

**Promoting gender equality in education – the promise of community-involving, culturally relevant, mother-tongue based ECE.**

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**SUMMARY:**

As many children speak a home language that differs from the language of instruction in schools, research confirms that children learn best in their home language as a prelude to bilingual and multilingual education.

The key message is that a “one size fits all” approach does not work. Girls and women are disadvantaged on nearly all the indicators of quality of life and this presentation focused on the concept that mother tongue-based early childhood care is crucially important in promoting educational success among girls.

MTB-MLE benefits both genders, but especially girls. The latter are more likely to speak only their home language; are less likely to be enrolled in school; are more likely to terminate education early; and parents are less likely to value schooling for girls.

Studies have shown that the transition to education in a second language is best done gradually: first introducing the second language as a subject of study, and introducing learning in the second language after children are fully literate in their home language.

In the majority of countries, there is an urgent need to design early learning opportunities with the needs and goals of girls and girls’ parents in order to achieve EFA by the 2015 deadline.

The learners’ mother tongue holds the key to making schooling more inclusive for disadvantaged groups, most conspicuously the poor, indigenous and minorities, and girls.

Exclusive language-in-education policies and practices are significant contributors to persistent high rates of early school non-attendance, non-engagement, and failure among minority and indigenous children, especially girls.

Research has revealed that when education is offered in the girls’ home language, girls are more likely to: enroll and attend school; engage actively by expressing their thoughts; develop self-concepts as capable learners; take pride in their home culture; and talk to family members about their experiences in the classroom.

Teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities are more acceptable to parents because they tend to treat girls more fairly as capable learners; are less likely to exploit or abuse girls; be more effective communicators with local community members; and are more attuned to local learning styles and goals.

Many examples of high parent participation in MTB material production and school decision-making reveal that this approach enables parents to ensure what girls are learning is culturally meaningful and practically useful.

The four cornerstones of early childhood care and development are to: start at the beginning with a mother-tongue based parent education; prepare for success with at least two years of quality early childhood programmes prior to formal school entry; improve primary school quality and; include early childhood in school policies.

**Recommendations:**

There is a need to create and authorize gender-sensitive pedagogy; raise awareness about gender in curriculum; involve pre-service and in-service teachers in problem solving and goal setting regarding gender equity and issues of inclusion/exclusion; train teachers in local languages and support for multi-language acquisition; involve girls in planning learning activities that are meaningful to them; train secondary school students to assist in local early learning programmes using the mother tongue; involve community members in initiatives to increase girls' participation in school; create community advisory groups to promote communication, familiarity and safety for girls and families; recruit community members as teachers' assistants; involve both parents in home-based early language and learning activities for girls; and take advantage of toolkits, such as UNESCO's: Promoting Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education toolkit.

Discussion:

Q. The use of teacher assistants was mentioned many times. What is the role of the teacher assistant compared to those of the trained community?

A. This is a really big topic. It is challenging that is working well in some areas and not working well in others. The teacher assistant can be mothers, in Canada, they can be elders - sometimes they can be people who are a bit more trained. We shouldn't just have volunteers, but we should have community members that have something to contribute and should be paid. Maybe a way forward would be to formalize community involvement. It would be great if people can share other experiences from their countries.

Q. In reference to the earlier statement on whether a child should be fully literate in their home language/mother tongue, before learning the second language, what age should a child be fully literate before learning the second language? What are the main problems in having a child learn a second language at a very young age?

A. We all recognise that an ideal educational outcome is to complete all years of secondary education and be bilingual with the home language and the national or dominant international language, with the prospect of moving on to secondary and technical education. Research on language acquisition (MTB-MLE) talks about cognitive-academic development; that children need to be fluent academically in one language, in which the child is able to deal with abstract concepts in the written language, before learning academic content in another language. It is better to talk about years of schooling or a competence base, rather than the age of the child. Especially when considering that in some countries, children enter school late, or they drop-out. So it is better to refer to the years of schooling.

Q. Teachers from the same community if they know the MT then the children are less abused – please elaborate since it is not clear how language contributed to reducing this abuse?

A. Research appears to indicate that when teachers are recruited locally, there is a perception that there is less violence. Perhaps there is more respect, and the community knows the teachers and they are more accountable to the children – it is about cultural-safety. When there are teachers coming from outside of the community and/or language community, there is a perception that there would be less cultural safety. They are less likely to report exploitation: because they know the girls and they know the family, as they are of the same ethno-linguistic group.

Q. What are the best practices to achieve the goals?

A. It is crucial to raise awareness about gender in the curriculum. Resources such as the UNESCO toolkit are also invaluable devices. It is also important to train teachers in local languages in problem solving. Another good practice is to train secondary school students to assist in local early learning programmes using the mother tongue. It is also important to involve community members in

initiatives to increase girls' participation in school, such as community advisory groups that provide support and protection for girls and their families.