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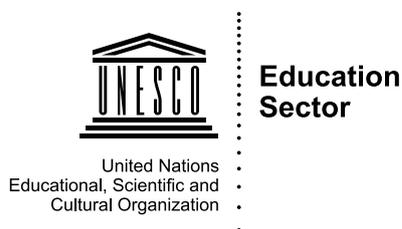


Mother Tongue and Early Childhood Care and Education

Synergies and Challenges

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**Mother Tongue and
Early Childhood Care
and Education:
Synergies and Challenge**

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Abstract

Two major, inter-related issues are analysed in this paper – mother tongue (MT) and early childhood care and education (ECCE). Evidence tells us that learning first in one's MT leads to better outcomes in the future – for individuals, cultures, and nations. But MT is used rarely in ECCE programmes and the early grades of primary school so that many children are forced to learn in a language they poorly understand, and in an environment which neglects and even represses their cultural identity and the language which "carries" it. Evidence also tells us that good quality ECCE programmes enhance the well-being of young children. But many governments spend few resources on ECCE and put very little effort into creating a developmentally and linguistically appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for young pre-school children. The challenge is that while the most disadvantaged children benefit the most from ECCE programmes, these children participate in them the least. Thus, for both cultural and educational reasons, and as a child's right, ECCE and initial literacy should be provided in a child's MT, and actions can be taken at both macro- and micro-levels to ensure that this is achieved. In other words, the long and often difficult process of revitalising, maintaining, and further developing endangered languages of indigenous peoples must begin first in families and communities – but then must continue into ECCE programmes and into the wider education system. Without this, indigenous, minority languages and cultures will never thrive – and many will not survive.

Key words: mother tongue, early childhood development and education, language policy



Introduction

Many provocative questions can be asked in regard to the two major issues analysed in this paper: (1) early childhood care and education (ECCE) and (2) the use of mother tongue (MT)² in education – but many of these questions, unfortunately, are not able to be answered by supposedly well-informed respondents in many nations of the world, even those in high-level positions in ministries of education. This means that in many countries, education policies, programmes, and budgets are being established in the absence of knowledge and data important to improving the quality both of schools and of student outcomes.

In terms of **early childhood care and education**, the period of early childhood is generally defined as covering the ages of 0 (or -9 months) to 8 (an age when children have mastered the fundamentals needed for later learning). We know that good quality ECCE programmes enhance the well-being of children in this age range.³ We also know that the most disadvantaged children (over 250 million under 5 years of age) need and benefit the most from ECCE programmes of good quality – including girls; children of migrants and those affected by conflict, disaster, and abuse; children living in extreme poverty and in rural and remote areas; children in poor health, malnourished, and with disabilities and delays; and children of linguistic/ethnic minorities.⁴

So why, therefore, do governments spend so few resources on good quality ECCE? Why is it so difficult to create a seamless, developmentally and linguistically appropriate, curriculum and pedagogy for young children, beginning even in the home with parental education, and then continuing from day care programmes through kindergartens into the early years of primary school? And why do disadvantaged children participate in ECCE programmes the least, and why is so little effort made to proactively look for these children and ensure that they are enrolled and succeed in these programmes?

In terms of **mother tongue**, evidence from around the world tells us that learning first in one's home language leads to better outcomes in the future – for individuals, cultures, and nations. But if this is the case, why is mother tongue used so rarely in ECCE programmes and, even more

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In 1933 there were 38 Eyak speakers left... at home her mother donned a *kushi*, or apron, to make cakes in an *'isxah*, or round mixing bowl; but at school “barbarous” Eyak was forbidden... As the spoken language died, so did the stories of tricky Creator-Raven and the magical loon, of giant animals and tiny homunculi with fish-spears no bigger than a matchstick. People forgot why “hat” was the same word as “hammer”, or why the word for a leaf, *kultahi*, was also the word for a feather... For Mrs. Smith... the death of Eyak meant the not-to-be-imagined disappearance of the world.

”

*Obituary of Marie Smith, the last speaker of the Eyak language, aged 89.*¹

1 The Economist, February 9, 2008, *Obituary: Marie Smith*, p. 80.

2 “Mother tongue” here refers to the home language or first language learned by children.

