

Mother Tongue Use in Education and Universal Primary Education in the Pacific. **Dr. Nikhat Shameem (UNICEF Pacific)**

Some context on multilingualism in the Pacific Islands Countries: The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are highly linguistically diverse. Issues of language today are linked with the history of colonialism and language legacy in the region. There is now a tendency for local lingua francas to be given low status. For example, use of the word ‘vernaculars’ consistently in language policy and documents undermines the importance of mother tongues as viable languages of education. There tends to be positive attitudes and resource allocation in relation to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) rather than mother tongue education.

Problems for Universal Primary Education goals include; severe problems with low and uneven school access, lack of resources, high drop out & push out rates, deficient facilities, low standards and achievements, questionable curriculum relevance, inappropriate assessment systems & ineffective quality assurance mechanisms (*Ward, Sikua & Banks in Rethinking Educational Aid in the Pacific, 2005*).

Some examples of activities taking place in different regions include:

1. Language development (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, PNG, NZ Maori)
2. Language planning and policy (Samoa, Cook Islands)
3. Materials development (International Reading Association: Int Dev in Oceania Committee)
Text development: Niue, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati (but fate unknown in all except Niue).
Shell books in Papua New Guinea.
4. Teacher education and teaching methodologies in language teaching, and teaching content through multiple languages (New Zealand)
5. Research at all stages (New Zealand, Samoa, Cook Islands)
6. Community, students, teachers and parental involvement (Fiji, Samoa)

Some issues with language in education policies-in-progress; Many countries’ constitutions make no reference to the relative status of languages. In most cases Pijin/Bislama has no official status, though it is the main lingua franca, and has no official place in formal education. It is frequently used as a language of learning and code-switched with local mother tongues and English.

Education policy has revolved around literacy in English. Draft language policies are developed by outside Technical Assistance with support from Ministries of Education. Some of this work makes little reference to Pacific and local literature, research and experience in different languages.

A Good Model: Samoa

In Samoa, there has been solid research, language planning and policy development. Orthography work is currently being undertaken to standardise spelling and grammar and coin new words. Curriculums are being developed in both English and Samoan in complementarity, but also to support interdependence of language skills and strategies for learning. All skill areas are addressed in the curriculum (listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting) in progressively cognitively demanding ways. Monitoring and evaluation procedures are still being worked out.

What is needed in the Pacific?

Evaluation of current programs, curricula and approaches; leadership in language use in education to ensure first education in the mother tongue is on the agenda; donor commitment (bilateral and multilateral) to mother tongue education; exchange visits to countries where successful models are being implemented (Samoa, NZ, Cook Islands, PNG), and more research, especially on the linguistic environment of students.