



Save the Children

## Language and children's education

### Policy brief

**Millions of children are missing out on education because they don't speak the language used in their schools. Children taught in an unfamiliar language often fail tests, have to repeat grades and drop out of education altogether. There is an urgent need to move towards teaching in languages that children understand, to avoid failure and accelerate progress towards targets to get everyone an education, including the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All.**

### What is the problem?

Literacy and numeracy levels are dramatically lower than expected in many countries<sup>1</sup>, and poor communities are frustrated that children are not learning the skills they need to do well in life. This is likely to hold back the economic development of many countries.

The language used to teach primary school children is a big factor in this disappointing picture. Many countries have several groups who speak their own local language. However, governments often decide that school should be taught in just one national language, or even a foreign language, to promote unity or economic competitiveness – even when teachers don't speak that language well.

An estimated 221 million primary school aged children speak local languages which are not used in schools<sup>2</sup>. There is a large amount of evidence that children understand very little of their lessons when they are not taught in a language they know well. Children who don't learn in their first language through primary education often perform much worse than children who do, and often fail to learn the school language well.

Some governments have tried teaching in a local language for two or three years before switching to a new language. However, the change usually happens abruptly, and before children have enough vocabulary to cope with classes in the new language - so this approach also fails.

## **Language affects the poorest and most excluded children the most**

Children in rural areas, who speak one language at home and have no contact with the school language outside school, have the biggest problems. Most young children in these settings find it impossible to 'pick up' the school language in the way they are expected to.

A statistical review found that in rural areas of 26 developing countries, not providing education in children's first language was a major factor in children dropping out of school<sup>3</sup>. When children already face multiple barriers – living far from schools, hunger, poor health, lack of materials and little time to study – language can tip the balance into total exclusion from education.

The 72 million children who do not attend school – mainly children living in conflict affected fragile states, and the poorest and most marginalised in many countries<sup>4</sup> – need strong support to get into school, stay there, and learn.

## **Poor school language can prevent peace-building and waste resources**

Large amounts of teaching time, materials and infrastructure are wasted when children drop out, repeat grades, or fail to achieve learning outcomes because they don't understand the school language. Training teachers in a language which they do not know well contributes to this ineffective use of resources. As education is such a large investment for governments, donors, and families with limited resources, it makes little sense to make learning more difficult than it needs to be.

In countries with large divisions between linguistic groups, there is evidence that excluding groups of people from educational success because they don't speak the school language is likely to worsen conflict and increase fragility<sup>5</sup>.

## **What can be done?**

### **Prioritise action on school language in high risk countries**

Save the Children's research<sup>6</sup> used a set of criteria to identify countries at greatest risk of negative consequences related to teaching in languages children don't know well. The criteria included availability of first-language education; social and economic divisions between language groups; and links between education, ethnicity and conflict. Countries that score highly are likely to face major delays to education, economic growth and stability if they do not shift toward teaching in languages which children understand.

36 countries scored highly, and are sub-divided into two groups: high risk and highest risk. Countries at high risk are: Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ghana, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Peru, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.

20 countries appear in the 'highest risk' category: Afghanistan, Benin, Bosnia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic Of Congo, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand and Uganda.

## **Teach preschool and primary school children in a familiar language: gradually build their skills in other languages**

Children do best when they are taught in a familiar language for the whole of preschool and primary education, with early but gradual introduction of other languages based on ideas and vocabulary that the child already knows. This approach has been shown to lead to far better learning of national or foreign languages<sup>7</sup>, and is being demonstrated by Save the Children in countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh. Such approaches lead to better retention and performance across the whole curriculum, including in mathematics. Any transition to another teaching language must be done slowly.

## **Move towards multilingual schooling**

Governments in multilingual countries with large rural populations should make clear policy commitments to move towards multilingual teaching based on local languages, and plan a series of changes to teaching over time. These changes are likely to include:

- allocating teachers to places based on the local language they already speak
- giving teachers incentives to learn local languages and stay in communities
- making it easier for local-language speakers to get teacher training and qualifications
- encouraging production of learning and literacy materials in local languages: this can be done through standard publishing or community-based production
- setting targets for second language to be taught in schools based on the real second language needs children face when they leave basic and secondary education
- progressively changing examination systems, so that for most subjects children are assessed using a familiar language
- making sure that the regions where language is the biggest barrier to learning get the 'first wave' of investment and capacity support to change schools' practice.

While several countries may need support to make these changes, the rewards are likely to be high – mother tongue based multilingual education has been shown to save millions of dollars every year in reduced grade repetition and wasted dropout costs<sup>8</sup>. For countries or regions rebuilding school systems after conflict or natural disaster, it makes sense to bring in teaching in languages that are familiar to children.

Simple changes can be made straight away, such as asking teachers to encourage children to speak their first language in school. This alone will make schooling much less frightening and difficult for many children, and will encourage the development of their first language, which children need in order to learn other languages well.

## **What should donors and international agencies do?**

Not enough has been done to make governments in developing and middle income countries aware of the evidence around language in education, and what to do about it. Some countries are moving towards multilingual schooling, but others are introducing more teaching in foreign languages at early grades, and many countries continue with current approaches.

Few international agencies are clearly explaining the need for education in familiar languages, and fewer still are investing in multilingual teaching based on familiar languages. This risks reducing the effectiveness of aid to basic education, and means donors and international agencies are ignoring a situation that could worsen conflict and increase fragility.

Donors and international education agencies must promote clear standards for moving towards good practice in school language, and should fund increased capacity to teach children in languages they understand.

Donors and international education agencies should take the following actions:

- Make clear commitments to supporting education in familiar languages, with strong second language development - particularly for rural populations.
- Bring school language to the forefront of dialogue with government and multilateral partners on education sector funding, making evidence clear and accessible. Prioritise this in countries with high levels of linguistic division, rural poverty and fragility.
- Invest to help high-risk countries frontload the costs of moving towards multilingual education.
- Ensure that 'coverage of primary education in a familiar language' is highlighted as a key indicator of education quality and equity in national and international benchmarks and assessment systems.
- Fund programmes which generate evidence on how to shift towards teaching in familiar languages and strengthening second language skills.

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## References

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6 H Pinnock, op. cit.

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8 Save the Children, op.cit.