3 J. P. Shonkoff, L. Richter, J. van der Gaag and Z. A. Bhutta, 2012, An integrated scientific framework for child survival and early childhood development, *Pediatrics*. Feb 2012, 129 (2) e460-e472; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2011-0366.

4 A. D. Denboba, L. K. Elder, J. Lombardi, L. B. Rawlings, R. K. Sayre and Q. T. Wodon, 2014, *Stepping Up Early Childhood Development: Investing in Young Children for High Returns (English)*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/868571468321240018/Stepping-up-early-childhood-development-investing-in-young-children-for-high-returns>

rarely, in the early grades of primary school, and why are so many children therefore forced to learn in a language they poorly understand and in an environment which neglects and even represses their cultural identity and the language which “carries” it?

A conservative estimate indicates that of the 7,000 or so languages living today (and 540 have died since 1950), 1,075 – or 15 per cent – will be dead or dying by the end of this century.⁵ In other words, there will be three times as many dead and dormant languages at the end of the century as there are today⁶ – and the rate of death may well accelerate. In relation to this trend, other questions arise: (1) How many languages are spoken in Asia (and in one’s own country), and what percentage of these languages are “in trouble” or “dying”? (2) What is the status of non-dominant languages of indigenous/linguistic minority groups in regard to dominant languages? (3) How many of these languages are used at all in education – as the medium of instruction or as a subject? If not, why not?



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⁵ The current rate of language death is estimated at 9–17 per year; calculated over the 80 years left in this century, the number of dead languages by 2100 could be considerably more than 1,075.

⁶ G. F. Simons and C. D. Fennig (eds.), 2018, *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, twenty-first edition, Dallas: SIL International. <https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnologue/gary-simons/welcome-21st-edition>

Early Childhood Care and Education

Early childhood development (ECD), as a stage in a person's life, can be seen from two different perspectives. As an outcome, ECD defines a child's status as being "physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent and ready to learn".⁷ As a process, ECD covers important periods of transition from pregnancy (and even before) to infancy and from home into ECCE programmes and then into primary school and to successful early learning (especially in literacy and numeracy) and socio-emotional development.

From a global perspective, early childhood is the most important developmental phase in a human's life when a child's brain grows exponentially and when the foundations of a range of competencies – motoric, cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, etc. – are established.

Figure 1 shows the stages of brain development of infants and indicates that a large percentage (80 per cent) of a child's brain has been developed by the age of three – including development in regard to speech, emotions, and language.⁸ From a neuroscience perspective, therefore, it is clear that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first years of life and that the impact of the quality of this development is long-lasting throughout a person's life.

