parents to participate in the focus group discussions that were held in the school premises.

In Maputo province—surrounding the capital city in the southernmost area of Mozambique—the selected schools were located in the Manhiça, Matutuíne, and Magude districts. Two of the schools used Ronga as the home language in bilingual education, whereas the remaining four schools used Changana. Nampula is the most populous province in the country, with Macua as the main local language. As mentioned earlier, USAID has supported bilingual education for the past decade in Nampula province. USAID's initial focus was on local language literacy. Subsequently, the focus shifted to supporting government's bilingual education programme as a whole.<sup>14</sup> The selected schools for our study were located in Mugovolos, Ribáuè, and Murrupula districts.

All 12 schools offered bilingual education, but not necessarily at every grade level (Table 2). The schools had also monolingual (Portuguese-only) classes. In the six schools in Maputo province, bilingual education had been introduced between 2017 and 2019. In Nampula province bilingual education was introduced more recently: two schools in 2019, three schools in 2020, and one school only in the beginning of 2023. Most schools had bilingual classes in Grades 1–4. In Nampula province, once the school introduced bilingual education, it was the only modality offered (i.e. no

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<sup>14</sup> The USAID-supported Aprender a Ler! sought to improve students' reading performance through teacher training and coaching, development and use of complementary reading material, and improved school management and district supervision. The subsequent Vamos Ler! programme supported MINEDH in expansion of bilingual education to 2,010 schools in Nampula and Zambézia provinces (USAID 2022). The most recent project SABER had plans to expand to Niassa and Cabo Delgado provinces and to add 1,395 new schools to bilingual education. However, in February 2025 the US government abruptly terminated this project along with thousands of other USAID projects across the world.

parallel monolingual classes), whereas the schools in Maputo province continued to offer parallel monolingual classes.

**Table 2: Characteristics of the sample schools**

Characteristic	(Number of schools)
All schools	12
Region	
Maputo	6
Nampula	6
Bilingual classes offered	
Grade 1	12
Grade 2	9
Grade 3	8
Grade 4	9
Grade 5	7
Grade 6	5
Language of instruction in bilingual education	
Changana	4
Ronga	2
Macua	6
Year bilingual education was introduced	
2017	2
2018	3
2019	3
2020	3
2023	1

Source: authors' compilation based on study data.

Our target was to have a total of ten parents agree to participate in each focus group. However, the number of attendees ended up being larger in some schools as more parents than expected responded positively to the invitation. We felt that it was important to include all parents who had come to the school with the purpose of participating in the focus group. The only prerequisite to join the group was that the parent (or guardian; see footnote 2) had at least one child currently enrolled in the school, whether in a bilingual or monolingual class.

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of the focus group participants. As can be seen, there were more participants in Nampula province as the focus groups were larger there. However, the total number of focus groups was the same—one per school—in both provinces. The majority of parents participating in the focus group discussion were female; the average age of participants was 35 years. More than three quarters of parents had a child in bilingual education and most of them also had a child in monolingual education.

**Table 3: Characteristics of focus group participants**

Characteristic	
<i>Number of participants (total)</i>	162
Region (%)	
Maputo	38.3
Nampula	61.7
Gender (%)	
Female	63.3
Male	36.7
Age (years)	
Average	35
Min	18
Max	68
Language (%)	
Changana	25.8
Ronga	11.3
Macua	62.9
<i>Children's current language modality (%)</i>	
Parents with children in bilingual education	77.8
Parents with children in monolingual education	56.8

Source: authors' compilation based on study data.

Facilitators informed focus group participants about the remit of the research, main topics for discussion, and processes of data transcription. They also reaffirmed confidentiality and anonymity. One member of the research team was assigned to take notes throughout the discussion. With the permission of participants, discussions were audio recorded so that the team could produce a full (verbatim) transcript from each focus group discussion. Afterwards, the team of facilitators held an internal debriefing that was summarized in a separate note. Verbatim transcripts were prepared in the local language and subsequently translated into Portuguese and English.

Our data analysis followed the general principles of qualitative data analysis. Specifically, we analysed the verbatim transcripts from the 12 focus group discussions systematically using the thematic analysis approach (e.g., van Ingelgom 2020). This included preparing topic matrices and summaries. With our research questions (Section 1) as the point of departure, we primarily adopted a deductive approach to structure the analysis. The predefined themes were used to identify and compare the views arising from the discussions. However, we also remained open to new insights by identifying and mapping frequently emerging themes. This allowed us to capture valuable parental perspectives that were not initially anticipated.

