

ALL IN SCHOOL

**Out-of-School
Children Initiative**

UNICEF AND UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR STATISTICS

SCHOOL ACCESS FOR CHILDREN FROM NON-DOMINANT ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES

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Table of contents

	Page
1. Introduction	4
2. Specific barriers to school access for children from non-dominant communities.....	5
2.1 Enabling or disabling environment.....	5
2.2 Supply factors	6
2.3 Demand factors.....	6
3. Evidence-based policies and strategies to counteract the barriers	7
3.1 Research methodology and data collection strategies	7
3.2 MLE design consistent with language, literacy and learning research	7
3.3 Policy linked to resources and implementation structures	8
3.4 Addressing structural barriers	8
References	9

1. Introduction

This paper analyses school access for children from non-dominant ethnic and linguistic communities using the OOSCI studies (referenced under UIS-UNICEF below) and other international experiences. Non-dominant (ND) groups are minorities or even majorities that are unfairly marginalised in certain social contexts.¹ Ethnicity and language overlap with poverty, rural life, religion and gender in ways that exclude children from gaining access to or completing basic education.² For example, children from ND groups are 40-60% less likely than those from dominant groups to enrol in school in Bolivia, China, Ecuador, India and Laos, and in the same contexts ND girls are 30-50% less likely to enrol than ND boys.³

Underlying Education for All is the idea that school participation allows people to lead happier, healthier and more productive lives. However, most education systems are designed for dominant groups, causing serious harm⁴ to children from ND groups because their home languages, values and experiences are not used as learning resources. Instruction in a language learners do not yet understand prevents them from making the sound-symbol-meaning connections needed for literacy and learning, and it devalues their identities.⁵ Such systems either fail to attract ND children to begin with or push them out by teaching or testing in dominant languages. ND families cope either by sacrificing scarce resources in their aspiration for dominant languages; by rejecting schools wholesale as socially irrelevant or pedagogically ineffective; or by failing to convince themselves or their children (especially girls) that classroom boredom is preferable to work at home.

An estimated 2.3 billion people, nearly 40% of the world's population, lack access to education in their own languages.⁶ Simply getting children into school will not address this issue. Demand should be created by tailoring educational services to child and community needs, providing equitable access to national curricular goals, including the learning of dominant languages. "Pull" factors include respect for cultural and religious traditions and local calendars, along with multilingual education (MLE) based on learners' home languages (L1).

¹ Groups considered non-dominant in one context may be dominant in another (Kosonen and Benson, 2013).

² UNESCO (2010:149-154)

³ Lockheed and Lewis (2012:119-123)

⁴ Dominant education contributes to linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

⁵ Devaluation may be implicit, e.g. absence of learners' images in school materials, or explicit, e.g. prohibiting them from wearing traditional clothing or speaking home languages. Quality pedagogy supports identity formation (Cummins and Early, 2011).

⁶ Walter and Benson (2012:282)

Box 1. Grade 4 Portuguese lesson for Changana speakers, Mozambique⁷

Teacher: **What can you see in this picture here?** [Illustration of boy with three body parts labeled]

Students: [Silence]

Teacher: **What can you see here?**

Carla: I can see a boy

Teacher: **What?**

Some students: [Echoing Carla's answer] I can see a boy.

Teacher: **There is a boy...Is it just a boy that you can see here?**

Students: [Timidly] Yes.

Teacher: **What?**

Students: [Different answers] Yes/No

Teacher: **What else can you see here?**

Students: [Silence]

Teacher: **This boy...was anything divided up?**

Students: It was divided up.

(Chimbutane, 2011: 85)

2. Specific barriers to school access for children from non-dominant communities

2.1 Enabling or disabling environment

Language-in-education policy. National and international languages dominate education policy without regard for how children learn and teachers teach. There is no evidence that using a dominant language as medium of instruction improves learner proficiency in that language—particularly when teacher proficiency is limited. Policy should enable appropriate linguistic and cultural approaches to the curriculum.

