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GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION POLICY BRIEF

Mother-tongue education: policy lessons for quality and inclusion

This policy brief is intended to inform educational language policies and support better quality of educational outcomes, especially in increased literacy rates. It aims to highlight the increasing body of evidence which supports the importance of mother-tongue learning in the early years of education. It takes the latest evidence from around the world, as well as setting out GCE's positions on mother-tongue learning.

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GCE is a civil society coalition that calls on governments to deliver the right of everyone to a free, quality, public education. Operating in 97 countries with members including grassroots organisations, teachers' unions, child rights groups and international NGOs, its mission is to make sure that States act now to deliver the right of everyone to a free, quality public education.

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Executive Summary

In developing countries, an estimated 221 million children enter the classroom unable to understand the language they are taught in. Many countries teach in the old colonial language, or in a dominant national or international language, which young children do not speak at home.

This leaves these children in the impossible position of trying to decipher what they are being taught in an unknown language. Children in remote rural areas, who speak a different language at home, often have the biggest problems in trying to learn the school language – with which they have no contact outside of school. This is a significant contributing factor to poor education quality, low literacy outcomes and high drop-out rates in many countries. It has been estimated that 50% of the world's out-of-school children live in communities which use a different language to the one used in the local schools.

It is now well-established through research that children who receive schooling in their mother-tongue language in early grades have better learning outcomes overall and, in particular, significantly better literacy levels. Despite increasingly overwhelming evidence of the value and benefits of early education in mother-tongue, few countries invest in it. Designing policies to incorporate these findings should be central to addressing the low quality of education in the developing world. It also goes to the heart of making education more inclusive and ensuring the right to education for all.

An emerging body of evidence points to some key principles in building more coherent language policies in the developing world. Firstly, mother-tongue learning should be the initial key language of instruction in education, with a second language introduced later in carefully managed stages. Research provides convincing evidence that a second language is learned best when a first language has been learned well. This process should be backed by a culturally contextualised curriculum with appropriate and adequate materials, written in a language that is relevant to children. The lack of such materials has a hugely negative effect on children's learning. At the same time, teachers need to be equipped not only for teaching across a multi-lingual curriculum, but also for improving the quality of education in general. In some cases, this will involve ensuring sufficient placements of teachers who speak local languages, through working with teacher organisations to develop appropriate recruitment and retention schemes. In other cases, it will involve better training, development and support.

A lack of resources for introducing such reforms should not be seen as a major stumbling block, as extra costs can be repaid through savings from reduced school repetition and drop-outs. In the few cases where these benefits have been calculated, the savings have considerably outweighed the incremental costs of establishing and maintaining schooling in local languages and the rewards in terms of quality and inclusion would anyway justify the investment.

1. The importance of mother-tongue learning¹

The dominance of non-mother tongue education

In many developing countries, a significant proportion of children enter school not speaking the language of the classroom. Many education systems favour using national or 'global' languages instead of mother-tongue teaching. Education is often carried out in the old colonial language, or an international language, such as English. This is based on the belief that certain internationally 'important' languages give children a competitive advantage in later life. In other countries, education is taught in the dominant² language of a main linguistic group, sometimes at the expense of more marginalised ethnic or linguistic groups.

In far too many countries, the educational basics – textbooks, learning materials and the teacher's language of instruction - are primarily or entirely available only in non-mother-tongue languages. Sometimes, in multilingual countries with many local languages, teachers themselves do not speak the local language which children learn at home, and speak the dominant language. In other cases, the teachers themselves may not be fully proficient in the language of instruction.

Children in remote rural areas, who speak one language at home and have no contact with the school language outside of the classroom, often have the biggest problems in gaining any understanding of the language taught at school.

This is a significant factor contributing to poor quality education and continuing low literacy.³ Without the use of mother-tongue, children's potential is often wasted resulting in educational failure and a lack of development. As one World Bank study pointed out: *"Fifty percent of the world's out of school children live in communities where the language of the schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition"*.⁴

Mother-tongue learning as a means to quality and access

It is estimated that 221 million primary-aged children from minority language and ethnic communities do not have access to education in a language they know.⁵ The unsurprising result is that literacy rates among ethnic and linguistic minorities are particularly low.⁶

Low quality and achievement in many African schools can be partially related to language. As UNESCO notes: *"Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language"*.⁷ Education is almost universally offered in the old colonial languages – French, English or Portuguese – which most young people do not speak at home.