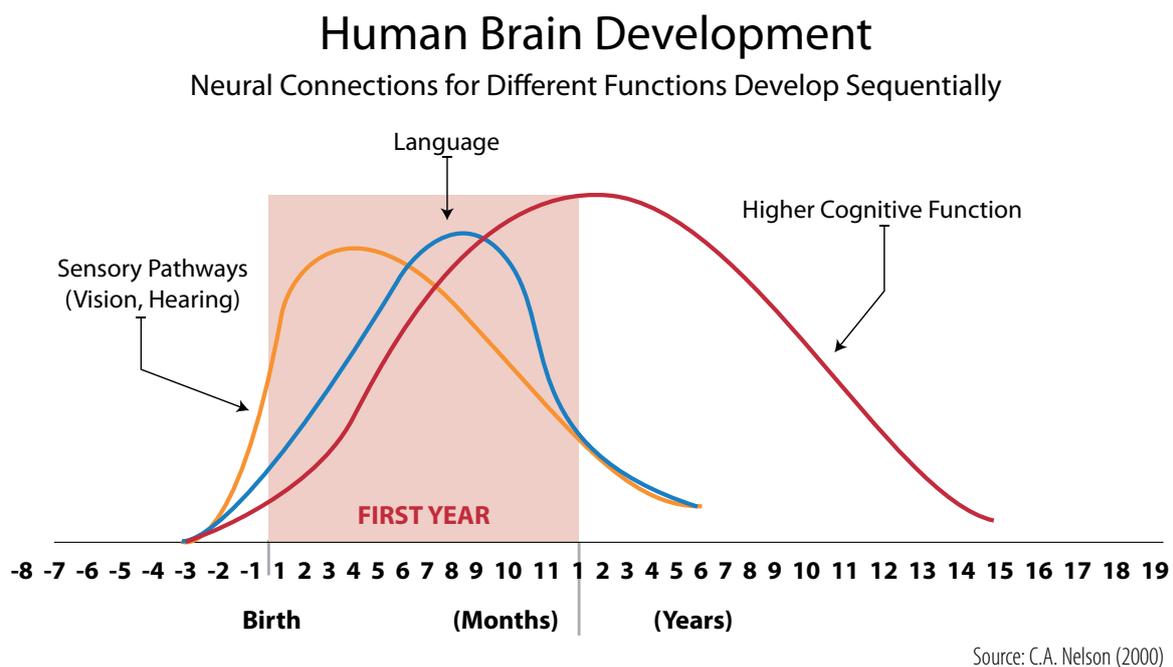


Figure 1: Human Brain Development. Note. From InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development, Center on the Developing Child, 2007. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-eecd>.

⁷ UNICEF, 2010, *Facts for Life*. <https://www.unicef.org/ffi/03>

⁸ Center on the Developing Child, 2007, InBrief: The science of early childhood development. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-eecd>

The importance of these early years – what are often called the first 1,000 days from conception to the age of three – means several things. First, preventive early programmes yield higher returns than later remedial ones: providing adequate services and support as early as possible to infants who are underweight and stunted or have a range of delays and disabilities produces better results than waiting to intervene only when children are older.⁹ Second, the most disadvantaged children – by sex, socio-economic status, disability, and ethnicity/language – experience the most dramatic gains from ECCE programmes; such children, however, including those from indigenous groups, are least likely to be enrolled in these programmes.¹⁰

Third, ECCE programmes have been shown to have sustainable, long-term effects on the development of human capital in general and on outcomes such as social cohesion and economic success. These programmes are therefore important in helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and in preventing inequalities in the well-being in one generation from being transmitted to the next. And fourth, from a financial perspective, early investment in these programmes also has a higher rate of return in regard to individual and social outcomes than investments at higher levels of education.¹¹

But good quality ECCE programmes have advantages in other areas as well:¹²

- **Health:** ECCE programmes lower health costs for young children and their mothers and reduce the number of later high-risk adults.
- **Education:** Good quality ECCE results in cost savings and increased efficiency in the education system, with children more ready for school, enrolling with solid pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills and socio-emotional competencies (e.g., resilience, tolerance, empathy) and therefore less likely to repeat, drop out, and fail.
- **Culture:** ECCE programmes, if embedded in local culture and delivered in the mother tongue, can have a strong impact on the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and on a person's cultural identity and self-esteem and therefore on her/his future participation in national development.

9 UNICEF, 2017, *Early Moments Matter for Every Child*, New York: UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/media/files/UNICEF_Early_Moments_Matter_for_Every_Child_report.pdf

10 A. D. Denboba, L. K. Elder, J. Lombardi, L. B. Rawlings, R. K. Sayre and Q. T. Wodon, 2014, *Stepping Up Early Childhood Development: Investing in Young Children for High Returns (English)*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/868571468321240018/Stepping-up-early-childhood-development-investing-in-young-children-for-high-returns>

11 P. R. Britto, P. L. Engle and C. M. Super (eds.), 2013, *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922994.001.0001.

