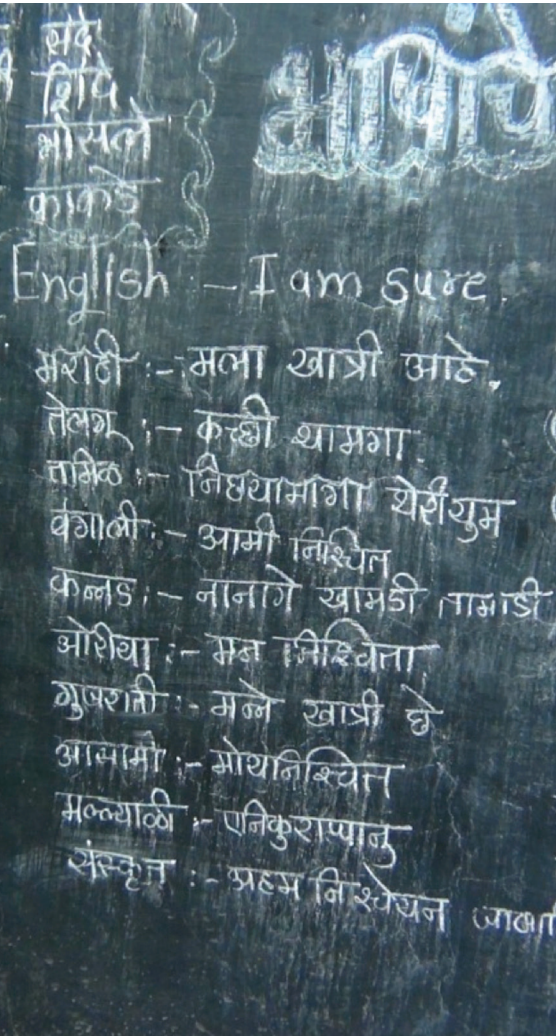


MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: RATIONALE, CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

A POLICY BRIEF





“ One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way. ”

- Frank Smith

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All the pictures used in the document were taken during the case study of Balwadis in Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra in June 2013.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Multilingualism functions within the principle of social justice and social practice. Research states that children who speak more than one language have more metalinguistic awareness; they are better at problem solving; demonstrate greater creativity; perform better in school overall and express more tolerant attitudes towards others as compared to monolingual children. This Policy brief, in consonance with the National Curriculum Framework (2005), addresses the issue of multilingual classrooms as a possibility and a resource rather than a challenge of diversity, especially in early childhood classrooms. It elucidates how children acquire language and gives reasons to promote multilingualism, especially in a heterogeneous country like India. This Brief provides an overview of the language policies in India that relate to mother tongue education, the complexities of the large number of languages at play and also provides examples of instructional setting that illustrate the realities of multilingualism in the educational setting. Given the nature of multilingualism in India, children have to negotiate the divide between home and school language from the time they enter preschool or school, often without much support. They learn in either regional/dominant language which is either their second language or third language. Pedagogy in early years is rarely informed by language development in second language because of which many children become silent and find school meaningless and drudgery. The Brief also busts some myths with evidence from research and draws out recommendations to promote multilingualism and literacy in multiple languages. It clearly points to the critical need of exposure to multiple languages from infancy and continued support for exposure to different languages to older ages. It emphasizes on the significance of a smooth transition between the home and school language and the need to prepare teachers to address this effectively. The possibilities of implementing multilingualism in early childhood education are presented. Early childhood is an optimal time to lay a solid foundation for mother tongue or home language. We also know that children are capable of learning more than one language at this stage and a sound language base in the home language is beneficial for learning other languages. This means that parents and teachers must be strongly committed to raising children acquiring two or more languages. The Brief has been directed towards policy makers, teachers, and professionals who work with children in diverse and challenging contexts.

