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Children need to be taught in a language they understand

All children, irrespective of their location, should have teachers who understand their language and culture and thus can improve their learning. Yet, in many countries, children are taught in languages they do not speak at home.

Speaking a minority language can be a source of disadvantage

Being born into a minority ethnic or linguistic group can seriously affect not only children's chance of being in school, but also whether they learn once there. Language and ethnicity are deeply intertwined. While the language a child speaks at home is often a crucial element of personal identity and group attachment, language can be a potent source of disadvantage at school because in many countries children are taught and take tests in languages they do not understand.

According to the 2011 PIRLS assessment, in seven countries at least 10% of students reported speaking a different language at home from the one they were tested in. In all these countries, their likelihood of achieving minimum learning standards in reading was lower than for students whose home language was the language of assessment.

In many parts of western Africa, French continues to be the main language of instruction, so the vast majority of children are taught from the early grades in a language they are not familiar with, seriously hampering their chance of learning. In Benin, for example, over 80% of grade 5 students who speak the test language at home achieve minimum learning in reading, compared with less than 60% of the 9 out of 10 students who speak another language.

Indigenous groups often face discrimination in school that is reinforced by the fact that the language used in the classroom may not be one that they speak. In Peru, test score gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous children in grade 2 are sizeable and increasing. In 2011, Spanish speakers were more than seven times as likely as indigenous language speakers to reach a satisfactory standard in reading. In Mali, where the language of instruction is French – different from the language most children speak at home – 92% of children were unable to read a single word by the end of grade 2.

Bilingual programmes in Peru aim to ensure that children can learn in their own language together with Spanish. However, children attending these programmes perform badly in both languages. By grade 4, only 1 in 10 Quechua speakers in bilingual programmes, and 1 in 20 speakers of other indigenous languages, reach a satisfactory level in their own language. Their achievement in Spanish is similarly weak. This highlights the importance not only of providing instruction in a child's own language, but also of ensuring that schools are of sufficient quality to ensure that learning takes place. One study found that half of teachers in bilingual education schools in southern Peru could not speak the local indigenous language.

In mathematics, too, language, culture and poverty often interact to produce an extremely high risk of being left far behind. Poor students speaking a minority language at home are among the lowest performers. In Turkey, for instance, poor grade 4 students speaking a non-Turkish language – predominantly Kurdish – are the lowest performers in the TIMSS assessment. Around 40% of poor non-Turkish speakers achieve minimum learning benchmarks in mathematics, just over half the national average.

Similarly, of poor rural students in Guatemala speaking a minority language (mostly indigenous) at home, only 47% reach the minimum achievement level in mathematics while 88% reach that level among rich urban students speaking Spanish. The problem goes beyond schools rarely addressing linguistic diversity: more than half of the achievement gap between indigenous and non-indigenous speakers is attributed to the fact that indigenous children attend schools with fewer instructional materials, lower quality infrastructure and less qualified teachers. This underscores the importance of redressing such deficits to improve learning outcomes for indigenous children.

Wide inequalities in learning

World Inequality Database on Education: www.education-inequalities.org



Our [World Inequality Database on Education \(WIDE\)](http://www.education-inequalities.org) has recently been updated to show the inequalities in learning across countries and within countries by different dimensions including whether the children speak the language of instruction at home.

[In the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2011, for example, the database shows that, while almost all those children who spoke Farsi, the official language, at home in urban areas learned the basics in reading in primary school, only 74% of those who did not speak Farsi at home in rural areas achieved the same minimum learning standard.](#)



Improve teacher education so all children can learn

Teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of multilingual classrooms. In Senegal, for example, only 8% of trainees expressed any confidence about teaching reading in local languages. Initial and ongoing programmes are needed to train teachers to teach in two languages and to understand the needs of second-language learners.

As a result of inadequate training, including overemphasis on theory rather than practice, many newly qualified teachers are not confident that they have the skills necessary to support children with more challenging learning needs.

