

# A positively plurilingual world: promoting mother tongue education

Claire Thomas

*'Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home.'* (World Bank, *In Their Own Language, Education for All, 2005*)

**D**ecisions about the language medium used in schools affect most minorities and almost all indigenous peoples. It is these groups who most commonly speak a language other than the prevailing national or majority one. As such, minority and indigenous children are most often affected by the absence of education in their 'home' language, and suffer the most severe consequences; for generations, they are relegated to life on the margins. Very high numbers of children are affected. For example, according to the Institute for Development Studies in the UK, approximately '1.38 billion people speak local languages – languages that are less well-known, without written forms and not used in formal education. This includes an estimated 221 million school-aged children.'

It seems obvious to say that children learn better when they understand and speak the language of the classroom. But currently many children around the world are taught at school in a language that they do not understand either well or at all. This has a direct impact, resulting in lower educational achievement, higher drop-out rates, loss of heritage languages and lower self-esteem for these children.

The challenges facing mother tongue education provision include the concentration or dispersal of minority communities, and the effects of decentralization on educational decision making. These will be discussed here, and the best ways of organizing mother tongue education sketched out, using examples and results from practice around the world.

Finally, some of the reasons decision makers give for resisting mother tongue education, despite its proven effectiveness, will be examined. Therefore, the chapter will be most useful for advocacy by minority and indigenous activists, and those working to shape educational policies.

## Terminology

In this chapter, a 'mother tongue' is a language that children learn from their parents (both mother and father), siblings, wider family and community, when they are very young (this includes signed languages used primarily by deaf people and their families).

Non-specialists most commonly use 'mother tongue education' to mean education in a language that children speak at home, with the implication that education is solely in that language, although this is rarely if ever the case. This is particularly unfortunate because policy makers often mistakenly believe that education in a home language will mean that children will never really master a national or majority language. But in fact, the opposite is true (see below.) What we are really talking about is multilingual education, whereby children start school speaking the language that they speak at home, and other languages are gradually introduced over time. For the rest of this chapter I will refer to Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTME).

## Education in MTME is better for children

World Bank research from Mali in 2005 showed that, 'End-of-primary pass rates between 1994 and 2000 for children who transitioned gradually from a local language to French were, on average, 32 per cent higher than for children in French-only programmes.' Policy makers' most common reaction to a population of children who speak a different language at home (and who are often not doing well in school as a result) is to put in place special programmes teaching the national or school language for these children. But research over two decades has demonstrated that, instead of supplementary support in the national language, teaching such children through their home language and gradually introducing other languages is more effective in terms of educational achievement for minority language pupils. Importantly, it also showed that minority language children progress faster in both their language *and the majority language* when they first receive education in their home language.

While all children benefit from education in their home language, UNESCO has found that girls benefit more. This may be for cultural reasons: girls, in general, are more restricted to the home. This limits their opportunities to be exposed to and learn other languages that may be spoken outside the home. Minority girls may participate very little in class because they do not understand the classroom language. Teachers may support and challenge boys in this situation because they have higher expectations of them but may not do so with girls.

# Bilingual teaching heads to the front of the class in Vietnam

By Karen Emmons

In a typical Vietnam primary class with ethnic minority students, the Vietnamese teacher strains to communicate through body language or through classmates who may know both the minority language and some Vietnamese. Learning is a sporadic occurrence.

Vietnam's Constitution and 1991 Universal Primary Education Law recognize that ethnic minority children have a right to study in their mother tongue. With 54 ethnic groups in the country, that's a lot of mother tongues. But somewhere along the way, using Vietnamese for instruction took precedence as the way to help ethnic minority students overcome the language

barrier. Unfortunately, students have struggled. Many gave up.

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) asked UNICEF and international consultants for help in developing a flexible bilingual programme specific to the Vietnam context. Preparation spanned almost two years, including policy decisions on which languages to choose for the pilot (H'mong, J'rai and Khmer were chosen), assessments to pick pilot sites and field visits to suggested schools.