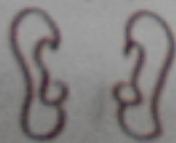




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INTRODUCTION

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) states:

Multilingualism, which is constitutive of the identity of a child and a typical feature of the Indian linguistic landscape, must be used as a resource, classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher. This is not only the best use of a resource readily available, but also a way of ensuring that every child feels secure and accepted, and that no one is left behind on account of his/her linguistic background. (p. 36)

This Policy brief, in consonance with the NCF 2005, addresses the issue of multilingual classrooms as a possibility and a resource rather than a challenge of diversity, especially in early childhood classrooms. It builds upon empirical research based on multilingual classrooms and addresses how teachers can promote linguistic diversity and facilitate learning in a non-threatening and welcoming environment. It emphasizes on the significance of a smooth transition between the home and school language and the need to prepare teachers to

address this effectively. The Policy Brief is addressed to policy makers, teachers, and professionals who work with children in diverse and challenging contexts.

This Brief is organised in the following sections:

- What is the role of language policy with respect to the multilingualism in India?
- What is the medium of instruction in the early childhood years?
- Why do we need to address multilingualism in early learning?
- What are the benefits of multilingualism?
- What is the role of Multilingualism in early language learning?
- How can we promote multilingualism through early childhood education (ECE)?
- Recommendations for Multilingual Education



What is the role of language policy with respect to the multilingualism in India?

Multilingualism refers to an individual speaker who uses two or more languages or to a community of speakers, where the use of more than one language is common. India provides the classic example of a multilingual context. Mohanty (2006) describes the multilingualism in India being at the “grass-root level” with the use of two or more languages in the daily lives of individuals. According to the 1961 Census, there are 1652 Indian languages. It is however believed that there are many more languages in use. According to Census 2001, there are 22 Scheduled languages in the VIII Schedule and 122 non-scheduled languages. Being a language in the VIII Schedule implies that it is required in the state schools or can be the medium of instruction and, can be taught in the government centres and the government provides funding for the development of these languages. Even with such provisions, this creates a disparity between the number of languages spoken in households and the State recognition of them. According to Annamalai (2001), India “is functionally

multilingual with forty-seven languages used in education as medium, eighty-seven in press, seventy-one in radio, thirteen in cinema and thirteen in state-level administration” (p. 35). This leads to several languages that children speak in their homes having no voice in classrooms.

Linguistic diversity in many cases is not recognized in the classrooms, and, any individual may face this issue of their language becoming marginalized. This is not just the case of children from tribal communities, but also of all children from minority languages. Sridhar (1996) points out to six categories of linguistic minorities present in India:

- Speakers of minor languages (languages not included in schedule



- VIII of the Constitution);
- Speakers of major languages who become minorities as a result of migration (e.g., Telugu migrants in the Kannada-speaking state of Karnataka);
- Speakers belonging to scheduled



castes and tribes (e.g., Gondi, Santhali, etc.);

- Religious minorities, e.g., Urdu speaking Muslims all over India (Chakledar, 1981; Dua, 1986);
- Linguistic minorities who speak major languages but are a minority because they lack numerical strength in their jurisdiction of residence (e.g., speakers of Sindhi, Kashmiri, etc.); and
- Ethnic minorities (e.g., Anglo-Indians, many of whom claim English as their native language). (p. 331)

From Sridhar's six categories of linguistic minorities, we can gauge the diversity and complexity present in our classrooms which go unnoticed by policymakers in designing the policies, frameworks and curriculum, and also by those who work directly with children. It is important to mention here that we need to have nuanced understanding of each linguistic minority when we design programmes for children in a particular geographical, social, cultural, and economical context.