12 Ibid.

Mother Tongue

Answers to the questions raised above about language are often surprising to many people in Asia and other regions, even those relatively well-educated and well-employed such as officials of ministries of education. There is often poor understanding of the sheer diversity of languages and cultures in the region and in individual countries – or of the fate many of these languages will suffer. In Asia, for example, of the 2,296 languages spoken, 38 per cent are considered to be “at risk” or “in trouble” (parents speak the language but their children do not) or “dying” (grandparents speak the language but later generations do not).¹³ Both of these risk factors relate to the lack of intergenerational transmission of language – the “next” generation speaks and understands the family’s original mother tongue (also called the “heritage” language) less than the current one. Making more difficult this language transmission between generations is that most of these languages are not used in formal education or even in non-formal community learning centres and ECCE programmes.¹⁴

Figure 2 provides information on linguistic diversity in Asia:

| Country | Languages | % In trouble/dying |
|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Malaysia | 136 | 81% |
| Indonesia | 707 | 49% |
| China | 298 | 53% |
| Philippines | 183 | 8% |
| Myanmar | 118 | 17% |
| Viet Nam | 109 | 39% |
| Thailand | 71 | 37% |
| Cambodia | 27 | 52% |
| India | 448 | 15% |
| Nepal | 121 | 54% |

Figure 2: Linguistic diversity in Asia. *Note:* From *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Twenty-first edition, by Simons, Gary F., and Fennig, Charles D., eds., 2018. Dallas: SIL International. <https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnologueblog/gary-simons/welcome-21st-edition>.

Note that Malaysia, among all the nations of South, Southeast, and East Asia, has the highest percentage – 81 per cent – of languages “in trouble” or “dying”. This is due largely to the fact that 112 of the 136 languages in Malaysia are considered “indigenous”; their importance pales in relation to the complex issues around the role of the national language (Bahasa Malaya) and the other major languages of the country – Tamil and Mandarin – and of English. Debates around how these major languages are used in education have raged for decades, with no final answer reached, and in these debates the role and importance of what are considered the languages of small, tribal, indigenous communities are usually ignored.

¹³ G. F. Simons and C. D. Fennig (eds), 2018, *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, twenty-first edition, Dallas: SIL International. <https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnologueblog/gary-simons/welcome-21st-edition>

¹⁴ K. Kosonen, 2017, *Language of instruction in Southeast Asia*, background paper prepared for the 2017/8, *Global Education Monitoring Report, Accountability in Education: Meeting Our Commitments*. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002595/259576e.pdf>

In fact, of the “indigenous” languages in Malaysia, only three – Semai (in peninsular Malaysia) and Kadazandusun and Iban (in Sabah and Sarawak) – are permitted to be used in formal education, and their use is restricted to being a special subject in the school’s timetable (usually 90 minutes per week) rather than as a language of instruction. Even this status was achieved only after several stringent criteria had been met – existence of a dictionary and an agreed-upon grammar, a set number of people from the language group in question with an advanced degree, etc. These criteria, considerably more difficult to meet than those in Cambodia and the Philippines which have much more liberal mother tongue policies, make it difficult for even fairly large language groups to gain permission to have their language used, however minimally, in the education system. Several other indigenous languages, such as Bidayuh and Penan, are allowed to be used in community learning centres and play schools but not as languages in formal schooling. This lack of attention to indigenous languages by the Malaysian education system makes it more likely that languages in trouble will begin to die and that dying languages will, in fact, disappear.

But then there is an important question in regard to languages and their decline and death: “Why should we care?” Should we, in other words, interfere with what some would consider natural selection – the domination of the strong and the decline of the weak? One important reason to do so from an anthropological and philosophical perspective is that when a language dies, as it did for the Eyak, the world loses a piece of its collective experience, of human knowledge, and of a unique worldview. It also often loses local knowledge – about plants and animals and their various uses, the conservation of the environment, and patterns of weather and longer-term climate change – and these losses can never be replaced.

In order not to suffer these losses and maintain the richness of a culture and the language which supports it, languages in danger should be revitalised and further developed. This is necessary for several reasons:

- they are needed to maintain what many consider essential for a sustainable future – cultural and linguistic diversity
- they express the identity of a people, “hold” their history, and transmit their culture
- they contribute to the sum total of human and cultural knowledge
- they help ensure the personal and social development of the speakers of the language and the fulfilment of their rights.

In terms of what we know in regard to mother tongues, it is clear that a language is more likely to survive and thrive if it is successfully transmitted from one generation to the next and if this process is buttressed by it having a strong presence in the education system, not merely as an occasional subject in the weekly timetable teaching, at best, basic literacy, crafts, music, and dance, but as the initial language of instruction, of both oral speech and written texts. The challenge is that most education systems don’t welcome, or are even hostile to, non-dominant linguistic communities/indigenous peoples and their cultures. If recognized at all, they are seen as “mere dialects” (usually of the national language) and insignificant “small” languages.

