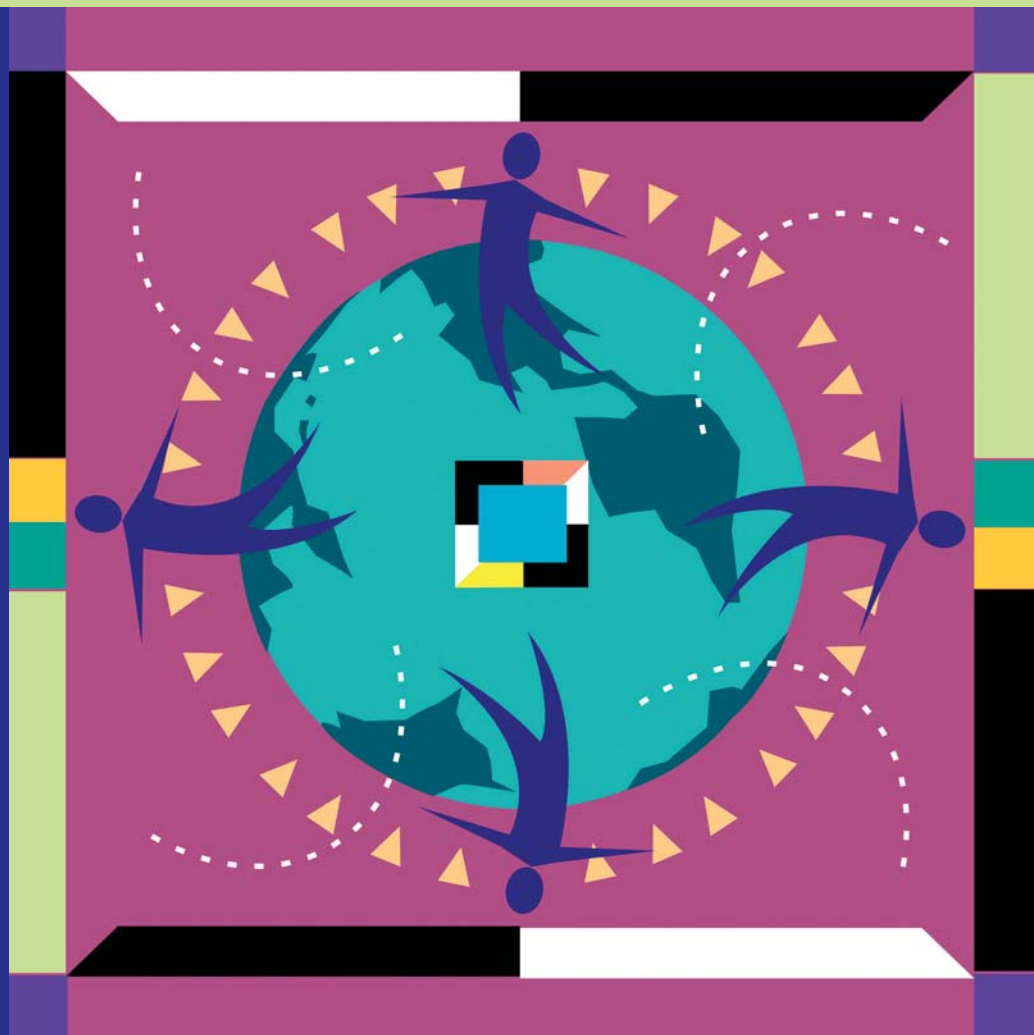


# Educating Learners in Their Home Languages

Establishing and Maintaining Successful Programs



# INTRODUCTION

*M*ORE THAN 6,000 LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN THE WORLD TODAY. Approximately 1.38 billion people speak languages that are not used for formal education, either because they are not written or because they have been deemed unsuitable for education. Children from minority language communities often attend classes taught in a national or regional language that they do not understand. This makes it very difficult for them to learn to read or master other academic skills. As a result, many children drop out before finishing primary school.

Language plays a central role in education. Children learn through language—by listening, reading, speaking, and writing. If they begin school in a language they know well—the language they speak at home, often referred to as the mother tongue—they can understand what is being taught and can learn to read and write. Once these skills have been developed, they can learn the official or national language used at higher levels of education in their area.