In 2008 the first piloted bilingual kindergarten classes opened their books and played games in the three mother tongues. One child said, 'I enjoy speaking H'mong with my teacher and friends and find it much more fun going to school.' Grade 1 classes follow in 2009. Ultimately, 13 kindergarten and 13 grade 1 classes (in three provinces) will be monitored until 2014, with materials and teacher training developed up to grade 5. That research will contribute to new policies and practices (including a legal framework) to promote the use of ethnic minority languages as a means for improving access, quality and equity of education and other social services. ■

**Below:** Girls from an indigenous community read outdoors at Ban Pho primary school in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam. The UNICEF-supported school provides education in a safe, child-friendly learning environment and includes classes taught in the children's indigenous language. *Josh Estey/UNICEF.*

*home ... [helps] pupils feel secure about their identity. They will meet other children like themselves, make friends within their community, engage in cultural activities and, most important of all, gain in self-esteem.'*

## MTME as a tool of conflict prevention

The link between assimilationist education policies and low self-esteem, absenteeism and high drop-out rates of children from indigenous and linguistic minority communities is now widely accepted. Such policies perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and marginalization that, in turn, can pave the way for mobilization of communities along ethnic lines when tensions are high.

Some policy makers may feel that both minority languages and education are relatively soft topics – compared, perhaps, to land rights, resource rights or reserved seats in Parliaments. This might lead them

to conclude that groups are less likely to mobilize around topics like the language of schooling. But this is dangerously short-sighted. Examples show that the closure of minority language schools and universities has been a contributing factor to raised ethnic tensions and conflict. In Kosovo in the early 1990s, the closure of many Albanian language primary and secondary schools and the mass expulsion of Albanian language students from the university certainly was one significant factor in increasing tensions. This was echoed a decade later in Tetovo, Macedonia; this time, however, partly due to more effective international interventions, a compromise over an Albanian-language university helped prevent widespread ethnic conflict. Other examples that demonstrate the links between assimilationist policy, language provisions and potential conflict include Botswana, China and Nicaragua, as documented in recent MRG reports.

States that run well-planned and well-implemented MTME programmes will, in the long run, reduce the risk of inter-ethnic conflict. Minority children will do better, will be able to break out of cycles of poverty, and intercultural education will build links between communities.



## MTME means lower drop-out rates, improved attendance

A telling insight from Bangladesh was offered by activist Mathura Bikash Tripura at the UN Forum. He said:

*'As a whole, net enrolment rate in Bangladesh has been increased from 71.2 per cent in 1990 to 86.6 per cent in 2001, with gender parity. But in the Chitragong Hill Tracts, only 56.8 per cent of the indigenous children from 6–10 years old enrolled in schools, and 60 per cent of the enrolled children drop out in early primary. This is double the national drop-out rate; the children are turning away for not speaking Bangla and they are experiencing education in a totally unfamiliar language.'* (see Box, p. 154)

Conversely, in Guatemala, according to Save the Children in 2008, with long-term bilingual and intercultural education, grade repetition is about half that in traditional schools, while drop-out rates are about 25 per cent lower. These are just two examples of many worldwide that confirm the benefits of MTME to minority and indigenous pupils.

## MTME means higher self-esteem

Educational development expert Carol Benson believes that systematic but frequently ignored differences between the language and culture of the school and the learner's community only succeed in teaching low self-esteem. She goes on to state:

*'Bilingual education addresses self-esteem in at least two ways. First, children are allowed to express their full range of knowledge and experience in a language in which they are competent. Second, use of the mother tongue in the official context of school demonstrates that their language and culture is deemed worthy of high-status activities such as schooling.'*

The benefits of this to children and to parents who may not have had MTME or even mainstream schooling cannot be underestimated. According to Our Languages, a languages project in the UK:

*'Introducing pupils to their heritage language, or teaching them literacy in a language they already speak at*

