

Panel 2- Public policy objectives for education in, and the teaching of, minority languages

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“When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.”

These words by Adreinne Rich in *Blood, bread and poetry*, poignantly convey the experience of students whose lived realities are rendered invisible and voices muted in the classroom, as the schools refuse to recognize their right to be taught in their own languages ... languages, without which higher mental cognition cannot happen... languages without which meaningful scaffolding of academic concepts on students’ prior experiences (a much recommended pedagogic strategy) cannot happen, since it is through the home language that everyday reality is experienced, reflected upon and communicated. That this continues to be the reality of many many many students was emphatically brought forth in the Asia-Pacific forum meeting in September 2019 in Bangkok. The participants shared - majority of languages continue to remain excluded from classroom spaces - in several linguistically diverse countries in the Asia –Pacific region where the diversity is contributed by both – historical co-existence of several diverse ethnic-linguistic communities and also by way of migration. A deeply concerning aspect is that often the exclusion was not justified by the small numbers of the group and hence the (quote –unquote) “feasibility” issues. Instead it involved exclusion of languages of even those communities whose numbers were large but to whom ‘political agency and participation’ was sought to be denied. Many of these exclusions are not just problems in difficulties in implementation but in intent. The challenges we face are tougher and need to be recognized.

Multilingualism in the Asia-Pacific region manifests itself as presence of multiple languages and also multilingual individuals. Many in India like me grow with up at least three to four languages. These include-the home language- in my case Kangri (an endangered language), the official regional language of the state (in my case Hindi), India’s official languages (Hindi and English) and often regional languages of other states if people have to move there. The chances of you being a multilingual are higher if your home language is not a language of international, national or regional dominance. It is only the relatively small number of speakers of ‘dominant’ languages who can afford to remain monolingual. But, unfortunately they are often responsible for policies in education.

At Asia-Pacific forum we wanted to acknowledge individual bilingualism-multilingualism as the norm, while formulating recommendations. The recommendations must identify and establish

dialogue with major stakeholders. These include central and local governments, parents and communities, school administrators and teachers, other providers of essential services, and even NGOs. They need to be educated about the cognitive and educational, socio-cultural, economic, and political consequences of multilingualism. There should be no negotiation with aims of an equal, socially just and democratic education. The access to knowledge and knowledge construction must be enabled for all without discrimination. The concern regarding access to knowledge and participation in knowledge constructions is reflected in the recommendations pertaining to 'pedagogic' dimension of the policy objectives.

If we imagine education as a process of one-sided –non dialogic-transmission of facts or by a more informed teacher to uninformed students, we reduce language to a mere communication medium, devoid of its cultural, critical and action potential. This makes us satisfied with models of education where home languages of students are 'only' used in the early years, aiming to "mainstream" or transit to dominant language- as early as possible! Such models only encourage children to see themselves as recipients and repeaters of knowledge but never contributors to it.

However,

- if we imagine education as an interactive-dialogic process between the teacher and students that does not reduce them to blank states -waiting for knowledge deposits, as conveyed in Freire's banking concept of knowledge...
- if we agree that education itself has to be a democratic process where democracy is experienced and not just "taught",
- if we imagine an education -that encourages critical and reflective consciousness inspiring learners to question injustice, oppression and inequality and become empathizing, sensitive and tolerant humans,

Then, must have models where children's home languages are recognized as more than 'bridges' for transition.

We need to invest in models that see presence of many languages not as obstacles but as useful pedagogic resource- as works of scholars like Prof. Ramakant Agnihotri in learning grammar or Prof. Minati Panda-in learning mathematical concepts- show.

These models recognize the significance of home languages and other languages in an individual's life without imposing a hierarchical arrangement on languages where some are made more 'advantaged' and 'advanced' than others. When struggles of comprehension are made absent for some and salient for others by sheer match or mismatch between home and school language or the aims of multilingualism are restricted to the already multilingual- conveniently excluding monolingual speakers of dominant languages, this is a matter of intentional and institutional 'advantaging' or 'disadvantaging'. As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas has written, a

monolingual teacher of multilingual teacher is by definition incompetent. Can we really expect her to understand the difficulties of students if she has never struggled to learn another language? Often difficulties in comprehension caused by institutional structures are interpreted by the children facing as their own incompetence. This is one of the dangerous consequences. Models of multilingual education that challenge language hierarchies, can help creating more democratic classrooms by redefining the power structures between teachers and students, as Jim Cummins has shown. We need to adopt more responsive/proactive/positive approach to bi/multilingualism- in education. We need to establish minimum pedagogical research based thresholds. Then it is less convenient for policy makers to cite 'practicality' or 'feasibility as reasons for imposing minimalist token MT based early exit transition models. It is important to recognise the diversity of strong, additive, bi/multilingual which meet these pedagogical thresholds. A meaningful pedagogic inclusion of languages of minorities and as Tove used the term 'minoritized'- which is over and above the transition use- is necessary.