The National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages (2005) recommends that children who come from oral cultures (i.e., from language that do not have a script), whose parents are migrants, and those who belong to

scheduled tribes, should be taught in mother tongue till class II. If the mother tongue of children is different from the regional/state language, the regional language maybe adopted as medium of instruction from class III onwards for elementary school. This is in extension of the Kothari Commission (1964-66) which proposed the "three language formula". It advocates that the child who comes to school with proficiency in his/her mother tongue must be taught to read and write in that language so that they learn better. To promote unity and national pride, second language must include Hindi/ regional/state language from Class III onwards. The third language to be taught to the child must include language that enables him/her to communicate with the larger community beyond the national boundaries. Three languages are the minimum number of languages child must know and use by the time he/she graduates from the school system. The implementation of this however, has been problematic as we will see in the next section. According to the Commission, if, in a classroom of 40 students 10 of them speak a mother tongue that is not the mainstream language, it must be done so. It implies that our teachers and school system must be strengthened to be able to cater to the needs of all children.



3. What is the medium of instruction in early childhood years?

It is critical to discuss and understand the implications of the medium of instruction in the early years. Although, there are millions of young children in India who are multilingual, our education system is unable to tap their unique ability; rather, they are often initiated into literacy learning in an unfamiliar language. Consequently, education is viewed by children as an activity that has little meaning. This section will provide case examples of the medium of instruction in early childhood classrooms.

Mother tongue instruction in classrooms

This section will present some complexities that children and teachers face in classrooms in face of the policies that support instruction in mother tongue/first language. For example, there are 450 scheduled tribes in India. All tribes have a distinct cultural identity, speak different languages, and celebrate festivals differently. Mostly, the tribal population have been dependent on forest but restriction by law on forest use has forced men and

women and even children either to take up wage labour in the same village, or migrate seasonally for small jobs such as in brick-kiln factories, cultivating onions, and so on. In some cases, special programs are created for these children. Programmes for these children are successful which are sensitive to their socio-cultural practices, such as Ashram Schools in Odisha. Similar efforts are ongoing in Rajasthan by “Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion”. In some hamlets, they have been successful in retaining children while their parents go to brick-kiln factories for six months. It has been possible through planning curriculum and instruction by using community based resources, and also with the efforts of a teacher who belongs to the same community.

On the other hand, the enormity of the languages in the country and the disparity in the languages available for literacy make literacy in a second language a necessity in India. In many cases, children who belong to ‘minority’ language community are at risk of being pushed out of the system or if they do continue to stay in the system, reach very low achievement levels. If these children do manage to succeed in the system, it may be at the cost of losing touch with their own linguistic culture because the system does not allow



their language and culture to seep into classroom space, and because, it has a low status in the hierarchy of languages. See examples on '*Kui children speaking Odishi*' and '*Gond children*'.

In the process of enumeration of languages in the Census, many mother tongues get subsumed under a dominant language because of power dynamics. Children, whose languages get subsumed under a standard dominant language, often sit quietly because they cannot follow the language used in textbooks, or language used as medium of instruction and interaction. They cannot participate in the classroom processes. See the example on '*Awadhi, Kumaoni, etc. codified as Hindi in Census*'.

Many of our children are thus, compelled to learn in languages that are not their own from early childhood years and are forced to leave behind their own culture and home language. Consequently, the regional or standard language can either motivate or marginalise children, particularly in early literacy and learning activities, depending on their respective language contexts. Children manage to negotiate a new language if they have opportunity to hear and express themselves with peers or significant adults. If children are forced to learn a language that is a part of the textbook and school culture without any support,

Kui children speaking Odishi

In Kui tribe in Odisha, children in higher grades were found to speak better Odishi than Kui. In fact, they were shy and hesitant to talk in Kui. Their perception and association of Kui with backwardness was palpable in their hesitation. There was no opportunity to use Kui in the school curriculum in higher grades and due to lack of employment possibility. Adults also preferred that children learned the language of power and social upward mobility. It was unfortunate that in the attempt to equip themselves with the language of power, that is Odishi, they were losing touch with their own culture and their own identity.

children tend to lack confidence in using the language. Children either cannot communicate with larger community or lose interest in studies and drop out.