For instance, in Zambia, where English was the educational language (among non-English speakers), it was found that at the end of primary schooling children were unable to read fluently or write clearly. Many failed examinations because they could not read and understand the instructions. Reading skills were poor, even among secondary school children. Literacy skills in tertiary education were unsatisfactory: students failed to read and grasp information due to lack of reading skills and poor writing skills.^{8,9}

A recent survey in Jharkhand, India revealed that more than 96% of children at primary level fail to follow classes where the medium of instruction is Hindi. Only 4% of the rural population in Jharkhand speaks Hindi while 96% speak either a tribal or regional language.¹⁰ Much time was being spent in classrooms with children simply copying from textbooks or the blackboard, with little comprehension of the real meaning, or the ability to apply their learning to other circumstances. By the end of primary schooling, children may be able to decode grade two-level texts in the school language, but are unable to answer questions related to the content.¹¹ Literacy is not simply being able to decode what is on a page: it is the intellectual process of gaining meaning from text; an achievement only possible in a language that is understood.

A number of studies show a zero level of understanding by children being taught in non-mother-tongue languages.¹² Those who manage to survive such schooling have stated that they understood very little until third, fourth or even eighth grade, depending on the amount of exposure to the language in and out of the school.¹³

Given that issues related to the poor quality of education in many countries can be directly linked to a lack of mother-tongue learning, improving the quality of education and learning outcomes needs more flexible approaches to incorporating mother-tongue into the classroom. It is essential that teachers' capacity is built to deal with this, appropriate teaching methods are created, and an interactive classroom environment is fostered – all of which will support the acquisition of literacy and learning in mother tongue.

Where instruction, curriculum and materials are not in the mother tongue and do not take account of the child's known world, the result is widespread non-attendance, increased repetition and low achievement levels. In a study of data from 160 language groups in 22 developing countries it was found that not using mother-tongue languages was a major cause of non-enrolment and dropout. Those with access to instruction in their mother-tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school.¹⁴

Local language policy has resulted in lower drop-out rates and higher retention and increased achievement.¹⁵ Where the language of home and school are the same it has been shown that assessments of literacy levels are higher.¹⁶ A study in Mali found that where the mother-tongue language of instruction was used children were five times less likely to repeat the year and more than three times less likely to drop out. In Ethiopia, local language policy has resulted in lower drop-out rates and higher retention.¹⁷ In bilingual schools in Guatemala – which cover about 15% of the population - grade repetition is about half that of traditional schools, while dropout rates are about 25% lower.¹⁸

Lack of mother-tongue learning underscores pre-existing inequalities

There is a strong equity dimension in the failure to provide mother-tongue education. The language children are taught in often reflects broader societal inequalities or asymmetries in power.

For instance, marginalised tribal groups struggle to have their identity and languages fully recognised, respected or understood within wider society. The failure to provide mother-tongue teaching is a form of discrimination that perpetuates these inequalities. Children from poorer rural areas or from ethnic and linguistic minorities are less likely to receive a quality education, and more likely to become non literate adults.

Many children in minority language communities, especially those living in remote areas, face significant challenges in accessing a good quality education. When pre-existing pockets of marginalisation, poverty, or poor teaching quality intersect with schooling in an unknown language, children may never make it to school, or if they do, will find little meaning in the classroom to keep them there.

Minority groups continue to make up a large proportion of those left out of classrooms. Ensuring more inclusive education policies which guarantee all children's right to education, will involve providing education to minority groups in their own language.

“When pre-existing pockets of marginalisation, poverty, or poor teaching quality intersect with schooling in an unknown language, children may never make it to school.”