In addition, after having completed our deductive analysis, we used artificial intelligence (AI)<sup>15</sup> to examine the transcripts to identify patterns and generate insights related to our research questions. A comparison between our deductive analysis and the AI results did not reveal any material differences. Thus, AI served as an additional verification tool, providing us with an extra layer of confidence in the findings.

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<sup>15</sup> *Aalto AI Assistant*, which is linked to the ChatGPT language model.



## 5 Results

This section reports our findings. The overarching assumption of this study was that parents' attitudes are an important factor for a successful bilingual education programme which, in turn, would help improve exceedingly weak foundational learning in Mozambique. First, we explored whether parents' attitudes towards bilingual education were positive (supportive), negative (not-in-favour), or indifferent, and whether these attitudes have changed over time.

Second, we explored a number of factors expected to influence parents' attitudes towards bilingual education, including information available to parents, student learning results, expectations about students' labour market prospects, quality of implementation of bilingual programmes, and parents' sociocultural attitudes towards local languages.

### 5.1 Parents' attitudes

We found that, overall, parents' attitudes towards bilingual education varied across schools. Roughly half of the focus groups were unequivocally supportive of bilingual education. Among the other half, some focus groups expressed qualified support, whereas in a few schools parents' attitudes were decidedly negative. This variation was more notable in Nampula, where there was strong opposition in some schools.

In the schools where we witnessed unanimous support, parents were happy that their children learnt to read and write in their home language. Some parents even suggested that bilingual education should be the principal modality throughout primary education. Others believed that their children would face fewer difficulties in life when they learnt both the local language and Portuguese.

I liked the fact that there are two languages. Because the first one is our doctrine at the country level and Portuguese is a foreign language. . . . When a child is born, he must begin with his doctrine, then move on to international languages, because all these things will make it easier for him. (Man, 52 years)

While still mostly positive, in a few other schools, parents had some reservations, and their support was more nuanced. The main concern was that students may not learn enough Portuguese.

I think it [bilingual education] is important for those who like it. But we also have some disapproval as we already speak Changana at home, and we go to school because we want to learn Portuguese. (Woman, 39 years)

As said, in a few schools scepticism was pronounced, as parents saw little or no benefit from bilingual education. Many would have preferred their children to learn exclusively in Portuguese. The concern about students not learning enough Portuguese was urgently felt by parents—much more so than in the 'partially supportive' focus groups.

I don't like Macua being taught to my young son because I sent him to school so he could study Portuguese. At home we have our language, which is Macua, our mother

tongue. So, it does not make sense that here at school they study Macua, too, without studying Portuguese. I don't like it! (Man, 49 years)

In light of our evidence, it is not easy to determine whether attitudes had changed over time. A similar mix of attitudes had been reported in studies carried out (in Gaza province) over a decade ago (Chimbutane 2011, 2013), indicating little change in attitudes. At the same time, many focus group participants reported that their initially critical attitude had shifted. As experience of bilingual education accumulated, many parents had come to accept it. This could indicate an improvement in attitudes over time. At the very least, it illustrates that parents' attitudes are not static.

## 5.2 Information

Regarding factors that shape attitudes, we started by exploring whether information that parents have on bilingual education—on its rationale, implementation details, transition from home language to Portuguese—influenced their attitudes towards it. Our assumption was that the more information made available, the more supportive the parents. We asked parents participating in focus groups what they knew about bilingual education currently as well as before enrolling their children in school or before the school implemented bilingual education.

In most focus groups, parents reported that they had not been part of the decision-making when the school had initially adopted bilingual education. The lack of engagement meant that parents were often not convinced about the benefits of bilingual education when it was adopted. We also asked parents who ultimately decided the placement of children either in monolingual or bilingual class. In nearly all schools, parents said that the decision rested solely with the school. In some schools, parents had been asked about their language preference or their child's mother tongue, but this had seldom translated into a class placement decision.

This was not something we were informed about. We just came and saw our children receiving books in Macua. (Man, 46 years)

We found that parents often possessed little information on bilingual education when they came to enrol their children in school; many parents said this had led to scepticism and misconceptions. For example, the transition from local language to Portuguese was often unclear—some parents had thought that teaching would be solely in the local language throughout primary school.