The argument against this, of course, is that people only learn to “read” once in terms of understanding the linkages between sounds and letter and words and sentences and meaning.¹⁵ Thus, basic educational theory states that learners must begin learning from where they “are” (the “known”) – in their home language – and NOT in a language they do not know, and then be enabled to transfer the literacy skills they have mastered to second and other languages. It is therefore essential that MT should begin to be used in ECCE programmes and then continued as the dominant language of instruction and literacy at least for three years of primary school (and preferably five or six) before the second language becomes the principal language of instruction.

In support of these arguments, research has told us several things. We know, for example, that MT: (1) produces better learning outcomes for children and greater internal efficiency for the education system – higher enrolment and achievement (in all subjects) and lower repetition and drop-out rates for children of minority groups often excluded from school and from learning¹⁶; (2) promotes participation of parents in their children’s education; (3) enables learners (especially girls) to gain fluency and confidence in speaking, reading, and writing their mother tongue – and then the national language and international languages¹⁷; (4) produces materials in home languages and inserts local knowledge into the classroom; and (5) ultimately promotes national unity and integration into the nation’s social, cultural, and economic life.¹⁸ Thus, for both cultural and educational reasons, and as a child’s right, early childhood care and education and initial literacy should be provided in a child’s mother tongue.¹⁹

An approach often used to achieve this is Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE).²⁰ Such an approach means that learning starts in a language the learner already speaks (L1); that initial literacy is gained by using L1 as the language of instruction (Lol); that other languages (e.g., L2, L3) are learned as ‘second’ languages with appropriate methods; that a successful “bridge” is built to transfer L1 literacy skills to L2; that eventually both L1 and L2 are languages of literacy; and that new languages (e.g., English) can be added more effectively later. The important issue to note is that MTB MLE is NOT teaching MT as a subject, a few hours a week, but rather as the language of instruction and literacy in early education.

¹⁵ J. Cummins, 2005, *Teaching for Cross-Language Transfer in Dual Language Education: Possibilities and Pitfalls*, Arlington, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. <https://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/new-resource-library/symposium-on-dual-language-education-3.pdf?sfvrsn=0&sfvrsn=0>

¹⁶ V. Collier and W. Thomas, 2004, The astounding effectiveness of dual language education for all. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*. 2:1 Winter.

¹⁷ Benson, Carol. 2005. *Girls, Educational Equity and Mother Tongue-based Teaching*. Bangkok: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000142049>

¹⁸ J. Lo Bianco, 2016, *Synthesis Report: Language, Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative*. Bangkok: UNICEF

¹⁹ H. Pinnock, 2009, *Language and Education: The Missing Link – How the Language Used in Schools Threatens the Achievement of Education for All*, London: CFBT and Save the Children; C. Perez-Brito, and N. Goldstein, 2010, *Mother Tongue Education and Learning for Quality Education: Background Paper for the Education Sector Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank; UNESCO, 2016, *Global Education Monitoring Report Policy Paper 24: If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?* Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713>

²⁰ K. Kosonen, 2006, Multigrade Teaching among ethnic minority children: The Language Issue, In L. Cornish (ed.), *Reaching EFA through Multi-grade Teaching: Issues, Contexts and Practices*, pp. 239–258. Armidale, NSW, Australia: Kardoorair Press.

An 'ideal' approach to L1-based multilingual education is shown below:

'Ideal' Approach to L1-based Multilingual Education
(Pre-school and primary levels, 2 languages)

| | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Primary Level | G6 | L1 (Subject) | L2 (Lol+Subject) | L3 |
| | G5 | L1 (Lol+Subject) | L2 (Lol+Subject) | L3 |
| | G4 | L1 (Lol+Subject) | L2 (Lol) | L3 |
| | G3 | L1 (Lol) | L2 | L3 |
| | G2 | L1 (Lol) | L2 (oral + written) | |
| | G1 | L1 (Lol, literacy) | L2 (oral) | |
| Pre-school | ECE2 | L1 (Lol, literacy) | L2 (oral) | |
| | ECE1 | L1 (Lol) | | |

Source: Kosonen 2006

Figure 3: An ideal approach to L1-based multilingual education. Note. From *Multigrade Teaching among Ethnic Minority Children: the Language Issue*. In Linley Cornish (ed.), *Reaching EFA through multi-grade teaching: Issues, contexts and practice*, by Kosonen, Kimmo, pp. 239–258, 2006. Armidale, NSW, Australia: Kardoair Press.



