

# **POLICY AND PRACTICE IN L1-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND STEPS FORWARD**

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This introductory article presents the theme of this special issue—policy and practice in multilingual education with a focus on non-dominant languages—and delves into current issues in policy and practice as we see them, referencing the seven high-quality articles that have been contributed along with other work in the field. Consistent with the aims of the journal, we take a comparative and international education perspective to describe what is being done in a range of countries or contexts. We explore the issues raised and the trends we see worldwide, and we indicate areas where new research and experimentation seem to be needed.

To begin with, we find it axiomatic that learners' own languages or at least widely spoken community languages are the most effective for teaching beginning and continuing literacy and content instruction, particularly in poorly-resourced education systems. This is why our use of the term mother tongue-/L1-based multilingual education (abbreviated as MLE) is intentional, referring to the systematic use and development of learners' strongest languages, building a strong foundation for literacy and learning while they are also learning one or more additional languages (García 2009; Kosonen & Benson 2013). Further, we believe that education systems should be promoting Multilingual Education for All (MEFA) by developing multiple literacies through additive and integrated approaches (Benson & Elorza 2015). Thus by the end of a well-designed MLE program, learners should be multilingual and multiliterate as well as achieving other goals of the curriculum.

As many of the articles in this issue demonstrate, such goals have yet to be recognized in many contexts, much less put into policy and/or implemented in classrooms. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, we believe that stating our position unequivocally raises the level of the discourse above lamenting about what is not being done to presenting a clear vision for the future and working toward it.

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The purpose of this introduction is to present the contributions to this special issue in the context of our discussion of the policies, practices and potentials involved in bringing effective MLE strategies into educational systems. We use examples from the contributors' articles as well as our own experiences, integrating international experiences to illustrate current challenges as well as possible ways to address them. We conclude with some directions for future work and research, in the hopes that this entire special issue will serve as a springboard for moving the MEFA agenda forward.

### **The state of MLE internationally**

As Kosonen (2017) states in a recent background paper written for UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, the past two decades have seen unprecedented policy support for expanding MLE in the Asia/Pacific region and beyond. The need is also unprecedented; Walter (in Walter & Benson 2012) has estimated that 40%, or 2.3 billion, of the world's people still lack access to instruction in a language they speak. The World Bank (2005) estimates that 50% of the world's out-of-school children live in places where the home and school languages are not the same. Even though language may not be the only factor, it is now widely understood that when schools do not use a language comprehensible to learners for instruction, they experience high wastage rates (in terms of repetition, failure, drop-out), pushing children out of their education systems at an early age (Ball 2010; Benson 2014; Heugh 2011).

The progress reported by Kosonen (2017) can be seen at least in part as a reaction to continuing calls for improvement in the quality of education for all, which are clearly highlighted in Sustainable Development Goal 4. Specifically, Target 4.1 calls for all 193 signatory countries, by 2030, to 'ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes', and Target 4.5 extends that mandate to 'eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education ... for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, [I]ndigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations' (UNESCO 2016). In another background paper for the GEMR, Benson (2016) discusses the important relationship between language of instruction and educational quality, demonstrating how use of learners' own languages for literacy and learning across the curriculum provides a solid foundation for basic and continuing education and for transfer of skills and knowledge to additional languages. She points out that for quality and equity to be adequately addressed, at least three questions must be answered about language use in the classroom: One, is the learner taught and assessed in a language s/he understands and speaks well? Two, does instruction draw on the learner's prior experiences and resources to construct new knowledge? Three, are teachers proficient in the language(s) of instruction? These and other important questions are implicit in this discussion, which is framed by what we see as current challenges to MLE implementation in policy and practice, accompanied in each case by the progress that has been made according to the rich articles contributed to this special issue.