We thought that children learnt in Ronga until the end of primary school. We were concerned about the higher grades because, in the secondary school, they learn in Portuguese and would face difficulties. (Woman, 53 years)

The information parents had on bilingual education remained, overall, highly variable across schools, and often incomplete. In schools where they had received more information (relative to other schools)—as expected—parents were more supportive of bilingual education. They understood the pedagogical rationale relatively well. A good example was a school where a separate meeting had been arranged at the beginning of the year to explain both the pedagogical benefits and implementation practicalities. Participants appreciated the fact that the parents whose children attended monolingual (Portuguese-only) classes were also included in the meetings.

However, there were focus groups where participants stated that they had received no information whatsoever about bilingual education from the school, or any other source. Some parents even learnt the specifics of bilingual education for the first time during our focus group discussion! Others said that they had only become aware of it when their children brought home learning materials that were in the local language instead of Portuguese.

Many parents don't know why bilingual education was introduced. Others only hear that Macua is being learnt, but the reason why instruction is in two languages is not known. I saw my children coming home with their Macua books, but I didn't know what was intended with this programme. (Man, 24 years)

In these schools (with less information), parents seemed unaware of any pedagogical benefits. In one school, parents had been told that the motivation of bilingual education was to improve knowledge of the local language and, thus, to help children succeed in places that used the same local language. Parents in that school were strongly opposed to bilingual education.

Across focus groups parents maintained that prevailing misconceptions were due to a lack of information, not only among parents but the whole community. This hindered acceptance of bilingual education and reduced support to it.

We should inform the entire community and a meeting should be held to open the school year and invite everyone to participate to clarify this further. . . . It's for you [school] to clarify to us the advantages of children learning in two languages . . . some parents simply refuse because they do not know the advantages. (Man, 53 years)

My opinion was that when the time comes for the opening meeting of the school year, regardless of whether you have a child or not, you should be present so that the teachers can inform us for everyone to know. (Woman, 43 years)

Parents expressed concerns about potential stigmatization of children in bilingual programmes or their families. This was because of the perceived inferiority of local languages compared with Portuguese and the perceived slower pace of bilingual students learning Portuguese (see also Chimbutane 2021). Parents felt that addressing these concerns was crucial to ensuring both parents' and children's comfort and willingness of children to continue going to school.

Overall, majority of schools had made an effort to inform parents, often in a meeting held at the beginning of the school year, but the information provided lacked specifics, and the meeting was a one-off event.

## **5.3 Student learning**

Across schools, parents indicated that their attitudes were influenced, most of all, by their children's progress in learning—progress that the parents themselves had witnessed. Many parents explained that, despite their initial scepticism, they had changed their mind and accepted bilingual education when they had noticed that their children were able to read in the local language soon after starting

school. Reading skills—rather than, say, numeracy—were what parents appreciated most. A number of participants also noted that their children had acquired reading skills earlier in a bilingual class compared with a monolingual one.

It is easier for our children to learn Changana and Portuguese, because those in Grade 1 are already reading. My son can already read, which really surprises me.  
(Woman, 29 years)

We see results. At first, we didn't accept it [bilingual education], because at home they already speak Changana. For them to study in *Changana* here at school, it wasn't good for us. But now, we can see that they are studying well, because even in church they can already read the Bible [in Changana]. (Woman, 45 years)

As in earlier studies (e.g., Chimbutane 2015), many participants pointed out how learning in the local language connected the school better with everyday life, and reduced the risk of dropping out before finishing primary school.<sup>16</sup> In several schools, initial resistance and scepticism had softened when parents had observed, in addition to improved learning, their children's more active participation in school work.

In fact, learning to read has been the most important aspect of bilingual education for Mozambican parents ever since the very first experiment in the 1990s. Already then parents expressed great pride in students' accomplishments in the mother tongue (Benson 2000). Just like in our study for more than a quarter century later, parents cited examples of the usefulness of their children's literacy, which ranged from reading the Bible aloud during church services to writing letters to family members working in South African mines. Then and now, parents want their children to learn.

Parents who reported positive learning results in both local language and Portuguese were the most supportive of all of bilingual education.