So Why ECCE and MT Together?

It should be obvious now why using MT in ECCE programmes and the early grades is so important. First, it supports the efforts to maintain and even further develop mother tongues through their intergenerational transmission. Second, it enhances the relevance and effectiveness of ECCE programmes and of early grade education for young children and for their parents/caregivers. And it also helps ensure full participation in these programmes and enhances student learning outcomes in mother tongue, other subjects, and the national language.

So what can be done to ensure that ECCE and MT programmes complement and reinforce each other? This question can be answered at both the (central government) macro-level and the (community) micro-level. At the **national, macro-level**, it is essential to:

Develop national policies/policy frameworks, strategies, and action plans for the promotion of MT in ECCE and other basic education programmes. This might involve:

- developing policies which strengthen the role of mother tongues in early education and focus on early cognitive and linguistic development, especially of linguistic minorities/indigenous peoples
- reforming the teacher education system to ensure the availability of trained ECCE facilitators and kindergarten and early grade teachers, with high status and pay, able to use MT in initial education and then build a successful bridge to mastery of the national language; this is reflected in Resolution 4g of MIPCE II which calls for “instructing IPGM (teacher training institutes) to add mother tongue teacher training programs”
- establishing good quality ECCE programmes in areas where indigenous people/ethnic minorities live (which is often in rural, remote areas which receive these programmes late, if at all)
- developing early reading materials in MT – simple materials able to promote pre-literacy skills in mother tongue in ECCE centres and more advanced ones for continuing the learning of MT in the early grades of primary school; this might require the identification of authors able to write appropriate materials in the MT and the publishing and dissemination of these materials to MT-based early learning programmes. (Resolution 4h of MIPCE II calls for “translating instructional materials into relevant indigenous languages.”)

Establish programmes to ease the transition from pre-school into primary school via MT; for example, as above, writing pre-school and early grade textbooks and other learning materials in MT; providing smaller classes in the early grades with better teachers able to teach

Resolution 3 of the Second Malaysian Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education (MIPCE II) has as its goal:

“

To develop a ‘national policy on mother tongue-based multilingual education’ for Malaysia where the mother tongue is the preferred language of instruction in pre-school education, and, to promote, where appropriate, especially in rural, indigenous areas, a policy of ‘mother tongue-first literacy’ that uses the mother tongue as the language of instruction for initial literacy in both pre-school and primary school.

”

in MT; and developing a seamless, continuous curriculum and pedagogy, based on MT, from ECCE programmes and pre-schools through at least the early years of primary school.

Promote high-level advocacy and identify “champions” for ECCE and MT – to increase both the demand for, and the supply of, these programmes; this can involve advocacy around ECCE and MT with national legislatures and ministries of education (and other ministries operating ECCE programmes) and also the identification of public figures who can become champions for ECCE and MT. Such advocacy is often most important in societies where some members of the dominant language group and culture feel somehow threatened by the non-dominant groups in their midst.

Collect more rigorous evidence, preferably through longitudinal research, on the effectiveness of these programmes, both on (1) the positive impacts of ECCE on health, nutrition, cognitive development, protection, and future income; and (2) the importance of mother tongue, beginning from early childhood, on educational achievement and efficiency, cultural/linguistic preservation, and more inclusive national development. MIPCE II Resolution 4c suggests “ensuring that research is conducted to compare the results from the [mother tongue based] pilot schools with those from similar schools using the standard curriculum.”

At the **community, micro-level**, other actions are required. These include the need to:

Promote advocacy within local communities in regard to the need for both ECCE and MT.