## MTME gives life to languages that are threatened

Alexandra Vujic, in her statement to the UN Forum on behalf of the Vojvodina Center for Human Rights, stressed that for endangered languages, language as a medium of education (rather than as a subject taught alongside other subjects) is critically important:

*'Homogeneous minorities [i.e. geographically concentrated] have more opportunities to preserve their language and culture in education through the medium of mother tongue, while dispersed minorities, whose only opportunity is more often just to learn their language, are strongly faced with assimilation processes and loss of their language and culture.'*

Ahola Ejembi of the Civil Liberties Organization in Nigeria, stated that the 'Akweya language is thus threatened with extinction and we are of the opinion that if the language is taught in primary schools in the area this drift will be arrested'.

## Degrees of geographic concentration or dispersal

It is important to note that, rights to mother tongue education for children notwithstanding, the number of speakers of a language and the geographical distribution of speakers do impact on the practicalities of organizing MTME, and both policy makers and minorities and indigenous peoples accept that these practical effects are important.

Most linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples around the world tend to live in areas where there are high concentrations of people speaking one, two or three languages. However internal migration to cities, internal displacement, and international migration and refugee movements are leading to a situation where more and more linguistic minorities find themselves isolated from their traditional community area. Their languages are therefore more vulnerable. In some cases, a particular school may have pupils speaking 20, 40 or even 60 different languages, and teaching through the medium of all of these languages would clearly be challenging. Minorities and indigenous peoples who are dispersed rather than living all together are much less likely to benefit from MTME. Though some states do provide at least some educational support for highly dispersed minority languages (e.g. Sweden and Belgium), the teaching is not through the medi-

um of these languages and it takes place outside the main school day. In 2003, the National Agency for Education Statistics in Sweden reported on 'Mother Tongue Studies', whereby:

*'Students with a mother tongue other than Swedish have the right to receive tuition in their native language as a school subject ... [with] its own separate syllabus ... Just over half of all pupils who are entitled to receive mother tongue tuition do so.'*

It said: 'Mother Tongue Studies courses are taught in approximately 60 languages (e.g. Arabic to 21,073 pupils, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian to 14,829 pupils, Finnish to 11,384 pupils and Albanian to 7,704 pupils).' This type of provision is very valuable to dispersed linguistic minorities and offers a partial solution, but it is not MTME.

## Devolution or centralization of decision making on education

A separate but related issue is the degree of devolution or centralization of power on educational decision making. Devolving power to regions or states can lead to a resurgence in MTME where one language community is concentrated. For example, since 1999, when the Welsh Assembly was established, there has been a 46 per cent increase in Welsh medium secondary school pupils. This is despite the fact that support and provision for speakers of minority languages in the UK (particularly migrant languages but also sign language and other regional languages) is not at all adequate.

However this is not always the case. According to the Indian Constitution, states and local authorities in India must 'provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups'. In Andhra Pradesh education programmes in eight languages have been running since 2003. The state of Orissa began rolling out programmes in ten languages in 2007. Despite this, according to experts in India:

*'Most states decide their own medium or mediums of instruction (MOI) for primary schools ... state policy varies for lack of implementation guidelines. States often designate the official state language (such as Tamil in Tamil Nadu) as MOI or even, increasingly, English.'*

# Success in three countries tells its own story

By Juan de Dios Simón

The EIBAMAZ project (Intercultural Bilingual Education in the Amazon Region) works with 17 indigenous groups in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. It is run by UNICEF and is supported by the government of Finland. In Bolivia the groups are the Cavineño, Movida, Mosenen, Tacana and Tsimane. In Ecuador the project works in eight provinces of the department of Puyo, with nine indigenous peoples and nationalities: Achuar, Ando, Cofan, Kichwa, Secoya, Shuar, Siona, Waorani and Zapara. In Peru it is working in the Ucayali region with three groups: Ashaninka, Shipibo and Yine. The project started in 2005.