My son studied Macua, but when he reached Grade 5, I suddenly heard him speak Portuguese (laughter) and I asked him: "How does that work?" He answered: "I already stopped studying Macua and entered in Portuguese language." I wished him strength; maybe he can help us out in the future. (Woman, 38 years)

However, doubts about Portuguese language acquisition created resistance towards bilingual education. In the focus groups where opposition was strong, participants argued that they had enrolled their children in school for them to learn Portuguese. Negative experiences—such as witnessing a child going through bilingual education without learning to read and write properly in either language—increased parents' pressure on the school to switch to monolingual education. Many parents reported that they had not seen sufficient Portuguese acquisition in bilingual classes, putting their children in an unfavourable position relative to those in monolingual classes. Children's proficiency in Portuguese was also considered necessary in social settings—some parents had felt

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<sup>16</sup> Only 48 per cent finish primary school in Mozambique today.

uncomfortable when their children could not speak Portuguese with relatives. Some parents were even convinced that their children were not taught in Portuguese at all.

The challenges we're experiencing at school is that we cannot hear the students being taught in Portuguese. This problem is really breaking our hearts. (Man, 31 years)

While parents may have accepted the pedagogical rationale—that the use of local language in early grades makes learning basic skills easier—they remained doubtful about its *overall* benefits. Again, this was largely because of the concerns that their children would not be able to learn sufficient Portuguese during their schooling and, therefore, not benefit from socioeconomic gains that come from mastering the dominant language. These concerns have appeared and reappeared in many studies since the introduction of bilingual education (e.g., Chimbutane 2011, 2021).

The varied parental experiences suggest that the learning benefits of bilingual education have not materialized in the same way in all schools. A possible explanation could be the timing of implementation across our sample of schools, allowing some schools more time to adapt and ensure pedagogical benefits. However, a closer look at the data revealed that the year of implementation did not correlate with parents' views on the learning benefits of bilingual education.

## 5.4 Labour market prospects

Regarding their children's prospects in the labour market, parents across schools emphasized, again, the importance of learning Portuguese. This included parents who were in favour of bilingual education and those who opposed it. Although participants in some focus groups expressed hopes for a bigger role for local language in the labour market, everyone highlighted the necessity of their children mastering Portuguese to succeed in the workplace. A common refrain among parents was: 'Portuguese is needed for getting a job', highlighting the importance of instrumental motivations and socioeconomic benefits. No other subject or foundational skill—say, numeracy—came up as a pre-requisite for finding a job except for Portuguese.

The truth is that studying Ronga [is not as advantageous] as Portuguese. When looking for a job, if you speak Portuguese, you have an advantage over someone who speaks Ronga. Portuguese is at the top in relation to Ronga. (Woman, 55 years)

Some parents felt that their children were not learning Portuguese at all, and that with the knowledge of a local language only, their children would never be employed. Instead of bringing value to schooling, they considered bilingual education as a serious hindrance for their children's future. In a couple of focus groups, parents even speculated that decision-makers' lack of transparency regarding bilingual education stemmed from their awareness of its limited overall benefit, denying bilingual students job opportunities. Parents argued that, in their experience, government made decisions without community consultation and, therefore, it did not serve the best interests of the population. Bilingual education was seen as a manifestation of this situation.

Yet, parents who viewed bilingual education as a means for their children to learn both the local language and Portuguese highlighted its advantages for their children's future. Proficiency in two languages, they noted, would open more doors and opportunities.

Finally, apart from Portuguese, a number of parents in several focus groups highlighted the importance of studying English as well even if it was discontinued in the most recent revision of the primary curriculum. Parents felt that English was important for employability.

We still don't know, if there will be jobs for those learning Changana. The child can study in a bilingual class but, in the end, jobs require English. Institutions require English and Portuguese. Children should know English and Portuguese . . . but without losing their Changana. (Woman, 46 years)

## 5.5 Implementation

In our previous study, school directors and teachers argued that monolingual education was much better resourced than bilingual education, which lacked learning and teaching materials and trained teachers (Chimbutane and Reinikka 2023). A number of other studies have also shown that the bilingual programme in Mozambique has suffered from scarcity of teaching and learning materials (Manuel et al. 2024; Ngunga 2011; Terra 2021; USAID 2017). In this section, we explore how Mozambican parents perceived implementation and resourcing of bilingual education.