Not all parents – and even larger communities – are convinced of the need for ECCE programmes for their children (they are too expensive and too far away, and the home environment is good enough) or for MT-based education (their children speak the MT at home so there is no need to provide it at school, and it’s better to master the national language early in order to become more successful in school and later life). Given the research evidence which points to the utility of both ECCE and MT in young child development and future well-being, advocacy within communities is sometimes needed. (Thus, Resolution 4d of the MIPCE II: “Engaging with indigenous communities to explain the rationale behind mother tongue-based education.”) Another possible mechanism for promoting acceptance of the greater use of mother tongue can be found in MIPCE II Resolution 4e: “Funding and encouraging workshops at the grassroots where indigenous knowledge of culture, art, folklore, dance, stories, etc., can be shared and incorporated into curriculum.”

Establish accessible and affordable ECCE programmes/pre-schools of good quality using MT as the language of communication, preferably in cooperation with the central government (or perhaps in its absence); these should be accompanied by strong family and community engagement and culturally relevant materials and pedagogies.

Identify and support members of indigenous and ethnic minority groups who can be trained and certified as pre-school and early grade facilitators and teachers and then return to their communities to work; this may require some official waiver of the usual academic qualifications for teacher education programmes where there is a lack of officially “qualified” candidates among these populations. Resolution 4f-h of MIPCE II calls for the prioritizing of recruitment and training of indigenous teachers.

Encourage families and communities to support the intergenerational transmission of MT and thereby continue to interact with children in MT first in basic communication and, eventually, for increasingly complex topics; this can include having ongoing instruction in MT to develop reading and writing skills both inside and outside of school (e.g., in adult education programmes) and exposure to positive parental attitudes toward maintaining the mother tongue.

But Why Is This So Difficult To Do?

The arguments for supporting more and better quality ECCE programmes are proving convincing in many countries. This is less true for MT programmes. But the ever-increasing scientific evidence and examples of good practice in regard to the use of MT in education, including in ECCE, should make it easier to promote expanded use of MT. Still, many challenges are often raised against this expansion. These include (and can be responded to) as follows:

- **the lack of alphabets/scripts** in many languages – but these can be developed, relatively quickly and inexpensively, with the involvement both of linguists and community members
- **the initial cost to produce mother tongue materials and to train teachers** to use (and sometimes even to speak) minority languages – but this cost will be recovered later from greater efficiency in the education system (e.g., less wastage from failure and dropping out)
- **the claim that some languages are “undeveloped”**, making them unable to express complicated ideas and concepts – but languages naturally grow and develop, and new vocabulary can be developed to express these ideas and concepts
- **indifference – and even opposition – from within some non-dominant indigenous and ethnic communities** who believe that mastery of the national language and/or English is more important than maintenance of their own language; community-level advocacy as described above is often needed to overcome this indifference
- **indifference – and even opposition – from dominant political and economic groups**, based on the overriding goal of national unity, who believe that any attempt to empower indigenous, minority communities will inevitably endanger this unity (and perhaps erode their domination).

This final challenge is often the least explicit but also the most difficult to overcome. Logic would suggest to these dominant groups that recognizing, respecting, valuing, and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity reinforces – rather than reduces – the loyalty and sense of unity that minority groups feel toward the state. But dominant groups are often loath to surrender the advantages that their mastery of the national language – and of international languages – confers upon them.

In summary, good quality, integrated, and comprehensive ECCE programmes promote the holistic development of young children for their own well-being – so that they remain “on track” physically, cognitively, linguistically, and socio-emotionally, for their later academic success, and

ultimately for their contributions to community and national development. A major factor which can help ensure and enrich these outcomes is the delivery of ECCE programmes in the mother tongue of the children and their families. This both increases the relevance and effectiveness of these programmes and also provides a valuable support to the promotion of mother tongue through transmission of that language from one generation to the next. This process is an important factor in the long and often difficult process of maintaining, revitalising, and further developing the endangered languages of indigenous peoples and other non-dominant groups. This process must begin first in homes and communities – but then must continue into ECCE programmes and into the wider education system. Without this, these languages and the cultures that depend on them will seldom thrive – and many will not survive.





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