Many countries have innovative educational programs that allow children to start school in their mother tongue, learn to read in that language, and gradually learn the language of wider communication in their area. In this way, the children have two (or more) languages in which to continue their schooling. In addition to providing educational opportunity to children, these programs help preserve the language and culture of their ethnic groups.

In 2000, the Center for Applied Linguistics reviewed successful mother tongue programs in 13 countries with linguistically diverse populations. These programs are described in the report, *Expanding Educational Opportunity in Linguistically Diverse Societies* (Dutcher, 2004). This brochure summarizes information from Dutcher's report on the steps involved in establishing a mother tongue education program and the ingredients needed for success. It is intended for readers who are interested in developing a mother tongue education program or in maintaining and enhancing an existing program.

## WHY MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION?

The value of mother tongue education has been known for many years. As early as 1953, a UNESCO committee of experts considering questions about language and education found many advantages to mother tongue education:

*It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. (UNESCO, 1953, p. 11)*

A 1999 UNICEF report agreed with UNESCO:

*There is ample research showing that students are quicker to learn to read and acquire other academic skills when first taught in their mother tongue. They also learn a second language more quickly than those initially taught to read in an unfamiliar language. (UNICEF, 1999, p. 41)*

In its 2003 publication, *Education in a Multilingual World*, UNESCO reiterates the points made in its 1953 report and states that virtually all research since 1953 has served to confirm the earlier arguments in support of mother tongue education programs. The 2003 report argues forcefully for the use of the mother tongue in primary education.

With extensive exposure and high motivation, children often learn to converse fairly easily in a new language. But learning academic language takes much more time. Research demonstrates that the longer a child can learn reading and academic content in his or her mother tongue while learning the second language, the better the chances of success beyond elementary school. In one large-scale study, researchers found a direct link between the amount or duration of mother tongue instruction and students' average percentile rank on national standardized tests after 11 years of schooling

(Thomas & Collier, 1997). In other words, the minority language students who received the most mother tongue instruction in elementary school performed best on standardized tests in high school in the national language.

## BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Understanding the importance of mother tongue education is the first step in building a foundation for mother tongue programs. Program development may begin with the government or with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose agendas include community development and the expansion of literacy. It may also begin with donor organizations working closely with the government to address specific problems. Substantial participation by members of the minority language communities themselves is vital in all phases of program development; without it, support for the program will be seriously hindered.

Whatever their affiliation, program developers will need to engage in a wide range of activities to build a foundation for their mother tongue education program. Some of these activities are described below.

### **Create Support at the National and Local Levels**

Building support for a mother tongue education program is key to its long-term success. Political will and legislative support at the national level are important at all phases of program development, especially for ongoing expansion and sustainability. Support at the local level is also essential; indeed, community support is key to all successful education programs. Specific areas that need to be addressed are described on the following page.

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### **DEVELOP OR MODIFY NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY**

If a country does not currently provide schooling in the local languages, the national government may need to pass laws legalizing mother tongue education in the early grades. For example, in Bolivia, the National Education Reform of 1994 made bilingual and intercultural education a priority, beginning with teaching in three major indigenous languages—Aymara, Guaraní, and Quechua—and later adding other minority languages.

### **PROVIDE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION SUPPORT**

To establish and maintain local language programs, support from all levels of the Ministry of Education is needed. Working with other branches of the government and the media, the Ministry can help provide financial and political backing for mother tongue education. The Ministry must also ensure that teachers assigned to these programs are proficient in the language of instruction and that programs are monitored so that quality remains high.

### **WIN COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

Schools cannot work well without community involvement and support. Children are more likely to enroll in school, stay in school longer, and learn more when they are strongly encouraged by parents who have a stake in the school. When schooling uses the language of the local community, parents can communicate easily with their children's teachers. But sometimes parents do not want their children instructed in their mother tongue. They ask, "Why would I send my children to school to learn the language they know? They need to learn Spanish (or English) to get a job." An important task, then, is to persuade parents that children can best learn the skills of reading and writing when the teacher uses a language that the children understand, and that children who learn to read and write in the language they know best—their mother tongue—can learn to read and write in the second language better and faster.