Instead of just resources in bilingual education, focus group discussions revealed a general lack of resources both in monolingual and bilingual classes. Discussions mostly concerned students' textbooks, as parents had little or no information on teachers' resources. While in some schools parents reported their children having enough textbooks in bilingual classes, especially in early grades, in other schools parents complained about shortages. In schools where bilingual education had been introduced recently, parents reported a lack of trained teachers and learning materials in the local language.

We have a very big lack of teachers and materials here. I think that the programme that government initiated, in order not to fail, should bring teachers and materials for all the students and train the teachers. (Man, 43 years)

Across focus groups there was a widespread complaint about lack of Portuguese textbooks and their poor condition in both monolingual and bilingual classes. Some parents, particularly in Nampula province, noted that they had seen a decrease in the amount of learning material in Portuguese since the introduction of bilingual education.

Apart from textbooks, shortages and poor condition of classrooms and desks emerged as a significant issue; these applied to both bilingual and monolingual education. Parents talked about the challenges of students sitting on the floor and too large class sizes. The absence of libraries was also brought up, which hindered the students' ability to complete homework or self-study. Many deplored that students were not allowed to take textbooks home, preventing them from studying outside school hours.

A good number of parents across focus groups expressed satisfaction with teachers delivering bilingual education and reported no notable differences in teaching quality compared with monolingual education. In focus groups that were supportive of bilingual education, parents gave credit to teachers by acknowledging their skills that were evident from their children's progress; what they had brought home from school; and from what the children had been able to teach to other family members. In

some schools, parents praised teachers who had shown patience and dedication in helping the children understand the topics in both languages.

I can see that they're well prepared, because it's noticeable from my child's results. I can see that he's studying, because nowadays you scarcely ever find a child in Grade 2 who is able to read. But he can already read in Changana. This shows that the teacher teaches well. He teaches Grade 2, but he's good. (Woman, 27 years)

However, some parents expressed a concern that teachers were not formally trained to teach in the local language.<sup>17</sup> This concern was most evident in the focus groups where parents held a negative view of bilingual education. In fact, they were worried about teacher competence in both the local language and Portuguese. Teacher training was especially important for teachers who were not fully proficient in the local language used in the school. Many parents also argued that there was a need to increase the total number of bilingual teachers. Parents suspected that, for certain cohorts, the formation of only monolingual classes had been due to a lack of teachers able to teach in the local language.

Maybe there is a teacher who is prepared to teach in Changana. The others are not qualified to teach in Changana, that's why they go to monolingual. So, for this to be successful there must be teachers first. (Woman, 38 years)

Finally, there were also parents who felt that they were not in a position to assess teacher qualifications as they had not observed any teaching. Neither were they aware whether teachers had received training in bilingual pedagogy—in itself an indication of limited parental participation in school life. Many participants also said that it was the school director who evaluated teacher performance, not parents, and that parents had to trust that teachers were adequately trained.

## 5.6 Sociocultural aspects

Focus group discussions also explored integrative (sociocultural) motivations. They revealed that parents' attitudes towards bilingual education extended beyond learning outcomes or future employability of their children—these were often intertwined with broader sociocultural perceptions of the value and role of local languages in society. Several participants considered it crucial for their children to learn their mother tongue as a means of intergenerational communication and fostering cultural pride and preserving their language and culture.

It is of great importance that a person knows his essence. Knowing about others, but not forgetting your culture. It is very important for a person to be able to speak his language and learn through it. (Man, 45 years)

For some parents, bilingual education signalled the government's acknowledgement of the value of Mozambican languages and culture. They wanted the local language to thrive and saw bilingual

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<sup>17</sup> In our previous study, both school directors and teachers themselves felt that teachers in bilingual education were not adequately prepared and badly needed more training (Chimbutane and Reinikka 2023).

education as an important way to ‘linguistic liberation’. Others stressed the importance of language diversity, even if they recognized that local languages were overlooked in the cities. Some suggested that bilingual education could bring prosperity by valuing the country’s origins; they advocated for more government effort to improve the status of local languages.

Ronga is a language like Portuguese, both transmit the same information. What we ask is that this does not just end here at school because I see that Ronga can do many more things. (Man, 37 years)

Proponents of bilingual education often emphasized the importance of children learning the local language properly, ensuring the ability to communicate with those who only speak the local language, such as elders and relatives. In some schools, participants were pleased that their children were learning the ‘pure version’ of a local language (also Chimbutane 2011) and could translate or teach new vocabulary to the rest of the family. Indeed, much of the discussion on potential benefits focused on the out-of-school advantages of knowing both languages.

