

# Girls, Educational Equity and Mother Tongue-based Teaching



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural Organization  
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## Introduction

Few doubt the power of basic education to improve conditions for marginalized groups of poor and rural populations, subordinated social groups, and females, in general. At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, one of the main agreed goals was “*to ensure that by 2015 all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances, and children from ethnic minorities, have access to complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality*” (UNESCO, 2000a). Another of the goals involved *improving levels of literacy, particularly among women*. Most countries, along with the bilateral, governmental or non-governmental organizations that support them, believe that they are working toward expanding educational access, improving efficiency, enhancing quality, and achieving equity of opportunity. Yet one of the biggest challenges to achieving all of these goals may be schooling systems, themselves, which continue to reproduce the inequalities found in society. This paper argues that one of the principal mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced is language, specifically the language used as the medium of instruction. It shows how the learner’s mother tongue holds the key to making schooling more inclusive for all disadvantaged groups, especially for girls and women.

The Asia-Pacific region is characterized by rich ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. As in other parts of the world, human diversity is a natural phenomenon, but imperialist and/or colonial processes have imposed dominant group languages or language varieties over prevalent regional ones. In some areas, people’s mother tongues are systematically ignored. As a result, the true linguistic panorama of a national population is rarely reflected in its school system, and large numbers of learners are confronted with either a foreign medium of instruction or a language variety that does not match their own (see Kosonen, 2005). Not surprisingly, such school systems have significant gaps in educational access and attainment between rich and poor, elite and marginalized, and males and females. While language is not the only factor in perpetuating these gaps, it is a highly significant one, as this paper will demonstrate. There are also strong indications that adopting a more appropriate school language makes a positive difference for girls, even more than for other disadvantaged learners.

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Making educational opportunities more equitable means dealing explicitly with children of disadvantaged groups through affirmative measures. Such measures should improve their chances to access school and remain there long enough to benefit socially, economically and in every other way that reduces their vulnerability. Understanding the conditions under which marginalized populations live is a crucial first step towards designing a school system that works on their behalf, rather than holding them to standards that only the elite can hope to meet - standards that reproduce inequality. This paper reports on the connections between ethnic and linguistic background, girls' school participation, and improving educational opportunities, and offers some strategies for policy makers, education advocates and practitioners.

It must be added that documentation of effective educational practices in Asian contexts is somewhat limited. The studies that are available describe either the effects of mother tongue-based schooling or the results of gender-oriented programmes, but rarely consider both at once. Educational studies would be more useful if they followed the call issued in many gender equity reports for disaggregation of data by sex so that the relative effects of innovations or interventions on girls and on boys can be documented. This paper makes connections where they can be made with the hope that future studies will examine them in more detail.

## **Connections Between Language and Marginality**

Many of the inequalities mentioned above correspond to ethnolinguistic heritage and conditions of language access, since the linguistic boundaries between the dominant group and the dominated are usually quite clear. The elite in any society are invariably speakers of the prestige language used in education, governance and other official domains. Meanwhile, the most marginalized groups have little access to the prestige language; they are speakers of languages or dialects that are not valued, sometimes not even recognized, by formal structures. While the latter groups are often called "linguistic minorities," they outnumber speakers of the dominant language in countries such as Lao PDR, where mother-tongue speakers of Lao comprise between 35 and 45 percent of the population, depending on how related ethnic minorities are counted (Chazée, 1999; in Kosonen, 2005). Even in countries where such groups are in the numerical minority, their populations may be high. Ethnic minorities in China, for example, represent only eight percent of the population, yet number close to 100 million people (Grimes, 2000; Kosonen, 2005).

The Asia-Pacific region has some of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, including Papua New Guinea (PNG) with roughly 800 languages, Indonesia with 650 and India with 380 (Grimes 2000). Unfortunately, discussions of societal multilingualism mask the fact that the poorest groups rarely have access to dominant or prestige languages. If they are bilingual, they may speak two local languages, or one local language and a lingua franca, neither of which is accorded value in formal sectors; more often they are monolingual in the home language (herein known as the L1). Writing on the theme of language and development, Bruthiaux (2002) has pointed out that 50 percent or more of populations of low-income countries are engaged in the informal sector, which does not expose them to dominant languages, particularly not in childhood.

Further exploring the theme of linguistic marginalization, Markee notes that “the younger or the more disadvantaged the participants are, the more likely it is that the L1 will provide the most viable means of access to development” (2002: 272). This does not mean that people do not want to learn the dominant languages; on the contrary, they are acutely aware of the economic importance of these languages. However, being submerged in a foreign language in school does not make for effective learning of language or anything else, as such school systems have demonstrated over and over again.