2. Policy lessons in mother-tongue learning

It is now well-established that children who receive schooling in their mother tongue in early grades tend to have better learning outcomes and significantly better literacy levels. Children's understanding of what is being taught and discussed in class significantly improves, leaving them to focus on learning core skills, rather than struggling to learn in a language they do not understand. Despite the increasingly overwhelming evidence of the value and benefits of early education in mother tongue, too few countries invest in it. Evidence from around the world points strongly towards a number of areas which should be prioritised in introducing mother-tongue and bi- or multi-lingual language policies, which are summarised below.

Begin literacy teaching in mother tongue

A curriculum, rooted in the child's known language, culture and environment, with appropriate and locally-developed reading and curriculum materials, is crucial for early learning success. Using the home language in the early stages of schooling in multilingual contexts supports child-centric policies. It starts with what is familiar and builds in new knowledge. It creates a smooth transition between home and school; it stimulates interest and ensures greater participation and engagement. This prepares children for the acquisition of literacy and encourages fluency and confidence in both the mother tongue and, later, in other languages, where this is necessary.¹⁹

Research provides convincing evidence that a second language is learned best when a first language is learned well.²⁰ Learning the dominant language later - particularly by specialist language teachers - may ultimately be the more effective route.²¹

Learning to read is a complex process and it is essential that it happens early. If children are not able to read well by third grade, they are likely to struggle to catch up and may never become fluent and confident readers. While other factors affect learning outcomes at school, early literacy experiences are particularly important in later school achievement.²² The correlation between reading ability and academic achievement has been tested in a number of different situations.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that mother-tongue education programmes are capable of producing functionally literate readers in 2 to 3 years rather than the 5 reported for many second language-medium programmes.²³ In many cases, as outlined above, children never learn to read well in the second language. Thus not being taught in the mother tongue can put children at a distinct disadvantage for their potential future learning trajectory. While the development of a vibrant, literate environment, good teaching practices and a supportive home environment are all important for good literacy learning, mother-tongue learning is a critical part of the literacy puzzle.²⁴

It is also worth noting that changing to an unknown language too early, or too abruptly, in a child's schooling can also be damaging. Research suggests that 'early-exit' mother-tongue education may not deliver strong academic benefits in the long term and children may not be successful in learning through either the mother tongue or in the dominant language.²⁵ Current evidence strongly recommends that mother tongue requires a minimum of six years (longer in under-resourced schools) if positive academic benefits are to be attained.²⁶ Learning in mother tongue over a long period of time in school, with the gradual introduction of other languages and a culturally relevant curriculum with appropriate and adequate materials that bridge to the wider world means a quality education is much more likely to be provided.²⁷

When there are multiple languages in a community, care needs to be taken which are chosen for schooling, particularly in sensitive areas. The community in such cases needs to be involved in the choices made, and dominant local languages should not exclude others on political or ethnic grounds. It is not impossible to ensure that all languages are included in the educational process.

In Bolivia, for example, the new General Education Act mandates mother-tongue teaching (with Spanish as a second language) in areas with a single, dominant indigenous language, and Spanish-language teaching (with the indigenous language as a second language) in areas with a single indigenous language but where Spanish is dominant. In multi-lingual areas, the choice of language(s) is made by the Community Education Board using established criteria.

Ensure availability of mother-tongue materials

Children need to be engaged in and excited about reading and learning and this can only be done if the materials are ones which they will understand and enjoy. In most developing countries, the only reading material children see are school textbooks, which are often in very short supply. Other materials to support learning are hardly ever available. Without access to good materials, children struggle to become literate and learn. In most low- and middle-income countries, the majority of primary schools have no library, and books are luxuries which families cannot afford.

For children from minority language communities, the situation is even more dismal. Textbooks are rarely available in local languages. They are usually in a European or other dominant language and are produced and used as if the children are fluent in those languages. Children are expected to understand

content that is incomprehensible, cognitively difficult and has little relevance to their lives.

Learning to read requires a range of complex skills, all of which need the right use of suitable materials. These skills include recognising sounds, connecting sounds to symbols, developing vocabulary, understanding the content and developing fluency. As children's language capacity develops, materials with increasing difficulty are required. Materials need to contain cognitively challenging content so that as children acquire knowledge, skills and concepts through their mother tongue, achievement in all subject areas will improve.