Others, especially those who felt marginalized because of the inferior status of their language, were often less supportive of bilingual education. In multiple schools, parents talked about situations where they had felt shame or inferiority because of their inability to speak Portuguese. The prospect that their child would not learn Portuguese as quickly and as well as other children was a concern. Moreover, some parents worried that bilingual education, by prioritizing local languages over Portuguese proficiency, reinforces rural communities’ sense of inferiority. Unsurprisingly, these parents supported monolingual education.

These observations highlight the interplay of integrative and instrumental motivations in defining attitudes towards the use of local languages in education. In another study, focusing on urban middle-class bilingual parents, Chimbutane and Gonçalves (2023) also show that family language decisions were driven by a combination of integrative and instrumental motivations. However, instrumental factors—socioeconomic and political power—had a higher weight in these decisions, as parents chose to invest in the transmission of Portuguese to their children at the expense of Bantu languages.

## 6 Discussion

Evidence from bilingual programmes based on low-status languages—such as Mozambican languages—shows that integrative motivations (sociocultural gains) tend to promote positive parental attitudes. Instrumental motivations (socioeconomic mobility), instead, tend to generate negative parental attitudes towards these programmes. Parents prefer L2-based monolingual programmes, thought to harness the cultural capital necessary for improving their children’s socioeconomic status. As highlighted in Section 2.2, instrumental motivations are often found to dominate parents’ attitudes in these contexts.

Interestingly, in our focus groups, positive parental attitudes towards bilingual education were more common than negative. Yet, there was considerable variation between schools, pointing to factors that can help mitigate or reverse negative attitudes. What mitigating factors did the focus groups reveal? First, there is an important role for the school in ensuring that parents receive full and regular information on bilingual education. By comparing the schools with more accurate information to those



with less (or even misinformation), it became clear that information with community engagement can help shape parents' attitudes and enhance acceptance of bilingual education.

Many parents felt that schools had not made enough effort to provide sufficient information on the rationale, processes, and benefits of bilingual education. These perceptions suggest that one-off campaigns held when the bilingual programme was first introduced is not enough to ensure buy-in. Such campaigns require systematic follow-up and reinforcement at the school level. Lack of information had led some parents to assume that only local language was used throughout primary school. Some even doubted the intentions of the programme, suspecting that their children were denied access to Portuguese language and, therefore, to meaningful education, socioeconomic mobility, and power. As discussed in Section 2, similar sentiments have also been observed in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.

Given these findings, providing regular and evidence-based information on bilingual education could be an effective strategy to get parents' and entire communities' buy-in and support. The school has a key role here, with support from the district, province, and national government. With a better understanding of the bilingual modality and its pedagogical benefits, parental attitudes could become less driven by sociocultural attitudes toward local language and its current role in society.

Second, parents' attitudes were considerably more positive towards bilingual education when they had seen that their children were learning to read in the local language in early grades and, especially, when they had learnt to speak and read Portuguese in upper grades. Indeed, there was a consensus among parents that adequate command of Portuguese was crucial for their children's job market prospects. Without exception, parents who expressed reservations or were outright opposed to bilingual education insisted on the importance of Portuguese. Many argued that students in bilingual education did not attain an adequate level of Portuguese required for a job. Even supporters of the bilingual programme expressed these concerns.

This finding is consistent with the construct of Portuguese as a gateway to educational success and socioeconomic mobility as well as with the view of the school as the hub for the distribution (or denial) of this important resource (see also Chimbutane 2011, 2013; Mataruca 2014). The fact that some parents had changed their minds about bilingual education when they had witnessed progress in their children's learning also demonstrates that parental attitudes are not static.

Stronger parental support requires that learning results improve and become more evident to them—including their children acquiring proficiency in Portuguese—so that parents would trust bilingual education to deliver the results they expect. The desire to learn (in) local languages can be enhanced if communities can see that knowledge and skills acquired through these languages can amplify employment opportunities and economic dividends. As Chimbutane (2011) has shown, the use of local languages in the formal context of schools is already influencing parents' re-evaluation of the socioeconomic value of these languages. However, much more needs to be done in policy and practice to institutionalize and expand this opening. It will not happen without stronger learning results—in both L1 and L2—that the parents can themselves observe.

