

The Right to Education: Does Schooling in Multiple Languages Have a Negative Impact on EFA?

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Introduction

UNESCO's guidelines on education and language provides three basic operational principles as part of the Education for All (EFA) agenda. The second of these provisions states, "UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies."¹ The purpose of the guidance is to further human rights in the field of education, especially education for girls, women, minorities, and the dispossessed. However, despite the auspicious and laudable goals of the UNESCO guidelines, adopted by the EFA delegates in 2003, there is substantive evidence to suggest that the foundational reasoning behind the provisions--especially the second provision--is flawed. A summary of that evidence is presented here.

Background

The multilingual education experiment in the United States began in the the 1960's. Linguists have suggested that mastery of one's native language, paired with mastery of another language, would facilitate the highest average cognitive ability of students leaving middle education.²

¹ UNESCO, Education in a Multilingual World: "Education in Multiple Languages", UNESCO Education Position Paper 2003, pp. 30-35.

² Crawford, J., 1989. Bilingual education: History, politics, theory, and practice. Bilingual Education Serv.

However, an accumulation of research collected since the sixties has indicated that educating students in their native language as well as English in American schools has *not* helped the dropout rates to reduce or the examination pass rates to rise.³

Although there is a more competitive case for bilingualism of two languages working in countries with more successful education systems, the same cannot be said of countries that do not provide the same standard of education to students speaking an average of three or more languages.

Case Study: Indonesia

There appears to be an average correlation between students speaking a multitude of languages, or students not being exclusively educated in their native language for the duration of their studies, and negative outcomes in exams and performance. For example, Indonesia--according to a survey carried out by the *Independent* education supplement--ranks as 69th in international high school rankings. An average Indonesian speaks 3 languages, the native language, Indonesian, is spoken fluently by only 43 million people out of a population of 261 million. Yet non-religious schools in Indonesia (84 percent of schools) are taught in ba'hasa Indonesian.⁴

While it should be recognized that correlation does not equal causation, there is good reason to study further the phenomena of education systems which both provide education in multiple languages and at the same time perform poorly in comparison to jurisdictions with one or two language education systems. The majority of these multilingual education systems sit at the bottom of a wide variety of independent rankings of international education systems. There is a suggestive correlation of lower pass rates considered on an international scale and the use of multiple languages within a single education system.⁵

³ Secada, W.G., Chavez-Chavez, R., Garcia, E., Muñoz, C., Oakes, J., Santiago-Santiago, I. and Slavin, R., 1998. No more excuses: The final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project. 2012.

⁴ Suryadarma, D. and Jones, G.W. eds., 2013. *Education in Indonesia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

⁵ Cf. Rebus Education World Education Ranking Brief, 2017.

The complication of a multitude of languages is often most prominent in postcolonial countries such as those in India, Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. In these countries as well the normal complexity of competing languages, there is also a historical structure of enforcement of non-indigenous languages.

Often, languages from close geographical areas have an element of crossover in vocabulary or application; however, colonial languages were often totally unrelated to educational provisions in those countries being colonised. In addition, a common problem with education in countries with a multitude of common languages is the ability of teachers to speak the mother tongue of all students in the classroom. The effect of teachers not speaking the mother language of students is most significantly felt by linguistic minorities. Fluency in language is required for nuance, which becomes increasingly important the higher up the education system one goes. Hence, it is not unusual to find in countries with multiple language issues that student performance decreases from elementary through post secondary education.

Sierra Leone & WEAC

In countries such as Sierra Leone there has been great progress made in bringing greater numbers of students through primary and secondary education. However, this has tailed off as students reach the end of WAEC programs (West African Examinations Council). Although the problems are complex WAEC provides a good example of linguistic issues in educational programs. WAEC consists of five West African Countries and aims to provide examinations in English, relying on the British standard (OCR, AQA, and Edexcel) for measuring student performance. However in Sierra Leone alone, there are 23 recognised commonly used languages. A significant minority of students don't speak English at all until they attend at least elementary school, immediately putting them at a disadvantage to students who have learned English as their mother tongue.⁶ Consequently, while the ostensible goal of WEAC has been to set West Africa on an international footing in terms of its educative provisions, student performance has not improved and the drop-out rate has in fact increased.

⁶ Banya, K., 1991. Economic decline and the education system: the case of Sierra Leone. *Compare*, 21(2), pp.127-143.

Moreover, issues can arise in the motivation of students to learn English if they do not speak it at home. This poor motivation--paired with large class sizes and inability of teachers to speak all local languages--creates barriers for students who will eventually have to take exams in English or other language in which international standardization is available.⁷

Furthermore, the simultaneous use of three or more languages by students can, in many cases, lead to problems in higher-order comprehension in at least one of those languages. Furthermore, given the nuance and idiomatic nature of language, a student may come away with non-identical theories of meaning which might not be the case had they just learned in one language thought their life.

This may, at least in part, be a reason behind the apparent drop off student numbers as students travel through the WAEC system and beyond into higher education. Students who speak three languages comparably might struggle to convey the complexity of ideas in higher education.⁸

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it seems that there is sufficient grounds to wonder if an system based on the delivery of education in multiple languages throughout the academic career of an individual is problematic and warrants further study. We note that the principles as proposed by the adopted EFA guidelines of 2003 have not been rigorously vetted or corroborated through research and data collection. In the interest of a more efficacious drive towards providing the right to education for all, it seems clear that UNESCO would do well to revisit and critically examine the question as to whether or not there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a right to education is achieved through multiple language schooling.

⁷ Felder, R.M. and Henriques, E.R., 1995. Learning and teaching styles in foreign and second language education. *Foreign language annals*, 28(1), pp.21-31.

⁸ Van der Walt, C., 2013. Multilingual higher education: Beyond English medium orientations. *Multilingual Matters*.

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