In most multilingual situations materials in mother tongue are lacking. In Papua New Guinea, where there are over 800 languages of which 450 are used in early years education, there are hardly any appropriate materials. Unsurprisingly, retention rates are low.²⁸ A study in Jharkhand, India, found that very few reading and writing materials are available in tribal or regional languages, resulting in poor reading and writing skills.²⁹ Meanwhile, a review of the situation in schools across Africa found that teaching practice and the development of literacy are negatively impacted by a severe lack of appropriate educational materials.³⁰

The availability of good learning materials, written in a language and with a context that is relevant to children is vitally important; a lack of such materials has a profoundly negative effect on children's learning and on literacy achievement levels.³¹

Sadly, even where mother-tongue materials are used, often not enough resources are channelled towards it for programmes to fully succeed. Such programmes will inevitably break down if there are insufficient materials in local languages. Without adequate materials the teaching of early literacy skills is extremely challenging and developing fluency is all but an impossible task.

BOX 1: DEVELOPING LOCAL LANGUAGES AND MATERIALS

Many minority languages have oral rather than written traditions and scripts have never been developed. Where languages have not been used in written form, collaboration between linguists, educators and community members is required to establish orthographies, grammars and dictionaries. Establishing orthographies and developing materials can raise the status of home languages. Writing stories, documenting histories and local knowledge contributes to the development of the language itself.

The argument that local languages are underdeveloped is often used to bypass them, but this is often due to their marginalisation or a lack of value placed on developing them. Others state that it would require too much time and too many resources to develop the vocabulary, to train teachers, and prepare teaching and learning materials.

Culturally relevant materials, compiled by teams that include local volunteers can encourage a love of and respect for the local language and culture. Moreover, materials produced in this way will be about familiar people, places and activities which will be interesting to children and in a language that is clear and understandable.

The inclusion of local and indigenous knowledge in texts and reading materials requires research with community participation and the only way to produce good material resources in the mother-tongue is by members of the language community themselves. There may be a lack of skilled authors and editors for the local languages, but capacity could be strengthened through training and experience. In many places the development of mother-tongue literature has been promoted through writing contests, festivals, book signings, writing and illustration workshops, debates and radio and television programs (e.g. Srujan in Orissa). Local artists can produce illustrations related to the text which are also appropriate to the local context.

Besides being important in children's learning, literacy plays an integral role in indigenous language revitalisation and regeneration. Recording and documenting the histories and the "stories" of a nation's people add to the richness of national heritage. Print literacy supports the preservation of traditions for future generations, ensures a wider variety of functions for the language and validates and gives status to the language. Using local materials in local languages gives dignity to often marginalised groups. It activates voices for reclaiming the local, reaffirming and revitalising indigenous identity.³² For many this means: *"identifying with my ethnic people, our past, our history, our worldview, our language; in the present, working to reclaim our rights; and in the future, projecting that our ethnic people might have a future with equality of opportunities with other peoples of our country"*.³³

Provide early childhood education in mother tongue

Literacy development starts early in life, and the home environment is an important factor in children's learning achievement.³⁴ Research has shown that reading aloud with children is a vitally important activity.³⁵ It helps build the knowledge and skills children need for learning to read. Where parents and the community are supporting literacy development, results show a marked improvement. The earlier children are exposed to stories the better their reading is: reading for only 15 minutes a day can expose children to one million written words in a year, thereby helping them to develop a rich vocabulary.

Children with access to materials at home are more likely to develop fluency in reading.³⁶ However, in many contexts – where parents are not literate or do not have access to books – this is not realistic. In this context, school resources are even more important. In particular, supporting early literacy development through Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) can be important for later achievement and can provide a way to overcome disadvantages in areas of deprivation – i.e. linguistic minority communities.³⁷ Children learning in preschool settings using mother tongue tend to outperform their non-mother tongue peers in almost every competency area. They develop literacy and other skills in an environment that involves more child engagement and participation and more integration of local culture in a more child-friendly environment.³⁸

Support effective teaching methods

Successful teaching of early literacy skills is dependant not only on the provision of suitable materials, but also on the way these skills

are introduced and taught. Rote learning and memorisation, with a textbook focus, will likely result in a child's reading fluency and comprehension remaining limited. Teachers need to use engaging instructional strategies, where children are active in the learning process.³⁹ Such strategies only become feasible when children understand the language of instruction and can therefore be interactively engaged.

