



FILM REVIEW

Colours of the Alphabet

Alastair Cole (Director)

Lansdowne Productions: Tongue Tied Films (2016)

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DOI Number: <https://doi.org/10.26203/knp5-2q48>

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To cite this film review: Markides, J. (2021). Colours of the Alphabet. *Education in the North*, 28(1) pp. 188-190.



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An Unassuming Film on the Privileging of English Language Learning in Zambian Schools: An insidious and imperceptible global crisis being shouldered by generations of innocent youth

Initially, I found that the title and premise of the documentary film, *Colours of the Alphabet*, came across as unassuming. The filmmaker follows three school-aged children—Steward, Elizabeth, and M'barak—in Zambia, as they enter into their first two terms of school. The problem being examined in the film is foregrounded through quotes, informational text, and the introduction of multicoloured subtitles. Orange for when Soli is being spoken. Green for Nyanja. Pink for Bemba. And white for English, the national language of Zambia.

Native to only one of the four languages spoken in the film, I quickly became reliant on the subtitles to understand what the children, their families, and teachers were saying. Within minutes, the movement between languages becomes apparent. It is clear that the teacher knows how to move between the languages in order to communicate with the students. I was instantly engrossed in watching for language/colour changes within the subtitles. For the most part, the students in the class came from Soli-speaking families. Yet, the lessons in the class focused on English language learning.

As an educator, it would be easy to critique the teacher's practices, but that would miss the point of the film. The instructional methods of the teacher are not the primary focus. Instead, the problematic nature of privileging English language in the education system is immediately evident. Rather than attending school in their first or second languages, the students enter into a schooling experience that centres deficit. The youth are not English speaking. Therefore, all of their learning is twofold, English *and* curriculum. While the students may have had natural talents, abilities, or interests in certain subject matter, their success in these areas are predicated on their ability to learn and understand—speak, read, and write—the English that accompanies the material.

The interviews with Steward, Elizabeth, and M'barak's parents add another level of tension that is subtle in many regards. The parents speak of their hopes for their children to learn English and have greater career choices and successes. The families speak varying levels of English themselves, yet remain connected to their communities through their first languages. Another person that is interviewed,

presumably an Elder or community leader, speaks about the peace that was attained through the introduction of English as a unifying language. In a later clip, the same Elder/leader seems to revel in the thought of the youth being able to attain education at the highest levels in the languages of their homelands—the thought both sublime and fanciful. In his words (translated into orange for Soli subtitles), “We would love that, but it can’t be?”

As the months progress, the students move through the curriculum, becoming schooled in the routines, expectations and language (learning). *Cover your mouth when you cough. Knock before you enter when you are late.* It is in the latter parts of the term that Steward’s struggles come into focus. In one segment, he appears defeated by schooling burying his face into his arms and crying silently as the teacher tells him to go home. The audience is left to interpret the reasons for Steward’s tears, as the teacher does not ascertain what is wrong with him. Prior to class, he had some of his guavas stolen by another girl; he might be concerned about the reprisal for the theft or his sadness could be school-related. In a later instance, Steward is unable to follow the teacher’s instructions to write the date and his name. He can be seen carefully tearing out and folding up a scrap of paper with his name written on it in English in his teacher’s and his own printing. It is unclear if he is ashamed or proud as he tucks this work away.

The film opens up space for important dialogue around the pragmatic and ethical issues around English language learning around the world. The statistics shared in the film suggest that 40% of the world’s population does not have access to education in their first languages. Colonization and globalization have created a perceived and felt need for English language learning as a path to opportunity, but at what cost? Language holds the histories and futures of cultural teachings (Davis, 2009; McAdams, 2015). While first languages were still being spoken in the homes and communities during the time of the filming, how many generations will be educated in English before the languages of Soli, Nyanja, and Bemba are lost?

Through an unassuming lens, the *Colours of the Alphabet* documentary offers insight into the global crisis of continued and unquestioned colonization of Peoples around the globe through the privileging of English language in education. One family noted that there are no books in Soli. How can the students see themselves in their learning if all of the texts are in English and reflect communities other than their own? As bell hooks (1996) experienced in the books she read in her girlhood, the characters were predominantly white and the storylines reflected Eurocentric values. Does that make for generations of youth, growing up as Husserlian Others, in their own educational narratives? While this documentary film does not provide the solutions, *Colours of the Alphabet* is an eye-opening view into the experiences and challenges that millions of youth are facing in schools today—an Othering and colonization by English that might otherwise be imperceptible.

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