

Mother Tongue Education

Jon Reyhner, Northern Arizona University

Language is not merely a means of communication. Language, thinking and learning are inextricably linked. When children are forced to study through a language they cannot fully understand in the early primary grades, they face a serious learning disadvantage that can stunt their cognitive development and adversely affect their self-esteem and self-confidence for life. This is especially severed in deprived socioeconomic situations where there is little exposure to the school language outside of school. This is further exacerbated when the children's culture, along with their language, is completely excluded from the classroom.

—Dhir Jhingran, 2009, p. 263.



The authors of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 blame teachers and their schools for the academic achievement gap between many ethnic minority children and white middle class American students. The opponents of the Act blame the affects of poverty for these academic differences. The contributors to *Social Justice Through Multilingual Education* (Multilingual Matters, 2009) edited by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, Ajit K. Mohanty and Minati Panda, citing extensive research, put the blame squarely on the lack of Mother Tongue (MT) and Mother Dialect Education. In their forward, the editors write that, “marginalized peoples who undergo culturally and linguistically appropriate education are better equipped both to maintain and develop their cultures and to participate in the wider society” (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2009, p. xvii). They find support in the findings of the United States’ National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth as reported in the 2006 book *Developing Literacy in Second Language Learners* edited by Dianne August

and Timothy Shanahan and published by Lawrence Erlbaum.

Throughout *Social Justice Through Multilingual Education*, the authors write about a “glocalising world” where education not only honors the local cultures of students but also opens up to them the wider world. After discussing the historical discrimination and assimilationist education the indigenous peoples of Scandinavia, the Sámi, have faced and how they are working to today to revive their Sámi language and culture, Ulla Aikio-Puoskari notes how the Sámi youth “who goes to school today is more or less a world citizen, using the internet for global communication and exposure to cultural influence of every kind” and the Sámi today are becoming “a part of the international movement of Indigenous peoples” (p. 240). Jim Cummins notes the advantages of “selective acculturation” versus “full assimilation,” which is the ideal of this glocalisation (p. 28)

Scandinavians have only one indigenous group, however India has 83 million tribal people (8.2% of its population) speaking 159 languages (pp. 4-5). Neighboring

Nepal has over 100 languages. The Indian 2001 Census reported 57 language with more than a million speaker and “in some areas, children have to learn four or five languages by the time they complete primary school” (p. 264-65). However, less than one percent of tribal children in India have any real opportunity for Mother Tongue instruction (p. 287). One effort at Multilingual Education (MLE) in 495 schools in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa is described by Ajit K. Mohanty and his colleagues,

The MLE programmes make special efforts to incorporate the cultural and daily life experiences of children and the indigenous knowledge systems, games, songs and stories from the tribal communities into the curriculum, textbooks, pictures and illustrations, teaching learning materials and children’s learning activities, all of which are developed and worked out and vetted in groups that include teachers, community leaders, writers and artists from the target language

community along with experts. The national and state curricula are closely followed in listing the grade specific competencies sought for development through the MLE programmes. (p. 294).

Minati Panda and Mohanty write, “Integrating everyday and scientific discourses is regarded as essential in developing a deep understanding of specific domains of knowledge” (p. 312), and the International Council for Science reports:

Universal education programs provide important tools for human development, but they may also compromise the transmission of indigenous language and knowledge. Inadvertently, they may contribute to the erosion of cultural diversity, a loss of social cohesion, and the alienation and disorientation of youth.... Actions are urgently needed to enhance the intergenerational transmission of local and indigenous knowledge. (p. 165)

As Carol Benson notes, basic literacy and numeracy concepts need to be learned only once and transfer to a second language (p. 75). Western linear cause and effect empirical science is contrasted traditional values based on “generosity and sharing, collectivism and cooperation” (p. 167).

Jhingran finds that “textbooks and instruction make no reference whatsoever to...local culture and traditions” despite the acknowledge constructivist importance on building on prior knowledge and moving student learning from the known to the unknown (p. 268). Translating textbooks into the local language is not enough because it does not localize them. David A. Hough and his colleagues write,

In contrast to this rich oral tradition of indigenous education, modern Western educational doctrine argues that learning materials must be graded, simplified and reduced to easily learnable/identifiable chunks for diagnostic purposes. The result is often boring, decontextualised textbooks, readers, supplementary materials and lesson plans, which serve to dumb out large numbers of students,

most particularly those from indigenous, minority and other marginalized groups. (p. 170).

Overall Jhingran finds there is too much emphasis in Indian primary schools on rote memorization.

Kathleen Heugh from her study of African education writes, “Additive bilingual education requires a minimum of six years of MTM [Mother Tongue Medium instruction] under ideal conditions, and usually eight years under those found in African education systems.” (p. 118). She found that South Africa, which used “glossy” expensive teaching materials that were too expensive to send home with students was less successful than Ethiopia, a much poorer country, that used cheaply printed materials that students could take home. She also found that the use of the promotion in South Africa of the whole language approach to teaching reading “left teachers in rural African settings confounded” (p. 120). She writes,

The national education system, encouraged by persuasive stakeholders, adopted these approaches without having ensured that they had been rigorously trialed under local conditions. Teachers have been encouraged to discard explicit teaching of reading and writing skills and to adopt vague notions that are not made explicit in any documentation. This has left teachers disempowered and students without the explicit scaffolding they require to develop strong reading, and writing in the MT [Mother Tongue] and/or the L2. (pp. 120-121).

She concludes, “While whole language and social literacies approaches may suit students in English-dominant societies where there are high levels of community literacy and printed materials are readily available beyond the classroom these conditions seldom apply in Africa” (p. 121).

The contributors to *Social Justice Through Multicultural Education* want English to be a healer rather than a killer language, and to emphasize that learning English is not a panacea. Dhir Jhingran recognizes the pragmatic need to teach English in early primary grades in India despite research to the contrary because

that is what parents want and the public schools need to compete with private schools that teach (poorly) in English (pp. 280-281). Susanne Jacobsen Pérez’s chapter on indigenous teacher training in Peru quotes López and Küper on how many Quechans believe “that Spanish alone is the language of reading and writing, and many parents still believe that learning to write means learning Spanish” (p. 203). As Skutnabb-Kangas and her colleagues state, “The faith that an early start in English [or Spanish as in the case of much of South America] means good education and ensures success in life is a pernicious myth” and that “high levels of competence in English [or Spanish] can be achieved without sacrificing competence in other languages” (p. 326-27).

My own experience working in American Indian schools in Montana, Arizona and New Mexico, some where almost all the students spoke only English and others where many of the students were still fluent in their Native language, showed me that just learning English and forgetting one’s heritage language did not close the achievement gap. In fact, as Andrea Bear Nicholas writes in her chapter on teacher training programs in Canada, “children in the [Mohawk language] immersion programme seemed not only to love school, but also to do as well or better, academically, than their peers educated entirely in English” (p. 226).

As Robert Phillipson notes, “any language can be used for good or evil purposes” (p. 89), and “English should be learned, but only additively” (p. 97). Mohanty and his colleagues declare that, “It is necessary to realize that MT in education is not a problem; it is the solution” (p. 291). Mohanty, a professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, citing Skutnabb-Kangas, declares that the denial of linguistic human rights is “a crime against humanity” (p. 8).

Note:

All page numbers in this column refer to Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, Ajit K. Mohanty and Minati Panda (Eds.). (2009). *Social Justice Through Multilingual Education*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.