Donor support to policy and implementation. Despite UNESCO's 1953 call for mother tongue education, coordinated donor response is only recent.⁸ Scrutiny of early reading failure has led to support of initial literacy in the L1,⁹ but programmes may view ND language use as temporary rather than systematic. Meanwhile, bilateral donors send the wrong messages by promoting dominant languages, as in Ethiopia, whose strong 8-year L1-medium policy is being undermined by teacher "professionalisation" programmes designed to improve English proficiency.¹⁰

⁷ This classroom discourse segment illustrates the lack of meaningful communication in the dominant language, despite lesson content that would be preschool level in the L1.

⁸ See UNESCO (1953) for the specialist report. The 2010 *International Conference on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals* marked a milestone in the level of recognition granted learners' L1s by low-income countries and donors.

<http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/about.html>

⁹ Despite methodological limitations (Schroeder 2013), Early Grade Reading Assessment data have highlighted weaknesses in the teaching of phonemic awareness and led to development of improved reading approaches.

¹⁰ Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012)

Resourcing and costing. Converting to L1-based education requires significant investment in linguistic development, materials production and teacher training. Policymakers should balance this against the social costs of out-of-school children and high per-pupil expenditures due to repetition, failure and dropout. Cost-benefit analyses in Senegal and Guatemala demonstrate that MLE programmes break even after 2 to 3 years.¹¹ The Ghana OOSCI study finds an alternative programme for overage youth—with its flexible calendar, relevant curriculum and participatory L1-based instruction—more cost-effective than the primary system.

2.2 Supply factors

Failure to build strong L1 foundations for learning. Despite growing recognition, MLE approaches are often limited in depth and breadth; they are shallow in terms of the degree to which L1 literacy and learning foundations are built upon, and they have limited scope in terms of the number of L1s used for curriculum, training and materials.¹² OOSCI studies including Pakistan and DR Congo call for expanded MLE in ND languages to improve the quality and provision of basic education. Current scholarship suggests that extended use of the L1 and continued development of biliteracy (reading and writing in both/all languages) maximises cognitive and affective benefits.¹³

Low investment in L1/bilingual materials and teacher development. Many OOSCI studies call for more and better-quality materials and teacher preparation in L1s. Even with bilingual intercultural programmes in Bolivia and Ghana, lack of materials and training hurts teaching quality and learner motivation.¹⁴ Decentralized processes are recommended to maximise local linguistic resources, and linguistic proficiency should be part of teachers' job portfolios. Creative, low-cost solutions are available for challenges such as linguistically mixed classrooms or languages without written standards.¹⁵

2.3 Demand factors

False blame on families. The Ghana OOSCI study calls “lack of parental awareness of the importance of schooling” a major barrier—immediately after discussing how irrelevant and incomprehensible lessons are to children taught in dominant languages. Marginalised people make strategic educational choices depending on what they believe will offer the best opportunities given their limited resources, sacrificing labour and finances and educating selected children (often boys). If they do not see education as comprehensible, relevant and useful, why should they pay school or opportunity costs?

Need to partner with communities. The Nigeria OOSCI study discusses how non-literate parents believe school-educated girls will reject future husbands, and how Quranic teachers convince Hausa families to shun Western education. Attitudes like these could be addressed if parents were involved in developing curricular approaches, engaged in negotiation between traditional values and national educational aims.

¹¹ Vawda and Patrinos (1999); Heugh (2011)

¹² Ouane and Glantz (2011)

¹³ See Cummins (2009) on interlinguistic transfer. Strong MLE models in Eritrea (Walter and Davis, 2005) and Ethiopia (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2012) significantly improve learning outcomes.

¹⁴ The Bolivia OOSCI study found that teachers of Indigenous children spoke DL Spanish at least 75% of the time, negatively affecting learners' comprehension and motivation.

¹⁵ Strategies include organizing multi-grade classrooms by language (Kosonen, 2006) and community-based language development (UNESCO, 2007).