### **Challenge 1: *International guidance is not as specific as it could be.***

Some time ago, we decided to review the development discourse to determine if there was actual support for our perception that "mother tongue" and bilingual or multilingual education were getting more attention. Taking UNESCO's Global

Monitoring Reports up to 2012 to represent that discourse, we searched for mentions and did indeed find an increase, accompanied by clearly positive positioning and demonstration of at least partial understanding of the pedagogical principles involved (Benson & Wong 2015). What seemed to be missing was specificity about the “whys” and the “hows” of implementing programs based on learners’ own languages. When the Sustainable Development Goals came out, we and other MLE professionals were dismayed that there was no specific mention of language, never mind language(s) of instruction. Both Benson (2016) and Kosonen (2017) point out language-related omissions and suggest how relevant language-related data should be collected and used to monitor educational quality. Thus far these remain suggestions, hidden in a single *optional* indicator in a UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) metadata document (UIS 2018). This single indicator (4.5.2) is the “percentage of primary students whose first or home language is the language of instruction” and its purpose is described as being “to measure the extent to which children in primary education are learning in a language with which they are familiar and in which they are likely to be proficient” (UIS 2018: 51). While it is difficult to imagine high-quality education taking place in school settings where teachers do not use languages that learners speak and understand, SDG 4 misses an opportunity to specify this, and language issues are relegated to a single indicator narrowly focused on primary education and its availability.

In the absence of strong international guidance on the importance of MLE programs, findings from this special issue demonstrate that policy borrowing and lending (Rappleye, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) serve as global forces of knowledge exchange that can move a MEFA agenda forward. As **Brown and Faster** point out, the phenomenon of language nests began in Māori communities of New Zealand, immersing young children in home language environments – or nests – at school. Through global knowledge exchange from South to North to the regional South, language nests “travelled” to places like Hawaii, Finland, and southeastern Estonia, always with the purpose of strengthening and renewing Indigenous or endangered languages. **Brown and Faster** describe the factors that have either facilitated or created obstacles for home language (Võro) immersion for young children in Estonia. They discuss how principles of heritage language immersion were adopted through global knowledge exchange and then adapted to uniquely benefit multilingual (Võro-Estonian) children in the Estonia context. The case of Võro revitalization is interesting because it is part of the global spread of the language nest approach but actually lacked any international guidance. That is, once in Estonia, the language nest approach underwent multiple regional iterations before establishing itself as a legitimate form of education in a non-dominant language.

Even if they lack clear international guidelines on MLE use, grassroots organizations may come together and advocate for non-dominant languages in education to encourage language revitalization. For example, **McIvor and Ball** discuss the context of First Nations people of Canada, warning that Indigenous languages have been “struggling for breath” in the Global North. In response, nine Indigenous partner organizations have developed a research project, **NETOLNEW**, to pressure government structures to honor agreements put into place to protect the rights of children to learn their Indigenous heritage languages. Clearly, if explicit MLE guidelines were available internationally, they would serve as a resource for governments and grassroots organizations and help them develop a shared understanding about the individual and

community-based benefits of multilingualism and education that support language and literacy learning. If clear guidelines existed, **McIvor and Ball** point out that both top-down initiatives headed at the government level and bottom-up supports driven by community members could build momentum for MLE implementation and maximize effectiveness. Wong and Benson (2019) make a similar argument about Cambodia, noting that there can be significant synergy when implementers from communities to teacher trainers are supported by language-in-education policy.

**Challenge 2: *MLE is applied with incomplete understanding of interlinguistic transfer.***

The “whys” and “hows” of MLE that we found missing in the development discourse, despite the generally positive outlook on MLE as addressing educational quality (Benson & Wong 2015), are linked to what we see as an incomplete understanding of the principle of interlinguistic transfer on the part of stakeholders and policymakers alike (see also Benson 2019). Interlinguistic transfer is the theoretical principle underlying the success of L1-based MLE. Learners can transfer skills and knowledge to new languages as they learn them, but they do this based on developing a strong foundation of oral, written and analytical skills in one of their best languages (Bialystok 2001; Cummins 2009). This is comparable to the teaching axiom of going from the known to the unknown, but evidence from experience in bilingual education shows that the L1 foundation needs to be built and strengthened throughout the learner’s school experience to be of maximal support for learning additional languages and literacies (Ball 2010; Cummins 2009; Heugh 2011; Walter & Benson 2012).