Early results include:

- 100 per cent of indigenous children studying under the integrated unities of learning (first four years) in the Amazonian area of Ecuador have their own books.
- More than 4,000 boys and girls received their first bilingual materials in Ucayali, Peru.
- Thousands of teachers in Bolivia have guidelines on how to apply interculturality in classrooms and didactic skills for multi-grade teaching and multi-ethnic classrooms.
- 3,000 bilingual teachers have been trained in diverse themes of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (IBE) in three countries.
- 1,000 indigenous teachers have access to technology centres, using the internet and diverse books in the documentation centres.
- Indigenous teams have been created to produce materials, using local technology combined with computer software to edit and

documents. These teams are organized by languages and regions of indigenous peoples in three countries.

- Thirty-three indigenous students from the University of Cuenca are studying for a bachelor's degree as investigators and high school teachers.
- Indigenous investigators have been chosen by their own peoples to conduct applied research in IBE in their own communities.
- Five bilingual and teachers' schools have received technical and financial support. Three public universities (Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Simón in Bolivia, Universidad de Cuenca in Ecuador, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Peru), have committed to including indigenous professional and traditional community leaders in the teaching and research institutes of the universities.

An evaluation of the programme to date found that:

- EIBAMAZ is innovative, well accepted by actors and counterparts and its components are dynamic.
- With UNICEF's management, the project has had a broader impact and radius of activities than it would otherwise have done.
- EIBAMAZ has generated a wide range of activities, and engaged with both teaching and education reform, despite a relatively small budget.
- The cost-benefit ratio and the efficiency of use of financial resources are very positive.
- There is a strong demand in the Amazon for an efficient, effective and pertinent intercultural bilingual education.
- Indigenous leaders are committed to working for their own IBE based in their own culture.
- Parents see the school as an ally in their attempts to transmit to their children their cultural heritage.

## How to organize MTME

Successful MTME requires high-quality, well-planned and well-implemented programmes. The best initiatives include consultation with and participation of the community, and are sensitive to and include the specific cultural knowledge and practices of children. MTME should go beyond merely sustaining languages to significantly contribute to a child's development, and education programmes need to be run in combination with policies that maximize the use of minority and indigenous languages in the economy and in the public sector.

However, because a majority of countries are running either no MTME or programmes that fall significantly short of even the very minimal standards set out below, activists in such challenging situations will need to first concentrate on more limited and targeted goals.

Expert Kathleen Heugh has found that good practice is to have education using only one language as a medium (the language spoken at home) for at least six years. The most common failing of current MTME programmes is that children stop using the home language after only two or three years and transition to a national language at this point.

MTME can be either additive or subtractive. Subtractive MTME is where the home language is replaced by another language after the first years of education. This is by far the most common form of MTME. But well-planned and well-implemented additive MTME programmes, where languages are added but none are dropped, are associated with a very high degree of fluency and a wide and deep vocabulary in several languages. It is helpful if mother tongues/minority languages are also used as a language medium for national examinations.

Children and parents should always be able to choose whether children attend MTME or mainstream education in the majority language or schools that combine both. Under no circumstances should bilingual or minority language schools be less well resourced than majority language ones. Certainly there should be no issue of any required segregation of children by language, although MTME may in fact lead to some separate classes in practice. For this reason, it is important that minority languages are also taught as a subject to all children in a country along with intercultural education.

## Why the gap between research findings and reality?

After significant civil society lobbying at the International Bureau of Education international conference in 2008, the world's education ministers recommended that states should: 'view linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom as a valuable resource and promote the use of the mother tongue in the early years of instruction'. The UN Forum also made strong recommendations on MTME (see References, pp. 234–40).

But despite these and other similar public statements, actual implementation of high-quality MTME around the world is rare. Unlike some other aspects of education provision covered in this book, the wealth of a state and the availability of resources is rarely a determining factor in whether or not MTME is provided, or even of its quality. Ideological considerations come into play too, with varying practices across regions.