Train and deploy mother-tongue teachers

Mother-tongue education requires teachers who share the language and culture of the children. It also requires that teachers are trained in the same language they are to teach in.⁴⁰ Some teachers may not be truly proficient in the language of instruction, and may struggle with teaching in a 'dominant' language they are not fluent in themselves. Or they may come from a minority language group and have been excluded from the learning process due to a lack of training materials in their language.⁴¹

Sometimes a lack of understanding can cascade down the generations where a teacher, who never fully understood their own teacher, is attempting to teach a child who barely understands the language (see Box 2 for an example from Namibia).

Teacher training needs to acknowledge the importance of linguistic diversity and should support teachers to implement methodologies that use the languages of the learner. This kind of approach will be a challenge to the (often) centralised approaches to teacher development and deployment. Countries should work with teacher organisations – unions and professional councils – to develop processes to recruit and train teachers appropriately.

BOX 2: NAMIBIA: A CRISIS IN TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF ENGLISH?

At independence in 1990, Namibia - a country with 13 local languages - chose English as its main national language, although it had no history of English as a colonial language, and very few citizens spoke it as their first language.

The decision was popularly supported, as it broke with the predominant Afrikaans language spoken under South African rule. It was also assumed that learning English as early as possible is important for future success in employment and education. But the policy was introduced too fast without sufficient investment or preparation. This left teachers teaching in a language they barely understood. Over 20 years later the fall-out continues to be felt across the generations. A 2011 government study showed that 98% of the country's teachers are not sufficiently proficient in the language: all but an astonishing 2% of teachers did not need to undergo further training in basic English. Despite high levels of spending on education, failure rates remain high with only four in ten (39%) learners expected to reach grade 12, which has been at least partly attributed to this disastrous language policy.

Source: "Language in Schools in Namibia: The Missing Link in Educational Achievement?" Priscilla G Harris. The Urban Trust of Namibia, 2011



3. Investment in mother-tongue learning

The potential cost of implementing mother-tongue learning is often cited as a reason for not introducing it: policy-makers claim that it is financially impractical in resource-constrained countries. Certainly in some countries, where there are many language groups, introducing early mother-tongue learning across the board may look economically challenging. But affordable approaches exist, and the investment is fully justified by the impact on improving education – which itself offsets the costs.

It has also been noted that insufficient funds initially allocated to multi-lingual education programmes has led to failures. Funds should be identified in advance to support policies. For instance, in Malawi insufficient resources were made available for a local language programme which led to an ineffectual roll-out.⁴²

Worth the money

While exact costs depend on context and approaches, it is clear that investment in mother tongue education is more than offset by improved educational performance. In the few cases where benefits have been calculated, the savings from reduced school repetition and drop-outs have considerably outweighed the incremental costs of establishing and maintaining schooling in local languages (production of learning materials, teacher training, etc.). Large amounts of teaching time, materials and infrastructure are wasted when children drop out, repeat grades, or fail to achieve learning outcomes. Training teachers in a language which they do not know well contributes to this ineffective use of resources.

In Guatemala, for example, a study found that mother-tongue-based bilingual schooling created savings of US\$5.6 million a year through reducing drop-out and repetition, despite higher initial costs for introducing new materials and teacher training.⁴³ In Mali, while French-only programmes cost 8% less than multi-lingual programmes, a World Bank study estimated that the total cost of educating a student through the six-year primary cycle in French actually cost about 27% more, because of the high repetition and dropout rates.⁴⁴

Expenses can be limited

Studies show that the additional costs in relation to both textbooks and teacher training may be less than 10% of the total budget allocation across the whole education budget.⁴⁵ For example, calculations reveal that the cost increase entailed by bringing in bi-lingual education in the Basque education system in Spain was in the region of 4.75%; the development of Maya medium education in Guatemala indicates that the added cost to the education system was only between 4% and 5%.