Many MLE programs use the L1 for only the first one or two years of primary schooling, or try to substitute time with pre-primary L1 development, which does not develop an adequate foundation for literacy. Policymakers are often overly focused on the learning of dominant language(s), intent on switching to them as soon as possible, while failing to invest in the L1 on which new language learning depends. This rush to learn the dominant language(s) is evident in many countries, where school systems might allow MLE programs in early childhood, but quickly push learners into subtractive bilingual models where they are immersed in the dominant language after only a few years of home language development. When the dominant language becomes the language of instruction, learners are not given the opportunity to further develop proficiency in their own languages, and stop progressing in their L1. Hence, subtractive bilingual models often promote the dominant language at the expense of the L1. This sends a clear message that the dominant language must be learned at all costs, and that the L1 is seen as a problem that impedes the learning of the dominant language, rather than as a resource to facilitate learning through interlinguistic transfer (Ruíz 1984). If language policies continue to adopt subtractive models that view multilingualism through a deficit lens, learners will suffer and their languages may become threatened or endangered, as illustrated in many contexts in this special issue.

In the case of Guatemala, we have one contribution from **Milian and Walker** and another from **Dalton, Hinshaw and Knipe**, all examining Indigenous language education efforts for speakers of Achi, Tz’utujil, K’iche’, Kaqchiquel, Q’eqchi’, Mam, Popti’ and Ixil. Their schools have adopted relatively weak models of bilingual education, but even so have brought Indigenous languages into formal education where they were not previously allowed. **Dalton et al.** examine Indigenous teachers’

perceptions of language, culture, and MLE. Using a single case study approach, their findings indicate that teachers in a Mayan community of Guatemala perceive their roles as agentive. Understanding the importance of promoting local priorities of language promotion or revitalization, these teachers appear to have relatively additive attitudes toward MLE that are grounded in theories of linguistic interdependence (Cummins 2009). Similarly, **Milian and Walker** explore the perspective of 13 Indigenous bilingual teachers from various communities in Guatemala regarding their role in implementing programs that promote bilingualism, biliteracy, and intercultural education. Serving as “bridges to bilingualism,” these teachers have assumed the responsibility of promoting home languages in school settings, understanding the interlinguistic relationship between the seven different Indigenous languages represented and Spanish, and recognizing a need for continued improvement at both the national and individual community levels.

More optimistically, some MLE programs do recognize the important role of L1 transfer to the L2/additional language(s), and are trying to extend their models. For example, in the northeast regions of Cambodia, there are plans to extend an MLE program for Indigenous language speakers into the later primary years and into additional languages. That program currently offers MLE in five languages and Khmer, the dominant language. A synergistic collaboration between the government, development partners, and grassroots school leadership committees has brought about progress in terms of attitudes and practices, though the long-proposed six-year pilot program of MLE has yet to begin (Benson & Wong 2019). Another positive example comes from Senegal, West Africa, where an innovative “simultaneous biliteracy” program has been piloted in Wolof and Pulaar alongside French in grades 1 through 4, with significant results in terms of learner achievement and stakeholder ownership (MWAI 2019). Associates in Research and Education for Development, the Senegalese NGO working with the National Ministry of Education on MLE implementation, took the initiative to develop and pilot the use of bilingual materials for grades 5 and 6 as well, providing documentation so that the Ministry can make policy decisions based on the results of a full six years of MLE.

**Challenge 3: Aspirations for learner proficiency in dominant (often international) languages are impossibly high.**

High aspirations for proficiency in dominant languages are often enshrined in policy and evident in school curricula, leading stakeholders to believe that instruction should begin as early as possible (e.g. Benson 2019; Heugh et al. 2012). However, they may ignore the fact that teachers do not always have the language skills—nor have they been trained in appropriate language pedagogies—to teach those languages or teach in them.