At the UN Forum, the French Minister of Education stated, 'French policy ... does not prevent the teaching of languages and heritage culture on an optional basis and outside the school day to those who desire it.' But more progressive policies on diverse languages as education mediums exist in many of France's neighbours including Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain (in relation to the Basque region), the UK (in relation to Wales) and Switzerland. Some countries in Latin America have made great progress but Canada's record remains patchy, with far more effort being made and success resulting with French and English as minority languages in different regions than with indigenous and migrant minority languages. The USA retains bilingual education programmes but California, through a measure known as Proposition 227, moved away from bilingual programmes and back to giving children with limited proficiency in English extra support in that language.

Some states have far better special provision for a few languages than for others (e.g. French in Canada, Saami in Sweden, Welsh in the UK). In some cases, certain languages are protected by historical treaties (e.g. Greek in Turkey and Turkish in Greece). But this continues to leave those speaking other languages in these states disadvantaged and complaining about these disparities.

# 'A person who does not know his history is doomed'

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Graduates of Intercultural Bilingual Education speak out. By *Anna Lucia D'Emilio*

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The UNICEF-supported 8th Latin American Congress of Intercultural Bilingual Education took place in Argentina in 2008. Participants included a panel of high school graduates from Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) programmes.

The group included: Ramber Molina, 23, a Quechua Bolivian; Moisés Rivero, 20, a Guaraní Bolivian; Daniel Paucar, 17, a Quechua Peruvian; Dora Virginia Alonzo Quijivix, 17, Maya Quiché from Guatemala; and Jessica Peñafiel, 14, a Kiwcha Ecuadorian.

Dora said IBE made a difference to her identity as an indigenous woman.

*'I believe that IBE has made new opportunities available to us, one of the greatest signs being that we can demonstrate to the whole world that we indigenous women can indeed attain what we set for ourselves. A clear example is that we have women MPs. I feel very proud of having a representative who is a woman and a Maya at the Guatemalan Congress, of having indigenous teachers who impart to us our education, of our grandmothers who have much knowledge which compares with the people who know about anthropology, astrology and other subjects, and then our grandfathers, who know what a Mayan ceremony is, living in harmony with our loved ones [and] our ancestors, [who] remember them and want to shape our identity.'*

She added: 'It would be good if, when making public policies regarding children, our opinions

could also be included' and that policy should take account of 'Girls ... who benefit most deeply from the contributions', including girls from 'the remote rural communities'.

Jessica agreed that the IBE 'has still a way to go', that it could be improved through better textbooks and more learning materials. She also said that there are few options available within the bilingual educational system, and that is why she had to do part of her studies in the Hispanic system.

Ramber summed up the importance of giving indigenous children the opportunity to gain access to IBE programmes when he contrasted 'study in one's mother tongue' – through which it is possible to study in depth 'important and significant aspects of our experiences, philosophy and our life itself' – with study in Spanish, because the texts that they were taught to read in Spanish were not 'that enjoyable since we would understand little of the real meaning, the essence ... it's that that view did not match (adapt to) our way of understanding life'.

Ramber is about to complete his undergraduate studies in law at Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Simón in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and would like to become a lecturer in constitutional law.

Moisés is studying to become a teacher at INSPOC, a model institute in teacher training for IBE, in Camiri, Bolivia.

*'I'll be a teacher, not for advancement but as a vocation. I'd like to reach the sectors most in need within the community and the sectors that nobody knows about nor studies. I want to reach out to them, for them to be aware of the cultural values, the grandfathers' knowledge, the values of our region, so that they remain in the books and will never be rubbed out of the Guaraní culture. In my region slavery still exists – we help them to rise up and eliminate slavery.'*

Daniel, who is studying to become a social communicator and a community leader, said: 'A person who does not know his history is doomed. I don't want to be like this.' ■

## Reasons given for not providing MTME

Some states declare a national language as necessary for national unity. Article 21 of the Syrian Constitution states: 'The education and cultural system aims to build an *Arabic* national socialistic generation' (emphasis added). This excludes the Kurdish speaking community in Syria (around 3 million people). Jian Badrachan, of the Kurdish Centre for Legal Studies and Consultancy explained that in Syria:

*It is forbidden to teach a lesson in the mother tongue of the Kurdish language. Teachers are forced to give lessons to pupils in Arabic which nobody understands, thus reflecting a strategy of the government in excluding the Kurds from a prospective education.'*

Syria has such a hardline stance on this issue that teaching Kurdish in private has even led to teachers being arrested, as reported at the UN Durban Review Conference in Geneva in April 2009 by the Human Rights Organization in Syria.