Parents' vision of Portuguese as the ultimate target in education can be linked to colonial and post-colonial language ideologies that have positioned Portuguese as a high-status language and local languages as inferior. Given this uneven status of languages, some parents perceive that bilingual education rather restricts children from education and puts them into a weaker position relative to

monolingual students (see also Chimbutane 2013; Chimbutane et al. 2022). Our findings indicate that these concerns often arise in instances where parents are under the impression that the sole purpose of bilingual education is to learn (in) a local language and that of monolingual education is to learn (in) Portuguese. The evidence we have produced suggests action from education and political perspectives.

How well is the Mozambican education system prepared, especially its schools and teachers, to step up delivery of quality bilingual education? Teacher training is in Portuguese, and all teachers are expected to be fully conversant in it. This is not always the case, however, as demonstrated by nationally representative school surveys, which in 2014 and 2018 assessed primary school teachers—teaching Grades 3 and 4—for their knowledge in Portuguese (Bassi et al. 2019; Molina and Martin 2015). The surveys found that teachers mastered only 32 per cent (2014) and 41 per cent (2018) of what is required to teach the lower primary curriculum in Portuguese—a cause for concern from the viewpoint of what parents expect for their children in terms of learning Portuguese either in bilingual or monolingual (Portuguese-only) classes. There was no significant skills difference between rural and urban teachers or between regions.

Teacher preparedness is even more critical for bilingual education as most of the teachers in the programme have received no pre-service training in bilingual instruction—only perhaps a short in-service training course—thus lacking the required competencies in the local language and bilingual pedagogies.

As parents have little to do with their children's classroom activities, they had relatively little to say about bilingual teaching or learning and teaching materials. Yet, they expected learning results, which require teacher preparedness and access to quality materials. While frontline actors on the supply side of education—teachers, schools directors, and local education officers—repeatedly raised the resistance of parents—the demand side—as a serious constraint for bilingual education (Chimbutane and Reinikka 2023), a joint analysis of supply and demand suggests that constraints are likely to arise primarily from weak implementation (supply). Teachers face a lack of materials and proper training in their attempt to deliver bilingual education; parents judge it based on results they themselves manage to observe; while school directors are caught in-between and depend on the rest of the education system. Although parental support is a critical element, the joint analysis underscores the fact that successful bilingual education is not possible without effective implementation to produce real learning results which, in turn, shape parental buy-in.

In brief, for a successful scale-up and sustainability of bilingual education, both effective implementation (supply side) and parental support and buy-in (demand side) are essential. Our earlier study examined the supply side—the roles, attitudes, and actions of Mozambican school directors, teachers, and local education officials—whereas this paper explored parents' attitudes on the demand side. We found that supply and demand are interdependent and both are required for a successful bilingual programme. Based on the findings of this study, we highlight two actions on the demand side that can make a positive difference: the school (i) providing full and regular information to parents and the surrounding community, and (ii) ensuring that learning results be made as visible to parents as possible. The rest of the education system should support the schools in these undertakings.

## 7 Summary and conclusions

Foundational learning—basic skills of reading, writing, and numeracy—is exceedingly weak in Mozambique as evident from the national learning assessments. While many factors affect learning, this paper explored bilingual education—using home language for instruction in early grades—which can offer one remedy. Specifically, evaluations of experimental bilingual programmes in several sub-Saharan African countries, including Mozambique, have shown large positive impacts on learning (Section 2.1). Moreover, an analysis of nationally representative school survey data showed that Portuguese-speaking students benefited significantly from teachers' content knowledge, but the average Mozambican student, speaking only a local language when entering school, did not. Thus, research evidence confirms that the language of instruction matters for learning.

However, the experiments are typically externally funded, short-term, and implemented by non-governmental actors. A key question, therefore, is: How to mainstream bilingual education and, while doing so, how to ensure that it delivers foundational learning at scale? One important ingredient in successful mainstreaming is parental buy-in and community mobilization—the topic of this study.

In focus group discussions in primary schools in Maputo and Nampula provinces, we first asked parents (directly) about their attitudes towards bilingual education. We then explored factors that can shape these attitudes: information; expectations about their children's school performance and labour market prospects; implementation of the bilingual programme; and general attitudes (sociocultural aspects) towards local language.

