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# Promoting the Presence of Minority Languages in Education

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**Forum:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

**Issue:** Promoting the presence of minority languages in education

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### **Introduction:**

Language allows us to communicate with others, and it is the basis on which our society is built on. It gives us the abilities to share ideas, experiences, tradition as well as knowledge. It also plays an important role in keeping peace as well as fostering understanding. Not to mention that it governs everything we do. However, languages are now under severe threat, as data collected from UNESCO suggested that some-600 languages have died off over the last century. It is predicted, that if this trend continues as it is, around 90 per cent of the languages may disappear by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the environments in which (different) languages are allowed to thrive and prosper is the classroom. However, often times, minority languages are not taught in school and lessons are instead given in the 'official language'. Data suggests that 40% of the global population, has no access to education that is given in a language they understand or speak. Not to forget the many children who do not get lessons in their mother tongue, which can often lead to these children (and their following generations) becoming more fluent in the official language and ultimately leaving their native language behind, leading to a loss of culture as well as identity.



Fig.1 School in Aruba (Government Offices of Aruba, 2019)

The language we speak influences our everyday life and can often influence the way in which we receive information/knowledge. Furthermore, it is also an inert part of our culture which ultimately makes a big part of our identity. This is why it is of utmost importance that we do ensure that languages are preserved.

### **Defining Key Terms:**

**Minority:** While the UN has no official definition, in this case a language minority would be any minority who speak a native language that holds less power than that of the majority language.

**Mother tongue/Native tongue:** Can refer to the language of one's ethnic background or the language exposed to an individual at birth.

**Bilingual/Multilingual:** The use of two or more languages. In a bilingual/multilingual school, 2 or more languages are used.

**Primary, secondary and tertiary education:** Level of education, there are several differences between countries on what they consider primary secondary and tertiary education. An example of primary education is primary school and an example of tertiary education is university or technical-vocational schools.

### **Background information:**

A lot of students within language-minorities tend to speak the official language better than their own mother tongue. Students will learn the best if they are taught in a language that they can understand (or speak). Children who are taught in a language that they understand, are 14% more likely to read and comprehend at the end of primary, when compared to those who don't. This works the same with minority languages, those that are taught in their mother tongue will go on to perform much better in school when compared to those who are not. Students are bound to understand and feel more at home, if they are comfortable in the language that they are taught in – i.e. their mother tongue.

Studies have shown that when pupils who belonged to a language minority were taught with their own mother tongue, their performance in school subject was on the same level as students whose mother tongues were the official language and those who were taught in the official language. This comes seemingly from the fact that

teaching a student in their respective native tongues, allowed for a better sense of identity and self-esteem, which motivated them to study more. Students that are not taught in their respective mother tongues, often suffer a loss of identity and the student as well as their parents may feel as though their language is not as important as the official language. Thus, giving them no incentive to teach or learn their own mother tongues. This can also lead to members of other languages, possibly attaching a particular class or economic success to one language, fostering misunderstanding between language groups.

This is further backed by the fact that, the marginalisation of languages in the education, will not allow the language to adapt and develop terminology relevant to modern context (for example technology) as well as in the labour market. This would then give the parents of children incentive to focus on teaching the children the official language instead of the mother tongue. This is also something that can be effectively mitigated by integrating minority languages into the school, as it would allow the language to adapt.

There is also substantial studies, proving that bilingualism can have many benefits related to cognitive skills as well as attitude, furthermore it can also foster creativity within students.

In a lot of Member States, there are often predisposed ideas that students who are taught in a minority languages tend to have an overall lower level of the official language, when compared to those who pursue education that is given in the official language. As stated before, this is often important when trying to get a job, for example. These claims come from deep-rooted ideologies that suggest that teaching more than 1 language at a time, would hinder the ability of communication as a whole. Although now there has been significant studies performed that show that multilingual education has several cognitive benefits and can often also improve language competency.

When children from language minorities attend schools that teach in the official language, those children and their parents may end up believing that their language is less important than the official level. One of the most problematic causes is the lack of consistency and continuity when it comes to the access to bilingual education or

other forms of education which may integrate minority languages. Often times what happens in bilingual education is that schools teach a healthy amount of both minority education and the official education in primary years. However, as time goes on, schools may start favouring the use of the official language more.