Some governments claim that majority opinion forces them to follow assimilationist policies and quote examples of MTME issues that have been put to the public vote (Proposition 227 in California is the best-known example). Botswana has brought bills to parliament on several occasions, which would modify the policy that privileges the Setswana language and culture over Botswana's 20 or so other languages, but none has passed.

However, when the benefits are explained and a debate takes place in which nationalist or anti-immigrant sentiments are not promoted, there is widespread public support for MTME. Initiatives are going ahead with broad support in Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea and Mozambique, which is currently rolling out a new programme of education in 16 languages (out of 43), with some early indications of success.

## Practical arguments made against MTME education

There is an acute shortage of trained teachers who speak or have training in mother tongue languages. According to the NGO Save the Children, 'Because speakers of local or minority languages often don't do well in school due to an unfriendly language of instruction, they don't make it through higher education and thus cannot qualify as teachers.' It

**Right:** Ryan Malibirr, an Aboriginal student at school in Ramingining, Northern Territory, Australia. Yolngu Matha, the local language, is taught in language and culture classes. *Polly Hemming.*

should be made easier for local people to be trained as teachers, as local teachers are much more likely to stay in remote areas (where minorities often live) than teachers from cities or other parts of the country. The EIBAMAZ project in Latin America coordinated by UNICEF (see Box, p. 89) has worked in this way, as has SIL in Papua New Guinea. As Carol Benson points out in 'Girls, educational equity and mother tongue education', locally based mother tongue teachers are more likely to have a closer relationship with and the trust of parents. This can particularly affect girls' enrolment in school and reduce girls' drop-out rates. Benson adds that a higher proportion of locally based mother tongue teachers are often female, providing positive role models for girl pupils.

Education departments often cite the additional investment and costs of MTME. It is true that funding is often needed to develop materials, and to invest initially in teacher training. However researchers and analysts, including at the World Bank, have shown that because of the reduced drop-out rate and repetition of years, even though the initial costs may be somewhat higher, MTME is still more cost effective in the long term.

## Conclusion

It is not coincidental that children from linguistic minority communities make up a large proportion of the children who are currently not in school. Linguistic minorities and most indigenous peoples are often marginalized in political and economic life. They are often either invisible or are just not a priority when policy decisions are taken. This is the overwhelming, if short-sighted reason, why their needs are so often ignored.

It is clear that education policies that deny education rights for linguistic minorities must be challenged. Education must be adapted to the languages that children speak rather than children being changed to fit in with the education systems in place. Provision needs to be tailored to take into account different languages and different cultures. More domestic and international litigation to call states to account on these issues is sorely needed.



Let there be no more children who describe their experience as one Punjabi speaker, who was submerged in an English-language medium education aged 7, did, saying:

*'Very difficult ... I didn't understand what people were saying around me so I thought that they were talking about me and I was thinking "What are they planning?" I didn't understand a word ... It was scary ... I came home every day in tears.'*

Let there be more parents of children who can say, as UNESCO reported this Tok Ples speaking parent in Papua New Guinea:

*'Now my child is in a Tok Ples school. He is not leaving his place. He is learning in school about his customs, his way of life. Now he can write anything he wants to in Tok Ples. Not just the things he can see, but things he thinks about, too. And he writes about his place. He writes about helping his mother carry water, about digging kaukau, about going to the garden. When he writes these things they become important to him. He is not only reading and writing about*

*things outside, but learning through reading and writing to be proud of our way of life. When he is big, he will not reject us. It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us.'* ■