Alternative, affordable approaches

In many developing countries, the task of developing print materials in local languages can be daunting and the costs of editing and publishing can be prohibitive. In situations where there are very small language communities, print-runs may not reach a break-even point for publishers, and relying on international publishing houses is expensive and inappropriate.

But materials do not have to be produced at vast cost and alternative approaches can be used. One study has shown how central production of multi-lingual materials in South Africa has led to overly-expensive materials across the many different language groups. So while South Africa has an admirable policy of multi-lingual education, they may have an inefficient model. While it is good to have attractive print materials available, decentralised publishing may be the best way forward. As one study looking at the differences between South Africa and Ethiopia stated: *“expensive, aesthetically pleasing learning materials, seldom find their way into the hands of students...decentralised production and local publishing and printing industries have managed to place (at least some) books into the hands of students to a far greater extent than in significantly wealthier South Africa. These books are not glamorous. They are printed on white paper with no illustrations in colour, yet they are functional and inexpensive.”*⁴⁶

Evidence shows that basic books with firm covers and black-and-white line drawings can meet learners’ needs – especially if the alternative is one expensive book between 4, 5 or even 30 children.

In Papua New Guinea materials have been published in hundreds of languages by using a basic ‘shell book’ format. A ‘shell book’ is a computer-aided concept that enables local workers to insert translated text and culturally appropriate illustrations into a template - or shell - of an existing publication. This shell book process can supplement locally created literature and provide a way to gain access to valuable information. This was an innovative way to overcome the linguistic challenges in Papua New Guinea where multiple languages – there are as many as 800 languages, 450 of which are currently used in primary mother-tongue education– would make it very expensive indeed to print full books.

In some cases language groups sit across national borders. Collaboration between publishers, education ministries, language experts, NGOs, and communities (across borders where this is feasible) can facilitate the process.

These examples of promoting multi-lingual learning materials suggest that the costs involved do not need to be massive.⁴⁷

4. Learning from experience: case studies in supporting mother-tongue learning

Experiences from India in improving reading and achievement levels through mother-tongue materials

With government funds and resources, materials have been developed for primary schools in eight minority languages in Andhra Pradesh⁴⁸ and ten in Orissa⁴⁹. An integrated theme-based approach was introduced for grades 1 to 2. Materials included alphabet charts, primers, big books for class and group reading, small books for individual and paired reading, the majority of which were locally authored. Factual content came from the community and culture. Materials for activities to support the reading process were also produced, such as picture, letter and word cards and a variety of games. Second language learning curriculum and mother-tongue and bilingual textbooks for subject areas were produced during the later primary years. All the materials were developed with local teacher and community support. These programmes showed remarkably positive results in enrolment, attendance and achievement levels across the curriculum.⁵⁰

Some schools in the programme were chosen for specific research purposes and additional materials were developed with a focus on reading both at home and at school, and more engagement from

the community. This included the “Read Together” programme, linking oral traditions to written material. Content was based on oral narratives provided by the community with local history, ecology, stories, and songs. Community reading and learning resource centres were set up and run by the communities in the villages. This encouraged the community’s interest and engagement in children’s education and in these schools children’s reading and learning attainment showed great improvements.⁵¹

Furthermore, in Orissa, a programme called Srujan was initiated by the government team to increase access to knowledge, information and materials for the multilingual education programme.⁵² Srujan is a community-based approach with an objective to link community knowledge and practices with the school curriculum, both in the context of curricular as well as extra-curricular activities. Activities included storytelling, traditional games, art and craft, music and dance and nature study.

