

## **Promoting children's rights to use their mother tongue in early education**

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One way to achieve equity of educational opportunities and achieve Education for All, as well as to counter linguistic and cultural loss, is to deliver early childhood education and primary school in children's mother tongue(s). Several frameworks provide the rationale for advocacy on this: Rights, Psychological development, Cultural & linguistic endangerment/loss, Educational equity, Economics: Labour force participation; Building and sustaining civil society;

### **RIGHTS**

**Child rights:** The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) Article 30 stipulates the right of Indigenous Peoples to use their own language in schooling.

UNCRC General Comment 7: Young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention. Early childhood (from birth to 8 yrs) is a critical period for realisation of these rights. Programs and policies are required to realise rights in early childhood. These policies and programs must recognise and incorporate diversities in culture, language, and child rearing.

**Parental rights** UNCRC Article 29; Education of the child shall be directed to development of respect for the child's parents, and the child's own cultural identity, language and values, as well as for the national values of the country in which the child is living.... (Also Article 5)

**Community rights** UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to education without discrimination. Article 2 establishes the basic principle against discrimination on the grounds of language.

UN Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education specifically recognises "the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including...the use or the teaching of their own language."

UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992, Article 4)- Affirms the rights of minorities, including Indigenous Peoples, to learn and/or have instruction in their mother tongue or heritage language.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT:** Cultural identity is associated with speaking the language of one's culture of origin. Cultural knowledge is embodied in language; so are self-concepts/concepts around commonalities with ancestors/ distinctiveness from others. Self-esteem is bound up with pride in who one is and special competencies associated with family of origin.

**CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ENDANGERMENT/LOSS;** About 6000 languages are now spoken globally. By the end of 2099, it is estimated that some 10-50% of those will still be spoken. Language loss endangers identity, heritage, belonging, cultural knowledge. The world's repository of language and culture is steadily depleted by language-in-education policies that impose dominant languages on children's learning journeys.

**EDUCATIONAL EQUITY;** Back in 1953 UNESCO encouraged mother tongue based early learning and primary school. Schools, kindergarten, preschool and even parenting education programs often become the first context of vulnerability for minority children by virtue of language in education policies that denigrate their home languages and associated cultures, and by the demand that children enter unfamiliar learning environments in an unfamiliar language.

### **What's known?**

The dominant language in a society is presented to children and families as normative, desired, privileged, high status .... and, very often..., the *required* language of early learning & later education programs. For minority language children, this often means a SUBMERSION approach (also known as 'Sink or Swim'). It can also mean *Subtractive bilingualism* ... when the second language becomes more proficient than the first language.

**Scholars agree...** Children can acquire 2+ languages in their early years. Languages don't compete for 'mental space' and bilingualism doesn't 'confuse' children. Given adequate inputs & opportunities for interaction, children can acquire multi-lingual proficiency.

Two notable projects focusing on MTB education include the Eskasoni Immersion Program, Canada, and the Kaugel First Language program in Papua New Guinea.

**What's next? We need:** research documenting learning, health, employment and social outcomes of mother tongue based Early Years programs. To raise awareness of parents as children's first language teachers and helping parents make informed decisions (e.g., Toronto School District: DVD "Value Your Language").. Community- and computer- generated curriculum resources.

**Find out more:** [www.ecdip.org/reports](http://www.ecdip.org/reports); UNESCO online library; UNESCO (2008b). *Mother tongue instruction in early childhood education: A selected bibliography*. Paris: UNESCO. UNESCO (2010). *Educational equity for children from diverse backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years: Literature Review*. <http://www.unesco.org/en/languages-in-education/publications/>

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