Language and marginality link to produce an impact on schooling in a number of ways. In terms of educational access, those who do not speak the language of the school have less of an opportunity to understand enrollment procedures, communicate with school officials, or understand what is being taught. If they do get to school, they receive a poor quality of education, because both literacy and concepts are taught in a foreign medium that few will be able to learn well enough to understand what is being taught. This process is highly inefficient, causing repetition, failure and dropout for all but a few who are somehow able to break the code, i.e. learn to read and write an unfamiliar language. There is inequality of opportunity because those who speak the language of the school can start learning the first day of classes, while all of the others must first learn the foreign code. Finally, perpetual subordination may cause learners to have low aspirations for their own educational achievement and participate unwittingly in a vicious circle of dropout and failure.

### **Connections Between Girls, Language and Marginality**

The conditions under which girls and women live their lives vary significantly by social group. As Nussbaum (2003) has pointed out, even girls and women from privileged groups can be handicapped by gender roles and expectations, becoming a disadvantaged subset of an advantaged group. However, girls and women from marginalized groups are victims of multiple disadvantages, and their access to schooling is the most limited when schools expect them to have linguistic resources that do not exist in their environment.

The connection between language and gender has been made by a number of researchers in the context of educational development. For example, Corson (1993) finds that the three groups most affected by injustices in language policy and planning in education are women and girls, the poor, and groups with languages not represented in formal structures. He finds strong links between language and gender injustice in the schools. Similarly, research reviewed by Dutcher (in CAL, 2001) and O’Gara & Kendall (1996) has demonstrated that unless they work in markets or factories, girls and women are much less likely than boys and men to be exposed to the prestige language because their lives are more often restricted to the home and family where the local language is spoken. This means that girls are less likely than boys to understand school instruction. Differences in language competence often go unnoticed at school, especially where girls are given fewer opportunities to speak and are expected to perform less well than boys (O’Gara & Kendall, 1996). Any reticence on the part of girls to speak may be interpreted as evidence of limited academic ability, rather than lack of exposure to the language of instruction.

Researchers such as Hovens (2002, 2003), Benson (2002a, 2002b), and Sichra (1992) have looked at differences between boys and girls in their research on bilingual education in Africa and Latin America. They have found that girls who learn in familiar languages stay in school longer, are more likely to be identified as good students, do better on achievement tests, and repeat grades less often than their peers who do not get home language instruction. This evidence suggests that a change in the language of teaching and learning greatly improves opportunities for educational access and attainment for female students.

## **The Proposal: Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education**

Mother tongue-based bilingual education means starting with the learner's knowledge and experiences by developing reading, writing and thinking skills in the mother tongue or home language (L1) while teaching the second or foreign language (L2) as a subject. Exposure to the L2 gradually increases without sacrificing L1 literacy and cognition. If time is taken to build second language skills based on first language competence and learners have an opportunity for continued study of their own languages, the result can be high-level bilingualism and biliteracy (see Cummins, 2001 for a review of the pedagogical principles in operation; see Thomas & Collier, 2002 for longitudinal research evidence). This result is associated with the additional benefits of cognitive flexibility and relative ease in acquiring additional languages (Baker, 2001).

Across the region, various types of programmes take steps to adapt to the language or languages of the learner. For example, some use a "close" second language such as a Creole or widely spoken regional language as the instructional medium, instead of the learner's actual mother tongue. This is the case with Tok Pisin in parts of Papua New Guinea (CAL, 2001; Siegel, 1997). However, this approach functions best if learners are familiar with the language when they begin schooling, which tends to happen in linguistically heterogeneous, semi-urban areas. Other programmes use the L2 as medium of instruction for much of the time, but reserve a place for the L1 and local knowledge, as is the case in parts of Viet Nam, where the L1 is taught as a subject, and in Indonesia, where locally-constructed curriculum may account for up to 20 percent of weekly lessons (CAL, 2001). Unfortunately, as Kosonen (2005) finds in the case of Indonesia, the time allocated to local curriculum often is not effectively exploited to promote language development.

The vast majority of bilingual school programmes in developing countries use the home language only for the first two or three years of schooling, attempting to transition students to instruction in the dominant language rather abruptly. This model is not backed by theory, nor is it likely to promote strong language and literacy skills. Nonetheless, it may get support from politicians because it gives the appearance of dealing with learners' needs without committing to more wide-reaching reform, and from parents because it gives the appearance of teaching the prestige language, which they believe is the key to their children's success.