### **Engage in Language Development and Planning**

#### **SELECT LANGUAGES TO BE USED FOR EDUCATION**

A multilingual country may decide to begin mother tongue education in only a few of its languages and add others later. They may begin with the languages that have the largest numbers of speakers.

#### **DECIDE WHICH LANGUAGE VARIETY TO USE FOR EDUCATION**

Community members must decide which variety of their language is most appropriate for school. Selection will depend on their attitudes, beliefs, and values about different language varieties.

#### **WRITE THE LANGUAGE**

If the language does not yet have a written form, the community can work with linguists to develop one. The linguists will consult with native speakers of the language to discover its system of sounds (phonology), word parts (morphology), and word combination rules (syntax) and to choose a spelling system. Universities and NGOs can help local communities identify qualified linguists to help them develop a writing system.

#### **STANDARDIZE THE LANGUAGE**

Linguists can also help establish norms for the written language. This often involves developing a way to write the language that incorporates many of its varieties.

#### **EXPAND AND ELABORATE THE VOCABULARY**

When a language is introduced into educational settings, broadening the vocabulary is likely to be necessary. New words can be invented or borrowed from other languages. Existing words can take on slightly different meanings.

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## DEVELOPING MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Once adequate support has been established for a mother tongue education program and language planning decisions have been made and carried out to set the stage for program implementation, attention needs to be given to the development of the program itself. Among the most important considerations are the development of curricula and materials, the adoption of a teaching model, and the establishment of a system for assessing students' progress.

### *Develop Curriculum and Learning Materials*

When mother tongue programs begin, the curriculum and materials are often translations of those being used in existing schools, sometimes with adjustments to reflect the local community. Sometimes, however, teachers work closely with community members to modify the curriculum and develop new materials to ensure that they reflect the students' culture. Sometimes this process goes further: Local stories, legends, songs, and poems become part of the formal curriculum. When this happens, the school program seems welcoming to the students because it builds on the life experiences of their community.

### *Adopt a Child-Centered Model of Teaching*

UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children 1999* states that "the Convention on the Rights of the Child guides us toward a more child-centered model of teaching and learning, one in which students participate actively, thinking and solving problems for themselves, and in this way developing the self-esteem that is essential for learning and decision-making throughout life" (UNICEF, 1999). In schools where children understand and speak the language being used in the classroom, they can participate actively in learning activities.

### *Assess Students' Progress Regularly*

Assessment of pupils' learning is a vital element of effective programs. Frequent assessments allow teachers to monitor pupils' progress toward the goals set for their grade level, adjust lessons to

meet pupils' needs, and identify children who need additional assistance. A record-keeping system is essential to tracking program success.

## RECRUITING, PLACING, TRAINING, AND PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

The success of mother tongue educational programs depends on recruiting and training teachers who are fully proficient in the language of the community and skillful at using that language for teaching and learning. New programs usually begin with in-service training for the teachers in the pilot program. As the program expands, teacher preparation programs must be developed to provide pre-service training for future teachers. This is necessary to ensure an ongoing supply of well-trained teachers who are able to teach in the local language and to provide students with an adequate transition to the language used for instruction at higher levels of education.

### *Develop Effective Recruitment Strategies*

Ongoing teacher recruitment is essential, both to fill new teaching positions as the program expands and to replace teachers who have left the program for better-paying jobs in larger towns and villages. A database of teachers that includes information on the language(s) in which each teacher is qualified to teach should be maintained at the national or regional level to ensure appropriate teacher placement. Such a database in Guatemala is used by the Ministry of Education to place teachers in appropriate settings.

### *Provide Training and Ongoing Professional Development*

Teacher training is the key to the sustainability of any education program. For mother tongue education programs, teachers who were themselves schooled in the language of wider communication must learn how school can be conducted in the local language. Their training may take place in teacher preparation colleges, through in-service professional development programs, or in special programs—offered when school is not in session—designed to upgrade their teaching credentials.

