

Response to the TV programme Leihlo la Sechaba.

Your programme on Thursday, 14 June 2012, dealt with the very important question of language. I don't think we fully realize the importance of language in its relation to power. In 1948, the Afrikaners consolidated their power through language. They made Afrikaans an official language and a compulsory subject in schools. That was a means of disempowering the majority population.

When the ANC came into power it did not use language to consolidate its power, partly because there are so many African languages. Instead the new government paid lip service to the question of language by recognising eleven languages and allowing English to continue in its dominance.

In your programme, it was acknowledged that parents wanted children to learn English because fluency in the language is regarded as a sign of intelligence. I think that attitude probably prevailed and prevented the government from making the effort to choose one or two African languages as compulsory subjects in schools.

Language plays an important role in empowerment and disempowerment. We can see that in schools. The Soweto children in 1976 fought against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction because they felt its disempowering effects. But African children are still being disempowered in schools. There will always be a sense of inferiority and inequality amongst most children who learn through a language that is not their mother tongue.