

POSITION PAPER: CELEBRATING THE LANGUAGE IN WHICH WE LOVE AND THINK

The International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on February 21, was created by UNESCO in 1999 to promote cultural diversity and multilingualism, and impede the growing “subtractive bilingualism” phenomenon, on the basis of which children whose families have been forced to move away from home or seek refuge in another country, have been losing their first (their native) language proficiency and have been becoming linguistically assimilated into the host-country’s official language –sometimes forced to do so through policies designed for this purpose.

With growing immigration rates, especially in the last 15-20 years, the assimilation process is taking place more rapidly, and in many schools around the world children lose their ethnic languages in the process of becoming linguistically and culturally assimilated into the dominant language of school and society. By the time they graduate from school, these youngsters have become monolingual. And, given that “the mother tongue is the language of the heart and the mind”, one wonders what cognitive and emotional components of themselves these youngsters have been forced to lose, in the process of becoming literate in a language other than that which had a crucial role in forming their way of thinking and their emotions.

One may also wonder what other parts of a person’s self is lost when education is offered in one or more languages other than the pupils’ mother tongue, since language is deeply connected to notions of culture and identity. One thing is for sure. Schooling in a language other than one’s own does not provide pupils with the most basic resource that they need so as to succeed in school. Many worldwide studies have shown that children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out or fail in early grades and that the use of children’s first language to access learning, especially throughout primary school, is of utmost importance. However, many educational systems around the world insist on the exclusive use of one or sometimes several privileged languages rather than the use of their pupils’ mother tongue. As such, globally, there are 50-75 million ‘marginalized’ children –children who are not enrolled in school and this is partly due to that school is irrelevant to their lives, to that they do not understand the language of instruction.

Some of these children are marginalized because their mother tongue is a minority language or because they are bilinguals! As a matter of fact, whereas bilingualism entails many cognitive, health and work-related benefits, in the 20th century bilingualism was constructed as negative. The assimilationist ethic in countries which received large immigrant populations presented bilinguals (especially the bilinguals whose first language was a minority or non-prestigious world language) as being of lower intelligence, having an educational disadvantage and even being misfits. Unfortunately, some countries are tending to reproduce these absurd ideas as part of the rising nationalist discourses.

Unquestionably, having the mother tongue as the language of instruction in school is very important for children’s overall development as it connects them to their understanding of self, cultivates self-respect, and ensures better cognitive development. In learning to express themselves in their mother tongue well, not only do young people they have a better chance at learning other languages, but also at being successful participants in society and the job market.

However, despite the overwhelming evidence of the value and benefits of education in the mother tongue, most countries do not invest in it. Therefore, on the 1st of January 2016, a new global development agenda came into effect whereby 193 world leaders pledged to a set of goals which will ‘leave no-one behind’. Respect for the use of mother tongue language is imperative if the world is to deliver on its promise of inclusive, quality education for all by 2030. As such, governments need to set about enacting policies that recognise mother tongue learning, and to finance their implementation –a task which is both costly and complex as there is need for trained teachers, teachers who can teach in more than one

language, and language materials in a language that students can understand. Even though the social, political and economic cost of maintaining the order as it is cannot be ignored, this Mother Language Day provides us with an opportunity to focus on the importance of multilingualism and mother tongue learning “for quality education, for fulfilling the potential of all learners, and for the success of the new global development agenda”.

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