Parents' attitudes toward bilingual education varied across schools. About half of the focus groups expressed an unambiguously positive attitude towards bilingual education. A few others, while also positive, expressed caveats. Many supportive participants reported that their initially critical attitude had shifted. As experience of bilingual education accumulated, they had come to accept it. Yet, there were a few schools where parents were sceptical and outright resisted bilingual education, particularly in Nampula province.

In terms of factors shaping parental attitudes, focus group discussions revealed that, due to differing practices in schools, the *information* parents possessed on bilingual education was highly variable, inconsistent, and often incomplete. In some schools, parents understood and appreciated its pedagogical rationale, that is, that the use of local language makes learning of foundational skills easier. In other schools misconceptions prevailed, creating or reinforcing scepticism and resistance. In schools where parents had received more information (relative to other schools)—as can be expected—parents were more supportive of bilingual education. Participants insisted that the school needs to provide information to the whole community, not just parents whose children are in bilingual classes. All in all, our findings highlight that information is a critical element in shaping parents' attitudes and acceptance of bilingual education.

Perhaps the most important influence on parents' attitudes, across the schools, was how well their children were *learning*—a key finding also in earlier studies in Mozambique (e.g., Benson 2000). Especially, when parents had themselves observed that their children were able to read in the local language in early grades, they were supportive of bilingual education. The most supportive were those parents whose children had learnt to speak and read Portuguese in upper grades.

In schools where parents expressed reservations or where opposition to bilingual education was strong, parents insisted that they had enrolled their children in school for them to learn Portuguese. Negative experiences among parents, such as witnessing a child going through bilingual education without learning properly either the local language or Portuguese, increased parental pressure on the school to switch back to monolingual education. A good number of parents reported that they had not seen sufficient Portuguese acquisition in bilingual classes, placing their children in an unfavourable position relative to children coming from monolingual education.

Concerns about sufficient Portuguese acquisition made parents doubtful about the overall benefits of bilingual education even in cases where they accepted its pedagogical rationale. This was largely driven by socioeconomic aspirations. Mastering the dominant language, Portuguese, was considered a must for those aspirations to materialize, especially in the job market. A common refrain among parents was: 'Portuguese is needed for getting a job.' No other subject or foundational skill—say, numeracy—came up as a pre-requisite for finding a job.

Parents' perceptions on implementation of the bilingual programme were quite different from those of school directors, teachers, and local education officials, which we explored in our earlier study in Maputo province. Teachers had been especially critical about scarcity and poor quality of teaching and learning materials, as well as absence of training opportunities in bilingual pedagogy. Parents did not mention teaching resources at all, which is not surprising as they had little or no direct engagement with teaching or classroom activities. Regarding learning materials, a majority of parents did not see much difference between bilingual and monolingual (Portuguese-only) education. However, a general lack of textbooks was a common concern to focus group participants, especially Portuguese textbooks in upper grades. Equally, across the schools, parents complained about shortages of classrooms and school furniture.

While recognizing a lack of training opportunities for teachers, overall, parents gave a lot of credit to their children's teachers, including those teaching bilingual classes. Indeed, many interventions in focus group discussions revealed respect for teachers.

Our earlier study showed that it is school directors who decide whether or not to establish bilingual classes and how to allocate the incoming students to different classes. School directors argued that there was strong pressure from parents that affected these decisions. Contrary to this argument, few parents participating in the focus groups mentioned such pressure—and when they had been asked about local language by the school, it had not had impact on their children's placement.

While integrative (sociocultural) motivations were important to many participants, they were not enough. Academic benefits and learning of Portuguese, which were expected to lead to instrumental (socioeconomic) gains, were parents' top priority, including parents who were supportive of bilingual education. For some the expansion of bilingual education signalled the government's acknowledgement of the value of Mozambican languages and culture. They wanted local languages to thrive and saw bilingual education as an important way of 'linguistic liberation'. Others, especially those who felt marginalized because of the inferior status of their language, were less supportive of bilingual education.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of learning results that parents can themselves observe. To ensure broader acceptance and support, it is crucial for schools consistently to communicate the benefits of bilingual education as well as address parental concerns, especially

Portuguese proficiency. Bridging the gap between the educational advantages of bilingual programmes and parents' socioeconomic goals for their children is key to the success and sustainability of bilingual education in Mozambique.

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