There is little or no concentrated policy effort in training of teachers



and preparation of teaching learning materials to address the linguistic complexities in the classroom so that all children get a level playing field on early literacy and learning. All children are forced to learn the dominant or the regional language with complete disregard to the language they use at

Awadhi, Kumaoni, etc. codified as Hindi in the Census

Most teachers begin lessons assuming that all children irrespective of whether their home language is Awadhi, Rajasthani, Kumaoni etc. (which are codified under the larger category of Hindi in the linguistic census) are proficient in Hindi. These children often take considerable time to make friends and cope with lessons in the classroom. Children tend to lose out on the richness of their own language and identity, and get marginalised particularly in terms of expression and interpersonal communication.

home. Since this is a critical period in the lives of children when their identity is being formed, they grow up either losing respect for their own language or losing touch with their roots or becoming antagonistic towards the dominant language (Finnbogadottir, 2008).

English language in perspective

The layout of the three-language formula is not necessarily followed at all times. This often results in English being the first language to be taught in the schools (Vaish, 2007). Additionally, with several languages for literacy in India, there is a preference for English even though there are almost no native speakers of English. The recommendations from the government are to have primary instruction in the native language or the regional language. Often, this is not followed and instruction is mostly in English (Mohanty, 2006). The main problem behind this is the negative attitude toward regional languages (Vaish, 2007). According to NCF (2005):
The level of introduction of English is now a matter of political response to people's aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue, and people's choices about the level of its introduction in the curriculum will have to be respected, with the proviso that we do not extend downwards the very system that has failed to deliver. (p.38)



English over the past 60 years has gained the status of power, employability, and social mobility. It is the medium of instruction in our higher education where research and knowledge production happens and has become a necessity to get into the educational system seamlessly. This need has percolated down to schools and even to pre-schools. It can be gauged by the growing demand for 'English-medium' pre-schools for very young children, even in remote parts of India. The curriculum and practices most of the times in these preschools go in contradiction of the developmental needs of children. Teachers lack training in second language pedagogy; moreover, many of them lack proficiency in English language themselves which is a prerequisite for a teacher to teach any language. In most cases children's first exposure to English, even as a medium of instruction, is with the alphabet and script, rather than with the spoken language. As a result of the unfamiliarity with the language of the text, children may learn to decode letters and words but find vocabulary and comprehension challenging. There is thus, no differentiated pedagogy for first, second and third languages in our schools, and these are all treated using the same approach.

Gond children speaking Gondī and Hindi and studying in Marathi medium Schools

Children in Harda village in Amravati district mostly belong to Gond tribe and speak Gondī along with Hindi, because it is the socially preferred language. The district is located on the borders of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Language used in textbook and medium of instruction in classroom is Marathi. The school teachers are Marathi speaking and do not speak or understand Gondī. Their main challenge is communication. A community member voiced his concern that it is only by the time children reached 6th or 7th grade that they began to understand some Marathi and by then, with little success with their studies they just drop out of the system. Even a 12th pass student often cannot speak fluent Marathi because of which s/he is unable to communicate with officials in district for their entitlements. It is a major concern especially, when we value education as tool of empowerment and medium of social change.



4. Why do we need to address multilingualism in early learning?

Several annual surveys indicate that there has been an increase in enrolment and decrease in dropout rates after the implementation of large scale programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, GoI), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS, GoI) and with the thrust of the Right to Education (RTE, 2009) to universalise elementary education. As a consequence, more and more children from linguistic minorities, oral cultures, and migrant communities are coming into the fold of educational entitlements and schemes. The result is that the contours of the classrooms are now changing and demonstrating increased diversity.

This diversity has not been addressed satisfactorily in teacher preparation programmes, textbooks, other reading material, approaches to curriculum development, pedagogy of early learning and assessment. As a result, children especially from the marginalised communities often show very low levels of achievement in reading, writing and computing. According to ASER (2011) (rural) percentage of children in grade V who were able to read at grade II level

has gone down from 53.7% in 2010 to 48.2% in 2011; and those in grade V level who were able to solve a 2-digit subtraction problem with borrowing has dropped from 70.9% in 2010 to 61.0% in 2011. The same report has also highlighted the fact that a quarter of all rural children attending school had a different language as medium of instruction in school from their home language.

