

UN International Mother Language Day – Africa Educational Trust on the importance of teaching children in their mother language

Sunday 21 February is UN International Mother Language Day. To mark this event the Africa Educational Trust have written a post for the LSE International Development blog outlining why education in mother tongue languages is socially, economically and politically important to children across the world.

An innovative programme in Ugandan schools is showing how mother tongue languages can be harnessed to improve literacy standards among adults as well as strengthening primary school outcomes for children.



Language is a powerful and controversial force in education: this is 40th anniversary year of the Soweto riots triggered by imposition of an oppressor's language on South African students.

For many children growing up in multi-lingual communities, there is pressure to start their education in the dominant regional or international language, leaving their mother tongue at the school gate. Yet the evidence is that this does not serve children well, and the Ugandan programme run by the Africa Educational Trust is challenging these assumptions.

Existing academic research (UNESCO 2011) has shown that instruction in the local or home language (L1) is important for the child's cognitive, linguistic and academic performance. Further, it is better to allow a child to become highly proficient at basic skills in their home language, with six to eight years of academic instruction in this medium before engaging in academic work in a second language (L2).

Despite this evidence, the socio-political implications of language instruction means the controversy remains over education in local, mother-tongue language versus the dominant regional or international language.

Africa Educational Trust has confronted some of the underlying beliefs and attitudes in its work in bilingual education in the Mother Tongue Education Project in Northern Uganda.

Uganda has a complicated history in language education. As well as English, at various periods different regional languages and Kiswahili have been promoted as languages of instruction. Parental and community feelings about language of instruction were often inevitably linked to their own hopes for their children's education. While some parents placed a social value on their local language, most parents' primary concern was for their children's economic well-being which they saw as being best served by being proficient either in English or Lugandan, the dominant regional languages.

Ugandan parents shared the views found in other bilingual communities such as in Peru or Vietnam (UNESCO 2008a), where a high value was placed on international languages, and local language instruction was seen to represent 'second-class education'.

Convincing parents that local language instruction has practical benefits has been key to winning their support for its use in schools. So the Africa Educational Trust project has taken the innovative approach of incorporating adult education into the school mother tongue language programme.

Northern Uganda as a region has the highest rate of adult illiteracy, largely the legacy of 20 years of conflict: most adults in this region never had the chance to attend school. The AET project gives parents the chance to attend literacy classes in their home language, learning alongside their children once a week at the government-run primary schools and also through classes at the community-run home learning centres.

As a result newly literate and numerate parents can engage with local businesses, health care and education services: they see the immediate benefits of mother tongue language education which gives them confidence in the strategy for their children's schooling.

This approach also strengthened ties between parents and teachers and increased parents' involvement in their children's education. A similar programme in Papua New Guinea (UNESCO 2008a), led to more parental input to produce more culturally relevant curricula and learning tools and materials.

While mother tongue education has not been a 'silver bullet' for all educational woes, it has made significant inroads into some major problems. It has led to higher enrolment and retention in schools in North Uganda, where the drop-out rate is among the highest in the country. In three years, schools using mother tongue as the medium of instruction have increased their overall enrolment by 35%, with a higher rate of 38% for girls, reflecting evidence that local language education is particularly important for girls (Benson 2010). Initial improvements in academic performance were observed, though further follow-up is needed to confirm long-term impacts on student's performance.

In the face of these practical benefits, an evaluation after three years of the project found no resistance among parents, educators or local officials towards mother tongue language instruction, and support for the project to continue.

To hear more about parental involvement with mother-tongue and early childhood education, please register for Africa Educational Trust's [webinar](#) with Dr. Alison Clark and Stella Tumwebaze, Executive Director of LBE, taking place on Wednesday 24 February.

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