Complicating the matter, policymakers tend to confuse teaching a language with teaching *in* a language. Despite the fact that there is no evidence that children learn a language better if it is the medium of instruction, education systems often rely on immersion in that language. Policymakers seem to believe that their aim for “native-like” proficiency in the dominant language will be served by “maximum exposure” to that language. This idea of time on task is misleading (Cummins 2009). As Heugh (2011) points out, “optimization” should not be associated with the *quantity* of language exposure, but rather the *quality* of instruction. Improving the quality of instruction

includes building on solid L1 skills developed through strategic and systematic use of the L1, while teaching the new language(s) explicitly using appropriate communicative methodologies like Total Physical Response (White & Genesee 1996). This requires teachers who are proficient in both/all languages, an important aspect which is not always understood by stakeholders.

Despite the pressure to equip young learners with what Bourdieu (1991) would call linguistic capital—giving them access to skills in a dominant language that will presumably give them higher social status—teachers in some multilingual contexts demonstrate awareness of the fallacies, and willingness to support learning and identity formation in learners' own languages. In their contribution to this issue, **Luís, Gutiérrez, Cano and Meyer** describe Ikoots teachers' experiences in San Mateo del Mar, Mexico, where they have adopted community-based bilingual instructional practices to develop and strengthen Indigenous languages and cultures. Going beyond classroom content and language instruction, teachers' bilingual and multicultural practices include taking children outdoors to gain tactical understandings of the world by drawing on their own and other community members' historically and culturally validated skills and knowledges. By drawing on these culturally-specific ways or funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2006), educators can create rich and well-scaffolded learning experiences for students, building on the known to teach the unknown. **Luís et al.** describe, for example, how teachers use sand drawings to illustrate figures and letters in Ikoots just as their ancestors had done in previous generations. Together, teachers and community members have enriched Indigenous language instruction through these community-based excursions which develop L1 vocabulary and concepts and, in time, facilitate learning of the dominant language and associated cultural practices.

Rather than buying into the nearly impossible goal of native-like proficiency, scholars are bringing other benefits of MLE into the conversation. **Wong**, for example, argues that L1-based language-in-education policies can also be used as a tool to promote peace. Drawing a connection between social cohesion, peacebuilding, and the use of non-dominant languages in education, he presents the case of Myanmar that is both rich in linguistic diversity and rife with political conflict. Using the peacebuilding constructs of redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation, **Wong** demonstrates how MLE can raise awareness of a *peace dividend* that values linguistic diversity and argues that language-in-education policies can be important peacebuilding strategies.

#### **Challenge 4: *Assessments of MLE programs exclusively measure dominant language proficiency***

One emerging issue in the field of MLE is to consider the language(s) used to assess learners. In many educational contexts, students are assessed only in the dominant language of school and society regardless of the language(s) used to provide instruction. This stems from the logic that if schools prioritize language and literacy skills in the dominant language as important outcomes of the school system, they will assess learners in that language. Following this line of logic, assessments in the dominant language are considered appropriate if children are taught solely in that dominant language. However, in MLE programs where children receive instruction in both the dominant and non-dominant languages, it is imperative to assess in both

languages to determine what they are learning. In MLE classrooms, particularly in the earlier years, assessing children's proficiency in the dominant language is inappropriate, because the bulk of the instruction is done in the L1, particularly language and literacy learning but also mathematics, science and other content. By assessing skills in the L1 as well as bilingually, educators will be better able to determine which literacy skills have been developed that will be available to transfer to the additional language(s), and whether or not content knowledge has been learned. Providing assessments in two (or more) languages allows scholars to examine how multilingual children draw from their linguistic repertoires, or what is known as their *dynamic system* of languages (García, Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2014) to more accurately and appropriately depict their developing language and literacy skills.