The programme has been a real success. Children have been better-able to understand the content and connect classroom knowledge with their own experience. Within six months, children in Class 1 were able to identify the words and letters from a sentence and read a sentence with meaning, while also being able to demonstrate thinking creatively.⁵³

BOX 3: THE EXAMPLE AND LESSONS LEARNT FROM 'LITERACY BOOST'

After discovering that reading results for children were much lower than they were expected to be in their programmatic work, Save the Children introduced an initiative called 'Literacy Boost'. Children were not learning to read fluently and literacy achievement levels remained low. As part of this they discovered that local language materials were needed as early as possible and parents and community, who speak the child's mother tongue, needed to complement school learning with a variety of exciting activities around reading in the mother tongue. The Literacy Boost Programme was introduced with a number of interventions focusing on the development of literacy skills. These interventions included community mobilisation to create an understanding of reading, materials creation workshops, Reading Camps and Book Banks in all villages surrounding the schools. For teachers, training sessions were held to improve the teaching of reading in five key areas: letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. An essential part of the Literacy Boost Programme was to make sure communities had greater variety and increased quantities of engaging and relevant print materials available for children to read.

Children borrow books to read at home and at school. Parents and community are guided to support children as they learn to read. Literacy Boost includes teacher training programmes for improving teaching methods in reading, and providing activities which support the curriculum. It also developed assessments which help teachers understand the needs of children and focus teaching appropriately.

For more information: see Save the Children 2012

<http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/6931.pdf>

The multi-lingual experience from the Philippines

In the Philippines, the problems associated with effective bilingual education among the linguistic minorities can be traced to a lack of reading and instructional materials in the local languages. The availability of appropriate literature and instructional materials is often identified as a constraint in the development of a localised curriculum.⁵⁴

When the mother-tongue-based education programme began, teachers prepared a series of bilingual traditional stories of Lubuagan for use as a reader. These stories reflect the culture

and lifestyle of the students and encourage comprehension development and reflection on the content by including familiar situations and increased contextual clues. The books were used with both early elementary children and non-readers in the upper grades of elementary school to motivate and interest them. Some of the stories were written by the teachers themselves, while others were written by members of the Lubuagan community at writers' workshops. The quantity of reading material was minimal and teachers had to resort to writing stories on flip charts to give the students more opportunity to read. Yet, even in these circumstances, test scores of children studying in Lubuagan improved in reading and language by up to 40%. Filipino scores were up by 38% and English by 31%.

These improvements were found to be due to the newly developed mother-tongue literacy skills.⁵⁵

Following the success of these programmes, the government introduced educational reforms. The policy stated that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction from kindergarten until

the third year of primary school. The language of instruction is then gradually moved to English from grades four to six in primary school. Subjects are taught in English throughout high school, as the country considers English proficiency by its workforce as a competitive advantage in employment.

BOX 4: THE 'NEST OF LANGUAGES' APPROACH IN YUCATAN, MEXICO

Four years ago, the Collective 'Muuch Kaanbal' (Learning Together) which is part of the Mexican GCE coalition (Civil en la Educación) began to learn the 'Language Nest' methodology for revitalising indigenous languages among children from endangered language groups, after being requested by the National Congress of Indigenous and Intercultural Education to take part in the process.

The 'language nest' approach is an immersion-based methodology for language revitalisation. In a 'language nest', often older speakers of the language take part in early childhood education with a view to improving intergenerational language transference.

After learning the methodology for this language nest approach, the Collective Muuch Kaanbal opened the first 'Nests of Language' programme in Yucatan Mexico three years ago. The aim is to recover the Mayan language and culture. The language nest is run by people from the community - these are called 'guides' of the nest language. Their aim is to spread the Mayan language and culture among young people. They may be grandparents, artisans or peasants.

Through daily activities, the approach starts to boost young children's understanding of, and value for, their original cultural identity. Everyday knowledge is leveraged to pre-form activities. While children are carrying out their activities, a guide tells them what they are doing using the endangered language. Activities range from cooking, sowing, weaving hammocks or producing handicrafts. Communication only takes place in the Mayan language and only local materials are used.

Not only does this approach aim to teach the indigenous language but it is also intended to foster a greater understanding of indigenous traditions. There is a strong focus on building a sense of love and respect for the earth and harmonious coexistence among the children and the community, as was the case in the ancestral culture. The activities also aim to strengthen human autonomy.