This would lead to ultimately the mother tongue or minority language eventually get phased out. This often happens in early to later years of secondary school, as a result of a lack of students that are able to speak the minority language easily. This eventually leads to an insufficient level of native language among students who have completed this bilingual-medium education. This is also the case for non-bilingual schools who have an official-language education medium, but still have a subject or course that may teach students, possibly from a young age, a minority language or their mother tongue. However, only devoting lessons to teaching a minority language, has shown to lead to lower native tongue language skills, when compared to the official language.



Fig. 2 Classroom in Zanaki Primary School in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in an English class. (UN News, 2019)

Another problem that would discourage schools as well as pupils from teaching/learning their mother tongue, is the lack of resources often available. Especially for native tongues that are often traditionally only learned through talking or interacting with family members.

## Major parties:

**India:** Has put several policies which ensure that there is effective use of minority languages in education. Such as the use of the three-language formula.

**Council of Europe:** An intergovernmental agency with Europe Member states, which promote democracy and human rights. Treaties such as The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages promotes usage of minority languages.

**National Association for Bilingual Education:** This is a non-governmental agency based in the United States, which advocates for educational programs that implement multilingual-medium education.

**Bolivia:** Has promoted the usage of indigenous languages into the national education system.

**China:** While China has put a considerable amount of effort into implementing minority languages into their education, minorities such as the Uyghurs are prohibited from being taught in their native tongue, Turkic. Instead, they are forcibly taught in, and taught to learn, Mandarin.

**Slovakia:** Even though Roma pupils make up around 19% of the student population in the primary and secondary years, there has been no implementation of the Romani language (often their mother tongue) in the curriculum.

**MLEN (Multilingual Education Network):** Multilingual Education is not a group, but a host of groups of activists that aim to serve quality education given in mother tongue and minority languages.

## Past attempts to solve this issue:

Hungary, for example, has given pupils and parents the option to enrol into a Slovak-instruction or a bilingual-instruction school. Schools are also put under the obligation to ensure that 50% of the curriculum is being taught in the other, minority language. This rule has also been kept continuously from primary to secondary. The 2011 Fundamental Law of Hungary also ensures that all nationalities living in Hungary have the right to receive education in their native language. This is also further promoted by the Rights of Nationalities, act CLXXIX, which ensures that people who

belong to a national minority, have the right to access public education in their mother tongue.



Fig. 3, Bilingual school in Budapest (Cgtn.com, 2021).

The United Nations have also put some regulations and legislations in place to ensure the incorporation of minority languages into the education system. Article 4 of the UN declaration on the rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities stipulates that: “States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.”. Ultimately promoting the implementation of minority languages in the education system, in all Member States. Furthermore, article 14 of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, also ensures that States shall ensure that indigenous have the right to access education in their own language.

India’s 3 language formula is an example of how non-bilingual schools can effectively implement the usage of language courses in the curriculum. Introduced in the National Education Policy in 1968, it ensures that all students take an international language (English), a national language (Hindi) as well as a regional language. This ensures that the students are not able to learn their respective mother tongues but are also available to communicate throughout inter-state communicates as well as internationally.

## Possible solutions:

**Putting in policies and legislation:** In order to ensure that linguistic minorities are able to pursue education in their own mother tongue, there must be a legal basis wherein this is possible. States can choose to put in policies and legislation, that ensure that nationalities have the right to education given in their own mother tongue and ensure that bilingual education uses 50% minority language in their curriculum, and make sure this is implemented in higher education.

**Minority & multilingual language-medium schools:** These are schools that fully teach their curriculum in a minority language or minority language in conjunction with another language, possibly with extra courses that allows students to learn other languages. Member States may employ public schools that do this, in order to ensure that minority languages are being used and taught in the education system and to ensure that linguistic minorities have an option of receiving education in their own language (according to Article 4 of the UN declaration on the rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities). However, states should also ensure that these schools get enough, and as much resources as official language-medium schools. Furthermore, efforts should be made to ensure that students in minority-language schools get equal opportunity for tertiary education as other schools.

**Ensuring resources:** Member states could lastly also ensure that schools that teach (in) minority languages, should be able to get sufficient resources for doing so. Such as buying textbooks or employing teachers qualified to teach in their respective language, so that students can take these courses or go to these schools without compromising the quality of their education.

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