Assessing only in a dominant language can have a negative effect on good MLE programs, as Heugh, Benson, Bogale and Gebre Yohannes (2012) found in Ethiopia, which has a policy supportive eight years of L1-medium education with instruction in Amharic as national language and English as international language. National assessments given in L1s at grades 4 and 8 demonstrated significantly higher achievement for those learning in their L1s for 8 years versus 6 or 4 years only. However, the fact that all instruction and assessment in secondary school and in teacher training institutions is in English appears to have a negative backwash effect on the L1-medium learning, prompting stakeholders to call for more and more English instead of recognizing the clear benefits of L1-based instruction (Heugh et al 2012).

The importance given to assessments, and their frequent lack of attention to learners' own languages, is evident in the Global North as well as the Global South. In their positive example from Indigenous education in Canada, **McIvor and Ball** describe a country-wide, federally-funded, Indigenous-led language revitalization research project conducted in collaboration with a number of Indigenous partners. The project is guided by five research-based themes that explore adult Indigenous language learning. One of these themes is the importance of a language-learning assessment tool, which is created to reflect the important nuances in cultures and contexts that are often missing from standardized assessments. **McIvor and Ball** highlight the fact that assessments of reading and writing skills and content knowledge in non-dominant and Indigenous languages must be sensitive to the cultural contexts in which these languages are embedded to enhance assessment validity. This point is consistent with multilingual curriculum work in Europe where different types and levels of language are required, consistent with learners' actual needs (see e.g. Elorza & Muñoa 2008), which has important implications for MLE worldwide. This addresses a concern of MLE scholar Mohanty (2019) that formal schooling too often requires domain-independent proficiency in all languages, which we would argue is highly unrealistic for all learners and most teachers.

Frawley's contribution brings the discussion back to the Global South, examining the importance of conducting appropriate assessments of MLE and non-MLE learners in Asia/Pacific regional contexts. He investigates how aspects of multilingual education can be linked to dimensions of UNICEF's Child Friendly School (CFS) framework (e.g. Wright, Mannathoko & Pasic 2009) in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Nepal. By aligning MLE principles and CFS goals of preserving non-dominant languages and cultures, **Frawley** suggests that MLE assessments be embedded *within* measurements of school success rather than remaining peripheral to school outcome indicators. For example, he notes that because L1-based MLE improves access to

schooling, decreases repetition and dropout and enhances gender equity, it corresponds to the CFS dimension calling for environments that foster equality. **Frawley** asserts that language assessments should be conducted in the local language with culturally and linguistically appropriate measures to be considered valid.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

The current special issue makes important contributions to the discussion of policies and practices in MLE, and to the use of multilingual pedagogies and non-dominant languages in formal educational systems. Starting with the assumption that learners' own languages are most effective for teaching beginning and continuing literacy and content instruction, the seven articles in this issue articulate ways in which a well-designed MLE program might involve stakeholders at all levels to achieve the goals of the curriculum. Rather than lamenting the misalignment between language-in-education policies and practices and the negative effects this has on speakers of non-dominant languages, these articles move the discourse forward by presenting clear visions for future work that promotes MLE and educational equity.

Drawing from our own experiences in international development contexts, and using examples from the contributions of this special issue, we presented four challenges in current research that threaten the use of MLE in school settings. Addressing these challenges means arguing for MLE policies that are more specific, more nuanced in their understanding of interlinguistic transfer, more realistic in terms of learner proficiency levels required, and more valid and inclusive with regard to the assessment of languages and curricular content. While the challenges mentioned do represent obstacles and even threats in moving an agenda of Multilingual Education For All forward, looking at the opposite side of the coin, these challenges – more optimistically – help us to describe tangible steps forward. Specifically, if stakeholders continue to promote equity and inclusion through policies and practices that are linguistically relevant and informed by research, we will be taking necessary steps forward in developing both L1 and additional language literacies that will sustain educational development in communities around the globe.

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