Currently, four Nests of Languages are being implemented in Izamal, Chocholá, Peto and Tixmehuac.

Source: Muuch Kaanbal, part of the GCE Mexico coalition 'Incidencia Civil en la Educación' written by y Mary Brenda Aracelly Poot Poot and Mary Rame Gomez

Conclusions and recommendations

Many children across the developing world are learning very little in school, a reality that can be linked to teaching that is in a language they do not fully understand. It is a practice that leads to limited – or non-existent – learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills, alienating experiences, and high drop-out and repetition rates. To improve the quality of education, language policies need to take account of mother-tongue learning. Models of education which ignore the mother tongue in the early years can be unproductive, ineffective and have a negative effect on children’s learning. Mother-tongue education - at least in early years - can enable teachers to teach, and learners to learn more effectively.

For too long, mother-tongue education has been largely ignored by policy makers. While there are encouraging signs that the policy pendulum is beginning to swing towards a greater understanding of the importance of mother-tongue learning, there is still a long way to go. More governments are developing policies and programmes that include mother tongue in the early stages of learning, but there is still a need to formulate better policies, ensure better preparation for the introduction of second languages and ensure adequate resources are set aside.

The Global Campaign for Education believes that evidence suggests that there are certain areas which should be prioritised in policy development, to ensure more responsive and better nuanced policy development in the arena of mother-tongue learning. These are outlined below.

Areas of action for developing country governments

Each country context will have different patterns of language which will need to be responded to, however, there are some broad lessons which can be drawn:

1. Show strong political will to introduce mother-tongue learning by making firm commitments to support education in mother-tongue languages.

2. Introduce language policies which:

- Ensure that early education is carried out in the mother-tongue language to ensure children are literate in their first language initially.
- Introduce a second language in gradually and carefully managed stages, ideally with specialist trained language teachers enabling the process.

3. Support the development of low cost mother-tongue learning materials by:

- Setting-up flexible textbook and reader purchasing and development schemes rather than centralised book ordering and distribution.
- Developing relevant local skills and techniques for the production of literacy materials, language teaching materials, writing pedagogical grammars, dictionaries, and so on.
- Involving local teachers and community in developing materials based on local knowledge, practices and environment.
- Ensuring good language documentation for non-scripted languages, with language experts and local communities.

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- Ensuring local education authorities can access budget lines for translating, developing and printing books and materials in children's mother tongue, rather than simply receiving shipments of books in a language set at central level.

4. Support teachers to effectively deliver a multi-language policy

- Ensure teacher training and performance management prioritises early literacy in local languages, and boosts teachers' own proficiency in the language of instruction, and teaching skills in the first and second languages.
- In countries with diverse linguistic groups, work with teacher unions to develop appropriate recruitment and training approaches. This may include allocating teachers to places based on the language they already speak, while also giving teachers incentives to be placed in rural communities.
- Teachers should also be trained in learner-centred, interactive teaching methods and approaches to curriculum design and delivery that support the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

5. Invest in multi-lingual teaching by increasing financial support, particularly for initial investment costs, to mother-tongue learning. Allocate specific budgets towards supporting and facilitating investment in mother-tongue teaching.

6. Build a supportive community environment: it is important that communities and families understand the benefits of mother-tongue learning: to build this support there must be information available on the status and function of languages and culture.

Areas of action for donor governments

- 1.** Ensure that mother-tongue language policies gain greater prominence as an indicator of education quality and equity in national and international benchmarks and systems.
- 2.** Provide financial support to the introduction of mother-tongue education schemes, including supporting programmes which build evidence for shifting towards mother-tongue languages and strengthening second language skills
- 3.** Provide technical assistance to partner governments for training teachers in mother-tongue and bilingual literacy approaches and build capacity in education administrations for decentralised development and mother-tongue books.

Notes and references

1. Mother-tongue in the context of education refers to the language a child learned first and usually speaks best. In a very high percentage of cases, the first language a child learns and the language a child speaks best are one and the same, certainly in the early years of education.
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