Even minimal use of the L1 promotes some recognition of the value of the home language and identity of the learner, but adoption of a strong bilingual model is

much more likely to have long-term benefits (Baker, 2001; Benson, 2002a). When learners can express their full range of knowledge in a language in which they are competent, and their backgrounds are valued and used as a basis for instruction, they develop higher self-esteem and greater self-confidence, as well as higher aspirations in schooling and in life. At this point in time, however, these benefits accrue only to “native-speaking” children in schools that use the dominant language.

## **Obstacles to Girls’ Participation and Strategies that Address Them**

A surprising number of obstacles to girls’ school participation are reported worldwide by poor countries and even by some richer ones. With the caveat that these are generalizations and do not all apply to all contexts or countries, some of the most common are the following (Chowdhury, 1993; Derbyshire, 2002; Kane, 1995; Rowe & Burchfield, 2000; UNESCO 2000b):

### **Family Decisions**

- ▶ Insufficient resources to cope with the direct and indirect costs of schooling
- ▶ Perception that boys bring more of a “return on investment” in schooling because girls marry into the husband’s family
- ▶ Perception that formal education does not prepare girls for their lives
- ▶ Need for girls to carry out household tasks such as childcare and water bearing, which are time-consuming and happen during school hours
- ▶ Concern that girls are sexually vulnerable when away from home
- ▶ Arrangement or encouragement of early marriage for girls
- ▶ Cultural and/or religious bias against formal education for girls

### **School-based Conditions**

- ▶ Distance between home and school, and associated safety issues
- ▶ Sexual exploitation of girls by teachers, fellow students or others
- ▶ Lack of appropriate facilities (such as latrines) for girls
- ▶ Differential treatment of girls, especially expectations that they clean classrooms, carry water, and do other domestic tasks for the school
- ▶ Teacher perception that girls are less academically proficient than boys, and subsequent lower expectations for girls that can lead to ignoring or deriding them in class

### **Girls’ Own Attitudes and Experiences**

- ▶ Exhaustion from balancing household tasks with studying and attending school
- ▶ Low self-esteem from improper treatment by teachers and fellow students
- ▶ Perception that the curriculum is irrelevant to their experiences and aspirations
- ▶ Lack of female role models in formal education

In the Asia-Pacific region, there are additional considerations such as:

- Vulnerability of girls from female-headed households, since economic insecurity makes it less likely that girls will have the time or resources to attend school
- Engagement of female children in wage labor, particularly in factories, as well as in the sex industry
- Relative lack of relevance of the academic curriculum in preparing female learners for the types of work they are offered in the formal or informal sectors

All of these attitudes, beliefs, conditions and practices work against basic education for girls from poor and otherwise marginalized groups. There is a need for workable strategies that respond appropriately to each context, and the following have been attempted with positive results reported:

1. Providing financial assistance to families to offset direct and indirect “opportunity” costs of sending girls to school. Arends-Kuenning and Amin (2004) report on incentive programmes in Bangladesh that have brought girls to school by giving food or monthly stipends in exchange for regular school attendance and agreement not to marry before age 18. The authors also describe an experiment that paid stipends to secondary teachers based on female enrollment, providing an incentive for teachers to help girls stay in school. It should be noted that financial incentives function mainly where school values are not seen as conflicting with those of the home.
2. Adjusting school conditions to fit girls’ needs. Also in Bangladesh (Arends-Kuenning & Amin, 2004), schools have experimented with shorter days, seasonal sessions, and running in shifts to allow for girls to complete housework, which is not significantly reduced for school-goers. The BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) programme, offering inexpensive basic schooling to poor children and allocating 70 percent of their openings to girls, has had significant results in terms of both girls’ participation and employment of female teachers from the community.
3. Training and employing more female teachers, which involve improving physical conditions at teacher training institutions and in rural schools and communities. A similar measure is preferential promotion of female teachers to administrative positions, which is a positive step for long-term development of women in the profession. Unfortunately, though, it removes from their classroom positions the few women who exist as role models for students (Benson, 2002b).
4. Working with schools and communities to sensitize adults regarding gender-based inequalities and determining measures to counteract negative conditions for girls’ education. For example, a UNICEF project in Viet Nam purports to target vulnerable populations by incorporating strategies for teaching multi-grade classrooms, mother tongue-based teaching and gender awareness into teacher training (CAL, 2001: 99). Unfortunately, Kosonen (2004:5) finds that while Vietnamese policies are enabling, failure of implementers to see mother tongue-based teaching as a way to address the “language barrier” keeps the gap between policy and practice wide.

