

Making school systems multilingual: Moving from ‘Why’ to ‘How’.

Ms. Helen Pinnock (Save the Children) and Ms. Elizabeth Pearce (Save the Children),

Over the past year, Save the Children (SC) has been conducting research on mother tongue-based multilingual education programs in three countries: Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India. The focus of the research is on: 1) which components of mother tongue based multilingual education (MLE) programs can be replicated and brought into education systems 2) what strategies are needed to support institutionalising these critical components?

In Bangladesh, SC works with partners Zabarang Kalyan Samity (ZKS) and SIL, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The program encompasses more than 200 sites and three language groups. The mother tongue is used as the primary language of instruction for pre-primary years 1 and 2, with Bangla, the national language, introduced in Year 2.

Progress with scale-up in Bangladesh include: initiatives have extended to eight languages and primary school through a UNDP/EC program, and the Bangladesh 2009 draft National Education Policy recognises mother tongue-based education up to primary level.

Some constraints to scale-up include: Initiatives are on a community-based model yet scale-up must be done through the Hill District Council, there is a lack of clarity around decision-making/power; there is a politicised environment; and there is a lack of structure and consistency in teacher training.

Vietnam

The SC program operates in the northern highlands of Vietnam, with around eight schools and four language groups, and in partnership with local district government education offices. It works on strengthening oral development of children’s mother tongue, in preschool grade 2, and grade 3 from 2011. (The focus is on oral development as there is lack of agreement on writing systems). The program employs Vietnamese 2nd language teaching strategies and literacy (this is groundbreaking as for many years the government did not recognise that Vietnamese needed to be taught to ethnic minority children differently from Vietnamese-speaking children).

Key elements for scale-up include: the use of Teaching Assistants (TA) with grade 9 education from the community, as there is a lack of qualified ethnic minority teachers. The government has agreed to scale-up within larger SC projects. Constraints to scale-up include the diversity of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam and the need for different approaches for different groups; central approval for all initiatives is critical.

India

The states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are developing multilingual education (MLE) in 10 and 8 language communities respectively. The schools are in single language communities (547 in Orissa and 200 more this year; 2422 in Andhra Pradesh). Also, Assam, Jharkhand, and Chattisgarh are implementing some elements.

The benefits of MLE are apparent in pilot schools: Children are more confident and happy in school; there is more dynamic interaction between peers and teachers; there is quicker understanding of

lessons and tasks; there is more willingness to speak the second language; parents are more involved in children's learning.

There has also been useful learning about what can happen when new approaches are taken on, in relation to; attempts to expand without all necessary elements in place; officials in charge lack understanding of MLE; frequent changes of role; learning materials need field testing and revising; training and support to new MLE teachers inadequate; trainers sometimes lack MLE experience.

Overview of learning:

Barriers to scale-up tend to be: attitudinal, language related, and related to core education capacity.

Attitudinal: There are real worries that if you take away the amount of second language teaching, children won't get enough learning in that language. There are also concerns that you may not be transmitting the values of the nation. There may be sensitivity around whether 'too much' transmission of minority culture could be at the expense of the national culture. A key approach to deal with such concerns is to highlight that mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTBMLE) is a route to much more effective second language learning.

Language related: The lack of availability of minority language teachers means that new recruitment strategies are needed for them; Curricula and teacher training need to be adapted to support MTBMLE teaching; Assessment needs to be progressively upgraded to enable testing in local languages- and/or simple L2 instructions; Support is needed for print and production capacity for local languages. Also needed are processes to develop and validate new writing systems involving parents and representatives of language groups.

Core education capacity barriers; Education capacity is often weakest where the need for MTBMLE is strongest. Many school systems have not fully taken on board child-centered education. MTBMLE uses language for communication & meaning; traditional education places emphasis on accurate reproduction of language of instruction.

Key learning for policy:

Support MTBMLE through long and short-term policy commitments, integrated with existing reforms and linked to resources. MTBMLE must be approached from multiple angles. Policy implementation can be progressive, rather than 'all or nothing'. Different regional linguistic, social, political contexts in the same country may mean taking different approaches. Different types of 'scale' can be aimed for: nationally led, networked etc.