It is important to note the reasons for children dropping out. The NSS of 1998 (GoI, 2001) has pointed to two major factors for dropout rates—'child not interested in studies' (24.4%) and 'unable to cope with or failure in studies' (22.5%). According to Gates (1995), when a child's home language and culture is obliterated in the classroom space, when they are not provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful activities and when they are constantly reminded of their inability to meet the expectations of the teacher, they are most likely to internalize rejection and remain a spectator of the 'grand' mission of education.

With multilingualism at the grass root level, a child's knowledge of more than one language also constitutes his/her own identity (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004). Identity formation takes place in children at a young age quite rapidly.



Any discrimination against their linguistic identity, community and home culture, adversely affects their self-esteem and identity formation process, and thereby their ability and confidence to learn and school performance. Along with the identity aspect is also the fact that linguistic factors alone do not explain the differences in the academic performance of minority students in schools (Cummins, 1989). Hence, researchers encourage “additive” bilingualism as opposed to “subtractive” bilingualism so that children retain their native language as they learn English or another language. This also implies that in the early childhood years, teachers play a critical role in making all children feel welcome in the classroom. At the same time, it is important to recognise that it is difficult for teachers to talk in as many languages as there are children in the classroom. Thus, culturally and linguistically sensitive teaching methodologies must be examined.

5. What are the benefits of multilingualism?

In the face of the challenges of implementing mother tongue/first language instruction, it is critical to also consider the benefits of maintaining bilingualism. Bilinguals show greater

number of independent cognitive strategies at their disposal and exhibit greater flexibility in the use of these strategies to solve problems. They perform better especially in tasks that call for selective attention that includes inhibition, monitoring, and switch of focus of attention (Bialystok 2001).

One of the benefits that bilingual students have is related to metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to be aware of the language system to focus on the form and function of words (Gregory, 1996) and monitor the process of comprehension (Bernhardt, 1991). Bilingual children up to the age of six generally tend to outperform monolingual children on isolated tasks of metalinguistic awareness related to reading (Garcia, Jiménez, & Pearson, 1998). According to Mohanty (2000), who conducted studies on bilingual and monolingual Konds-speaking children in Odisha, pointed out that children who were in schools and also those who were not, had an advantage over their monolingual peers with respect to their cognitive and intellectual skills. They also performed better on metalinguistic and meta-cognitive task. Children who were schooled, outperformed their monolingual counterparts in educational achievement.



Given the fact that bilingual children have two or more languages in their repertoire, they have the advantage of cross-linguistic transfer. Most studies on cross-linguistic transfer draw from the basic assumption that literacy skills gained in one language can transfer to another language (Cummins, 1986). Studies on older and younger children have indicated that bilingual students are able to employ strategies of code-switching, code-mixing, and translation using cognates for cross-linguistic transfer (Bauer, 2000; García, 1998; Jiménez et al., 1995; Jiménez, García et al., 1996), although use of particular strategies may vary at different grade levels. In India, this is especially critical, owing to the multiple languages and literacies that young children are faced with, especially language minority children. The Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore developed a Bilingual Transfer Model for tribal groups that used a tribal language for instruction during the first year of schooling. Oral communication in the regional language was encouraged and gradually instruction in the regional language was increased. The script of the regional language was modified to adapt for the tribal language (Mohanty, 2006). Several studies on cross-language transfer have particularly indicated that phonological awareness skills

transfer from one language to the other, especially from the first to the second (Chiappe & Siegel, 1999; Cisero & Royer, 1995).