The first two strategies are meant to overcome traditional reluctance to expend scarce resources on girls' education. They also address early marriage practices, family values, teacher attitudes, and the need for female role models. The latter two strategies address more qualitative dimensions of obstacles to girls - attitudes, awareness and values - that are difficult to assess or change. They assume that a greater female presence in the schools will improve conditions for girls, which has been established in terms of role models, but not necessarily in terms of girl-friendly attitudes and practices since teachers are also products of their environments and backgrounds.

## **Mother Tongue-based Schooling as an Effective Strategy for Addressing Girls' School Participation**

Recognizing the obstacles to girls' school participation, as well as some of the strategies that have been applied to minimizing these obstacles, how can a change of instructional language positively impact girls? This section discusses a set of claims regarding the positive effects of mother tongue-based schooling on girls' participation, including issues of access, quality, efficiency and equity of opportunity. Some claims are backed up by evidence, while others are hypothesized on the basis of what is known. Examples from the Asia-Pacific region are used where available.

*More girls enroll in school when they can learn in a language that is familiar to them.* Girls and their families may be less apprehensive about attending a school that uses their language and, by association, a familiar culture and set of values. Teachers in bilingual programmes speak to students and their families in the L1, increasing family access to information about enrollment and schooling processes.

*School use of the home language increases parent participation and influence.* Improved communication allows parents to participate in school activities and decision-making, so that schools respond more to community needs and values. The resulting curriculum may better meet local needs, so that schooling becomes more relevant for girls.

*Teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students are less likely to exploit female students.* Teachers who interact socially with students' families are potentially more trustworthy and/or more subject to social control, reducing the risk that they will abuse girls sexually or otherwise.

Substantiation of the above claims comes from high levels of parental support for bilingual programmes, along with parents' expressed confidence in primary bilingual teachers, as reported by Benson (2002a) and Hovens (2002, 2003) in Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Mozambique. Similarly, mother tongue-based programmes promoted by the non-governmental organization (NGO) SIL International throughout Asia and the Pacific are possible due to high levels of community participation and leadership in school decision-making, along with mother tongue-based materials production (CAL, 2001). Another example of parental support for L1 literacy comes from Davao del Norte, Philippines, where women in a mother tongue-based literacy project asked that their children be taught instead, resulting in a joint pre-school/adult class (CAL, 2001: 96). A further study in Papua New Guinea demonstrates that parents appreciate the

promotion of cultural values that comes along with mother tongue-based schooling. Although they did not mention girls specifically, they said that children come out of Tok Ples schools with an “enhanced ability to function in their own language and with an appreciation of their own culture, something parents found was systematically undermined by the national community school system” (Ahai & Bopp, 1993: 57 in CAL, 2001: 91).

*Girls in bilingual classes stay in school longer.* Mother tongue-based schooling makes the home-school transition easier. Since girls have less exposure to the second language, they feel more comfortable speaking and learning in the L1. They are more likely to enjoy school and perceive that schooling is relevant when they experience success, which will promote achievement, as well as the confidence to continue their school careers.

*Girls learn better and can demonstrate their learning in the mother tongue.* Being able to talk to the teacher and other students in a familiar language allows girls to express the range of their thoughts and experiences, as well as demonstrate what they have learned. In this way, too, teachers can make more realistic assessments of their capabilities and teach by building upon what they know, rather than filling their heads with meaningless memorized facts in a foreign language.

*Bilingual teachers treat girls more fairly in the learning process.* Faced with the evidence of girls’ learning because they can communicate relatively freely, teachers become more aware of girls’ potential for school success. Both teachers and girls, themselves, will see that girls are more capable than they might have previously believed, making teachers’ expectations more optimistic and reducing girls’ repetition and failure rates.

These latter claims relate to both pedagogical and affective factors that influence school success and retention. Benson (2002a) and Hovens (2002, 2003) provide evidence from African contexts that girls in bilingual programmes repeated grades less often and stayed in school longer than girls and boys in “official” all-L2 schooling, and Klaus (2003) reports higher enrollment, lower dropout, and a higher proportion of girls in bilingual schools in PNG. Regarding teaching methods, although it can not be expected that teachers accustomed to rote learning change overnight, the act of switching to a language that students speak at least makes communication and participation possible. Hovens reports that members of one community in Niger actually complained about mother tongue-based classrooms because they were “so noisy,” not yet recognizing that children were talking about the subject instead of sitting passively, speaking only when it was time to repeat after the teacher.