Intersections of gender, language and ethnicity. Most out-of-school girls worldwide are from ND groups, mainly due to the mismatch between home and school language and culture.¹⁶ MLE programmes in Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Mozambique attract more girls, keep them in school longer and allow them to do better because of proximity to the home, trust of local teachers and use of the L1 to demonstrate their capabilities.¹⁷

4. Evidence-based policies and strategies to counteract the barriers

3.2 Research methodology and data collection strategies

OOSCI studies like Nigeria and Bolivia use language as a proxy for ethnicity to illustrate disparities between groups, but this data has little explanatory power.¹⁸ To analyse the effect of language on educational success/failure, repetition, dropout or push-out, we need data on children's L1 *in relation to* the language of instruction at available schools. This includes youth and adult literacy targets: How is literacy measured and in which language(s) relative to the learner's L1?¹⁹ L1-based programmes characteristically experience higher levels of participation, success and enjoyment (as well as parental involvement) and lower levels of repetition and dropout, especially among girls²⁰—so these data should be collected and disaggregated.

Assessment data should also be analysed with regard to languages: What is the **learners' L1** relative to the **language of instruction** and to the **language of assessment**? According to Ethiopia's national assessments, learners taught and tested in their own languages do better in all subjects including English than learners with a language mismatch—and 8 years of L1 allow the highest percentage of learners to enrol in secondary school.²¹ Multilingual programmes should test strategically in one or more languages,²² because testing only in the dominant language masks whether the difficulty lies in understanding the content, comprehending the test questions or expressing knowledge in the test language. An innovative dual-language assessment in Niger found that results were highest for learners taught and tested in their L1, and lowest for those taught and tested in the dominant language.²³

3.2 MLE design consistent with language, literacy and learning research

Educational quality is positively affected by L1 use even for a few years, as demonstrated by “early-exit” approaches.²⁴ However, current scholarship calls for extended use of the L1 and continued development of biliteracy (reading and writing in both/all languages) across the curriculum to maximise cognitive and affective benefits.²⁵ Among low-income countries, Eritrea

¹⁶ Lockheed and Lewis (2012: 119-123) review gender-within-ethnicity disadvantages in school participation in 16 countries, including OOSCI countries Bolivia, Guatemala, India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Romania.

¹⁷ Benson (2005).

¹⁸ Linguistic and cultural data are more relevant than ethnicity for educational decision-making.

¹⁹ Note that children's L1s may be different than adult heads of households responding to data requests.

²⁰ Benson (2004).

²¹ Heugh et al. (2012).

²² Mbude-Shale et al. (2004).

²³ Hovens (2002) demonstrated that even children taught only in the DL did better when tested in the ND.

²⁴ E.g. the Philippines and Cameroon (Walter, 2013).

²⁵ Cummins (2009).

and Ethiopia currently offer the strongest approaches: 8 years of primary schooling in their most widely spoken ND languages.²⁶

3.5 Policy linked to resources and implementation structures

Because medium of instruction choices are central to educational access, they should be built into national strategic plans, resourced appropriately, and structured for implementation at grassroots and technical levels. Ethiopia's top-down policy as implemented by regional education bureaus functions in homogeneous regions but strains limited resources in the linguistically diverse south.²⁷ Bolivia's bilingual intercultural education began with top-down policies, phased-in implementation and education councils responding to ND community challenges, but subsequent lack of resources and political distancing has weakened implementation.²⁸ In Mozambique, the offer of MLE as an option has allowed time for public demand to be met by decentralized implementation, but the chronically under-resourced programme depends on small NGOs and applied linguists.²⁹ Under-resourcing may cause communities to reject MLE due to low-quality implementation.

3.6 Addressing structural barriers

Given adequate financial and technical resources, decentralised implementation allows for relevant responses to local linguistic and cultural needs. These include instruction based on learners' and teachers' L1s, involvement of parents in curriculum delivery choices, and adaptation of school calendars to local lifestyles, all within reasonable national guidelines.

In sum, L1-based multilingual education addresses the needs of all learners, including the most marginalized, by using their (and their teachers') best languages for teaching and learning while facilitating acquisition of dominant languages needed for future participation in their societies. School use of ND languages attracts learners to the school, allowing them to participate and demonstrate what they know, and encouraging their families to be involved. Enabling policies and adequate resourcing will permit quality implementation and lower per-pupil expenditure. Bilingual, biliterate learners are likely to develop the critical thinking skills and self-confidence needed to live better-informed, happier and healthier lives.

²⁶ Walter (2013); Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012).

²⁷ Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012).

²⁸ López (2005) and OOSCI Bolivia report.

²⁹ Chimbutane and Benson (2012).

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