Given the situation of multilingual education in India, and the benefits of bilingualism pointed out in the previous section, there are implications for practice. This implies that instruction in schools needs to address linguistic, metalinguistic, and socio-cultural factors. In terms of linguistic and metalinguistic factors, the need is to use texts that can aid the process of comprehension (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998). There is also the need for vocabulary development in the native and second language and metalinguistic development at the word level to improve reading comprehension (Carlisle et al., 1999), strategies to build background knowledge to teach vocabulary in the second language (Ulanof & Pucci, 1999), and the continued strengthening of language and metalinguistic skills of children in their first language for them to acquire language and literacy skills in a second language (López & Greenfield, 2004).





6. What is the role of multilingualism in early language learning?

The developmental nature of the acquisition of a second language is well known and theories abound with respect to the nature of second language acquisition (Seliger, 1988; Beebe, 1988; and so on). Krashen (1985, p. 46) points out that “Purely theoretical research does not have a direct impact on the second language classroom but adds to our knowledge of second languages are acquired.” In this regard, it is important to examine the nature of language development, especially with respect

to second language. This section firstly examines the developmental nature of acquiring a new language and the support one need to provide to the child from infancy onwards. Lastly, this section also examines and refutes some of the myths of bilingualism. Table 1 provides an overview of the developmental patterns and some instructional scaffolds.

Given the nature of multilingualism in India, children have to negotiate the divide between home and school language right from the time they enter preschool or school, often without much support. They learn in either regional/ dominant language which is either their second language or third language. Pedagogy in early years is rarely informed by language development



TABLE-1**Stage of Second Language Acquisition and Adult Prompts**

(Adapted from Hill and Björk, 2008; Krashen and Terrell, 1983; and Robertson and Ford, 2008)

Stage	Characteristics of children's language production	Approximate Time Frame	Adult Prompts that scaffold language learning
Preproduction	The child has minimal comprehension of spoken language and is unable to verbalize thoughts. S/he is able to nod to indicate "yes" and "no". Other forms of communication support utilized include drawing and pointing to objects.	0–6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show me ... • Circle the ... • Where is ...? • Who has ...?
Early Production	The child has limited comprehension and produces one- or two-word responses. S/he is able to use some key words and familiar phrases. The present tense is mostly used in speech.	6 months – 1 year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/no questions • Either/or questions • Who ...? • What ...? • How many ...?
Speech Emergence	The child has developed comprehension skills and is also able to produce some simple sentences. Grammatical errors are present and the child is often unable to comprehend jokes and idioms.	1–3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why ...? • How ...?
Beginning Fluency	The child is fluent in speaking in social setups and makes minimal errors. In this stage, the child finds the need to use contextual and academic vocabulary. S/he often finds it difficult to express themselves using the new vocabulary.	3–4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain ... • Questions requiring phrase or short-sentence answers
Intermediate Fluency	The child has excellent comprehension skills and makes few grammatical errors.	4–5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would happen if ...? • Why do you think ...? • Questions requiring more than a sentence response
Advanced Fluency	The child has a near-native level of comprehension and speech production.	5–7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide if ... • Retell ...



in second language because of which many children become silent and find school meaningless and drudgery. The framework in Table 1 highlights that second language acquisition is developmental in nature, and with time and social interaction these errors give way to socially accepted norms of the language. This framework can help teachers to sensitively understand children's 'silence' in the classroom, mistakes that s/he commits while speaking, and also give direction as to how to help him/her in acquiring a second language.

Exposure to multiple languages from infancy: Research points to the need for continued support for exposure to different languages from infancy to older ages. Kovelman, Baker, and Petitto, 2008 pointed out that children who had exposure to high quality input in more than one language before the age of three years (with continual exposure after that age) performed better in reading, phonological awareness tasks than those who were exposed to the second language only after the age of three. These bilingual children also performed better in both languages

Support for multiple languages in older ages: Research indicates that children are able to develop high levels of competency in cognitive and

social skills when they are provided a supportive and high quality environment that values both their languages (Barac & Bialystok, 2012). Multilingual programs and approaches also support children's language and literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006) and the development of these skills in one language can aid the development of similar skills in another language (Brisk & Harrington, 2007).