All teachers require continuing support once they reach the classroom to enable them to reflect on teaching practices, to foster motivation and to help them adapt to change, such as using a new curriculum or language of instruction.

Get teachers where they are most needed

For bilingual education to be effective, governments need to recruit and deploy teachers from minority language groups. Recruiting teachers from under-represented groups to work in their own communities guarantees that children have teachers familiar with their culture and language. Flexible policies on entry requirements can help increase the number of candidates recruited from ethnic minority groups.

In Cambodia, where teacher trainees normally have to have completed grade 12, this requirement is waived for remote areas where upper secondary education is unavailable, increasing the pool of teachers from ethnic minorities.

Curriculum and assessment strategies that improve learning

To improve learning for all children, teachers need the support of curriculum and assessment strategies that can reduce disparities in school achievement and offer all children and young people the opportunity to acquire vital transferable skills. Such strategies need to build strong foundation skills by starting early, moving at the right pace, enabling disadvantaged pupils to catch up, meeting the language needs of ethnic minorities and building a culture of reading.

For children from ethnic and linguistic minorities to acquire strong foundation skills, schools need to teach the curriculum in a language children understand. Language policies



Nguyen, a teacher in Muong Khuong county, Viet Nam: 'There are 13 ethnic students in my class. All Hmong girls. Sometimes when you teach in Vietnamese they seem not to understand.'

Credit: Nguyen Thanh Tuan/UNESCO

may be difficult to implement, particularly where there is more than one language group in the same classroom or where teachers are not proficient in the local language.

To reduce learning disparities in the long term, bilingual programmes should be sustained over several years. In Cameroon, children taught in their local language, Kom, showed a marked advantage in achievement in reading and comprehension compared with children taught only in English. Kom-educated children also scored twice as high on mathematics tests at the end of grade 3. However, these learning gains were not sustained when the students switched to English-only instruction in grade 4. By contrast, in Ethiopia, children in regions where local language instruction extends through to upper primary school performed better in grade 8 subjects than pupils taught only in English.

For early grade literacy and bilingual education to be successful, pupils need access to inclusive learning materials that are relevant to their situation and in a language they are familiar with. Open licensing and new technology can make learning materials more widely available, including in local languages. In South Africa, open source educational materials are being developed and made available in several African languages. Digital distribution is increasing the number of districts, schools and teachers with access to curricular resources.

Interactive radio instruction can lead to improvement in learning outcomes for disadvantaged groups by addressing barriers such as distance and poor access to resources and quality teachers. Between 2006 and 2011, the South Sudan Interactive Radio Instruction project enrolled over 473,000 pupils, providing half-hour lessons linked to the national curriculum and including instruction in English and local language literacy. In locations that were out of range of any radio signal, the project distributed digital MP3 players to be used by trained teachers.

Second-chance accelerated learning programmes enable the disadvantaged to catch up

Where children are learning little and dropping out early, second-chance programmes can teach foundation skills through a shorter cycle of learning, which is one way of accelerating children's progress and raising achievement for disadvantaged groups. Several such accelerated learning programmes raise achievement for disadvantaged groups in less time than formal government schools, allowing them the opportunity to catch up and to re-enter formal schools. They usually benefit from small classes and teachers speaking the local language recruited from surrounding communities. In northern Ghana, for example, 46% of those who had attended an accelerated learning programme and re-entered primary school attained grade-appropriate levels in grade 4, compared with 34% of other students.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Policy-makers need to focus their attention on hiring and training teachers from under-represented groups, such as ethnic minorities, to serve in their own communities. Such teachers, familiar with the cultural context and local language, can improve learning opportunities for disadvantaged children.
- Pre-service and ongoing teacher education should train teachers in ethnically diverse societies to teach in more than one language.
- Curricula need to address issues of inclusion to enhance the chances of students from marginalized backgrounds to learn effectively. Classroom-based assessment tools can help teachers identify, monitor and support learners at risk of low achievement.