*More women may become teachers and, thus, role models for girls.* If women are most comfortable and skillful at speaking local languages due to their home experiences, they may be more likely to enroll in teacher education for mother tongue-based programmes. These teachers are likely to come from the same linguistic communities as the learners, meaning that bilingual schools will attract women from rural and previously marginalized groups who may still want to live in those communities. Thus, girls will have not only women, but women from their own groups, to look up to.

The idea of reaching out to women has already occurred to an NGO in Bolivia, which has developed an innovative *bachillerato pedagógico* (pedagogical secondary school) programme for indigenous girls that provides content instruction and teaching skills, preparing them to teach in the mother tongue in their home communities and addressing the problem of filling posts in remote areas (King & Benson, 2003). While there is no guarantee that women teachers will treat their female students more fairly than men teachers might, it is likely that they will identify more with girls. That is also the basis for a Swedish-funded project for marginalized girls in Rajasthan, India which - though it did not specifically target language of instruction - was successful in increasing the proportion of trained female teachers from the students' communities by creating special residential training schools for women only (Ramachandran & Sethi, 2001). Both of these examples could be criticized for providing non-standard teacher training in relation to official structures, but both allow women from marginalized groups' unprecedented access to training and higher profile positions.

## Conclusion

Use of the mother tongue already has powerful pedagogical and social justifications, but linking it to improvements in girls' participation may help call attention to the potential of learners' languages to facilitate education for all. To make these links more solid, researchers need to follow Derbyshire's (2002) advice in providing sex disaggregated data (quantitative figures on school enrollment, repetition, dropout, graduation, and so on) as well as gender analytical information (descriptive studies of people's values, attitudes and opinions relative to gender).

Undoubtedly there are challenges to implementing mother tongue-based teaching in educational settings that have been long dominated by other languages, just as improving educational access for female learners involves change in both structures and attitudes. Meanwhile, there are some "foot in the door" strategies that may provide the impetus for more far-reaching reform by demonstrating positive effects. Some examples are:

- ▶ Getting local and national ministries of education to authorize oral mother tongue use in the classroom, especially where it has traditionally been prohibited
- ▶ Changing teacher placement practices so that teachers come from the same linguistic group as their students, a measure which is likely to increase the number of female teachers because they can stay in or near their home communities
- ▶ Implementing mother tongue-based teaching at the preschool level, which may be easier if preschools are less controlled by official structures
- ▶ Providing in-service training for teachers in first and second language development, themes which should be taught wherever there is linguistic diversity
- ▶ Providing for study of the mother tongue as a discipline, which involves no change in medium of instruction for other subjects in the curriculum

- Working with teachers and communities to operationalize local curriculum components of school programmes
- Organizing extracurricular mother tongue-based language clubs
- Getting school children involved in local radio programming
- Encouraging family members participating in mother tongue-based literacy classes to share their reading and writing skills

These and other measures that do not involve large-scale transformation of educational systems are likely to promote awareness and prompt participants to re-evaluate traditionally marginalizing practices at school. If there is more active participation of girls when such strategies are implemented, more space may be made for generalizing beneficial practices like mother tongue-based teaching.

It is too simplistic to claim that implementing mother tongue-based education will equalize opportunities for girls and women. However, it is clear that designing a schooling system that recognizes the ethnolinguistic background and competence of learners goes a long way toward improving educational opportunities for all, including those from marginalized groups, and especially for female learners.

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## About the Author

Carol Benson began working in educational development in 1980 as a Peace Corps volunteer teacher trainer in Sierra Leone. From this experience, she became interested in the mismatch between home and school languages, particularly in post-colonial contexts. This led her to do postgraduate studies in bilingual education, teacher training and anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she eventually obtained a Ph.D in Social Sciences and Comparative Education. Benson is currently a guest lecturer at Stockholm University and Södertörn University College, where she gives courses in first and second language teaching and learning, as well as in university pedagogy.

She has provided technical assistance to national professionals in developing mother tongue/bilingual curricula and materials for children and adults, and in giving capacity-building courses for teachers, trainers and researchers in mother tongue-based bilingual schooling. This work has taken her to many countries in the Americas (Argentina, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico and the U.S.) and Africa (Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa), as well as to Sweden and Laos.

As an active researcher, Benson has ongoing projects to determine effective implementation strategies for mother tongue-based schooling, to examine the unique talents of students and teachers from bi- or multilingual contexts, to discover how language competence influences learning of subject matter across the curriculum, and to explore further how use of the mother tongue facilitates girls' education.



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