

The role of MLE in Early Childhood Care and Development Programmes and in the successful transition to Primary School

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Timor-Leste is a young country, only eight years old. Sixty percent of the population is aged 18 years or under. In this period of national rebuilding, it is recognised that education is urgent and needs immediate attention.

Early Childhood Education is just beginning to receive attention, with the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 referencing the government's objective of establishing a pre-school facility in at least half of all villages by 2015. (At present most of the 100-plus pre-schools are run by Church or non-government agencies or are community-run.) , In October 2010 a new law was adopted which will see the creation of a Directorate for Early Education.

Timor has 16 distinct indigenous languages, with Tetum the lingua franca among them. Along with Portuguese, Tetum is also the official co-language. As yet the Ministry of Education does not have a Language in Education policy which sets out clearly how and at what levels the various languages are introduced. Current practice in the classroom and in programs of professional development place a great deal more weight and prestige on Portuguese. Mother tongues are used in classrooms across the country, particularly in the pre-school and early primary years, but they enjoy no official place and teachers do so despite the strong emphasis in official discourse upon reintroducing Portuguese. I believe it is vital that we reassess current language in education practices and acknowledge the disconnect between the home and school environment that inevitably results when the language of the classroom is not that of the child's home and is foreign to parents and extended family members.

Issues we face include are that the local languages are seen as representing the past, tradition, backwardness and poverty, while the official languages are the key to the future, to economic and social power, employment and enlightenment.

Taking this reality into account, and extremely low rates of school completion and delays in acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills, the National Education Commission which I chair took the initiative earlier this year in preparing a national language in education policy for our Ministry of Education. Broadly, it will recommend that mother tongue becomes the principal language of instruction and learning in all pre-schools and throughout the first four years of primary schooling. We acknowledge that this will be a hard sell. But to support the new policy reform initiative, we have organised a series of new initiatives. In August, we organised the first National Languages Conference, which called upon the government to explore a role for national languages in the education system and to finance the establishment of Councils for the Promotion of Mother Tongue in each of the country's 13 districts. We also organised a National Languages writing competition in which there were close to 600 entries in 23 languages.

Though there are many challenges, aspects of the Strategic National Development Plan and other sub-plans include principles and policies aimed at promoting equitable development between population groups, and promoting the educational rights of socially marginalised groups.

The Strategy Plan of the Ministry of Education states: 'Timor Leste will undertake a concerted strategy of school construction and teacher training to ensure universal secondary school completion through grade 12 by the year 2020. This will require the opening of

teachers colleges and an intensive effort to expand multilingual education in schools in the coming decade.’

This and the renewed commitment to development of the pre-primary sector bodes well for the future of mother tongue based multilingual education in Timor-Leste.

Discussion and clarification

Traditional methodologies: A delegate from India asked whether a child can expect to achieve if he or she is raised according to traditional methodologies. Vargas-Baron replied that if a child is raised with strong self-esteem, a well-developed mind, strong body, good nutrition, and loving attention, among others, the child will achieve. Much traditional methodology is highly complex, brilliantly conceived, and highly functional. For example, research shows that the tradition of a child staying together with its mother for the first six months is optimal.

Timor-Leste: A delegate said that usually language policy changes when there is ‘regime change’. How is Timor Leste dealing with its language issues? Kirsty Sword Gusmao said that the issues in Timor are complex; there are misunderstandings on the pedagogical basis of MLE and low appreciation of what is indigenous, including the mother tongues. Creating the right roadmap for future initiatives was most important.

Government policies: Cliff Warren, Save the Children, asked whether governments are avoiding mother tongue and bilingual education in formal systems by pushing it to ECD? The response was that there is a need to emphasise that education is a life-long process. You start at the beginning, but it’s only the beginning. You need to continue to primary school and beyond.

An old issue reborn? A delegate noted that UNESCO has championed MLE since 1953, UNICEF for a long time also. Why then is it still at this point? Another delegate said right now is a positive time for MLE and MTE, and more advocacy needs to be done. A delegate from the Philippines agreed that more advocacy was needed, with a focus on parental involvement. A delegate from Cameroon questioned why the issue was still so difficult to push through. In Africa, he said, it was taboo to talk about mother tongue education. Most people did not see the value of the mother tongue, especially if it is only a spoken language. One delegate stated that governments around the world are becoming aware that their education systems are failing and new approaches are needed.

MDGs: It was pointed out that at a recent MDG summit in New York, early childhood development was not even mentioned, so there is a big job to be done.