International donor organizations and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often play a major role in the development of mother tongue programs, offering both money and technical assistance.

The training of trainers approach has proven effective for developing local capacity. In one model, teams from schools or school districts attend a week-long institute on a specific aspect of mother tongue education, such as initial literacy instruction. When these teams return to their communities, they train their colleagues based on what they learned in the institute.

Another important consideration is the need to train teachers to help older students begin to learn in the language of wider communication. These teachers will need to learn how to help students transfer their literacy skills in the mother tongue to their second language, how to integrate language and academic content instruction when children begin to learn the second language, and how—through sheltered instruction and other techniques—to support learning once students have made the transition to learning in a second language.

## EVALUATING AND IMPROVING PROGRAMS

Formal evaluation of program effectiveness can identify strengths and weaknesses to help educators improve their programs. At key points in program development, researchers and evaluators from the Ministry of Education or another administrative unit can examine data on student achievement; on student, parent, and community attitudes toward the program; on efficiency (cost compared to benefit); and on aspects of program delivery. Educators can use this information in deciding what program modifications need to be made.

## EXPANDING SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

Transforming a successful pilot project into a regional or national program is challenging. It can be hard to find staff to provide training and supervisory services to help the program grow. Ideally, planning for expansion should be part of program planning from the beginning. There should be a legal framework for the program that will help it endure through changes of political administrations. Regular publicity campaigns on the benefits of mother tongue education can help ensure continuing community support. Teachers' colleges and universities should expand the number of courses taught in the local languages to provide future teachers with sufficient exposure to the local languages as they are used in an educational setting. These colleges should also provide courses on methodologies for bilingual and mother tongue education, including approaches to teaching the national and official languages as second or foreign languages. Planning, preparing, producing, and revising instructional and learning materials, along with research and evaluation, should be part of the Ministry's ongoing work to enable continual program improvement. In countries with decentralized education systems, much of the curriculum work would be done at the state or provincial level, as is the case in Papua New Guinea. Successful bilingual and mother tongue programs around the world incorporate many of these elements.

## HOW OUTSIDERS CAN HELP

International donor organizations and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often play a major role in the development of mother tongue programs, offering both money and technical assistance. Sometimes the effort to create a mother tongue education program is initiated by outside agencies such as these. More often, however, the initiative comes from governments, who turn to the agencies for financial and technical assistance.



Some outside agencies sponsor pilot programs in countries that are just introducing mother tongue education; others sponsor research on successful programs or fund advocacy campaigns to win widespread support for mother tongue education.

Donor organizations and NGOs can provide direct support in all aspects of program development. For example, the German Technical Assistance Agency (GTZ), a donor organization, has supported materials development in a number of local languages around the world. Save the Children, an NGO, promotes mother tongue instruction for the early years wherever possible. SIL International works with communities worldwide, focusing on community-based programs that enable local people to assume responsibility for sustainable education programs in their own languages.

Outside agencies can help build the capacity of the Ministry of Education to plan and sustain mother tongue programs. They may also organize conferences in which government representatives and mother tongue educators from several countries come together to learn from each other's experiences. Some outside agencies sponsor pilot programs in countries that are just introducing mother tongue education; others sponsor research on successful programs or fund advocacy campaigns to win widespread support for mother tongue education. They may fund study abroad for local language specialists. They may also hire

outside experts to work with local teacher colleges to enhance their capacity to prepare teachers who will provide instruction in the mother tongue.

It is common for outside agencies to conduct careful evaluations of the programs they support. To facilitate ongoing program evaluation, the agencies may train staff at the Ministry of Education to use their evaluation methods. They may also bring in outside experts to assist local evaluation teams and send local staff abroad for advanced university training in educational evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of schooling is to enhance children's learning. When children begin school in a language they know, they are able to learn. As they learn to read and write in their mother tongue, they gain the cognitive basis for learning the national language, which will enable them as adults to help their country thrive in an increasingly interdependent world. Educating children first through their own language and then through the language of wider communication is indispensable to the development of an educated global citizenry.

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