The Myths of Bilingualism: Many parents and educators are reluctant to expose children to multiple languages because they are concerned that this will put undue pressure on the child and lead to delays in development. These fears, often without any scientific basis, are related to myths. Genesee (2009) has provided us with some of these myths and also with evidence that refute them. See Table 2.



TABLE-2
The Myth of Bilingualism (Genesee, 2009)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The myth of the monolingual brain:</i> Parents think that our brain will not be able to distinguish between two or more languages 	<p>This has been shown to be untrue because bilingual language development follows the same patterns as that of a monolingual. Children are able to differentiate their two languages and there are grammatical constraints on bilingual code-mixing.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The myth of time-on-task:</i> This implies that the more time we are able to spend on each task, the more we excel in it. 	<p>This myth also has been shown to be untrue because sometimes simultaneous bilinguals, exhibit a similar developmental pattern like that of monolingual children even though their exposure to language is approximately half as that of a monolingual. This points to the significance for the need of quality of exposure.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The myth of bilingualism and language impairment:</i> This points out that if children who have difficulties in learning one language are exposed to more than one language, they are at a greater risk 	<p>There is no evidence to support this claim. There is evidence that indicates that children with language impairment acquire two languages simultaneously and they exhibit language-specific morpho-syntactic difficulties similar to monolinguals in both languages that they acquire.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The myth of minority language children:</i> This states that children who speak a minority language at home must be acculturated into the school language as soon as possible because it will help them to integrate with the culture of the school. 	<p>Evidence indicates that a child's competency in their native language does not impede the acquisition of academic language and literacy skills in a second language. Children who speak a minority language and who are provided with initial instruction in their native language in school, are able to easily acquire literacy skills and academic knowledge in the second language better than those who are taught in all-English (or another second language) programs.</p>

Thus, contrary to popular belief, research conducted in various parts of the world suggests that children are able to learn multiple languages. They are better at problem solving, demonstrate greater creativity, perform better in school overall and express more tolerant attitudes towards others as compared to monolingual children (Bialystok & Martin, 2004).

7. How can we promote multilingualism through ECE?

While this is the stage for enabling children to strengthen their mother tongue or home language base, they can also be exposed to another language



which the child will learn simultaneously. The preschool stage therefore can be considered as an opportunity to help the child make the transition smoothly from home to school language. Experts encourage families and early childhood personnel to introduce second language within this period.

We also know that concepts get transferred in second language once the child has had a firm base in mother tongue. So, the question is how and when do we introduce second language in the early years? Additional language can be introduced, but not at the expense of mother tongue. Second language can continue as part of strategy to encourage multilingualism. Children need long term, regular and enriched exposure to both languages if they are to acquire full competence in both languages. It is important to have a teacher who knows the language and there is adequate infrastructure and materials as well to support her in the classroom.

Early childhood is thus a good time to lay a solid foundation for mother tongue or home language. We also know that children are capable of learning more than one language at this stage and a sound language base in the home language is beneficial for learning other languages. This means that parents and

teachers must be strongly committed to raising children acquiring two or more languages because at the heart of multilingualism is:

- Appreciation and respect for all languages,
- Understanding that languages flourish in each other's company,
- Firm belief that every individual must know and take pride in his/her cultural and linguistic identity, and
- Recognition that children learn better in early years if taught in mother tongue or home language as the medium of instruction.

How can Early Childhood Education curriculum adopt a multilingual approach?

With the insights provided by research on language development in young children we can attempt to design our ECE curriculum and learning environment to promote multilingual education. The objectives for multilingual education in early childhood years are:

- To promote a warm and secure learning environment where every child takes pride in their cultural and linguistic identity.
- To create awareness of and appreciation for the linguistic and cultural differences and similarities.





- To foster pedagogy that allows many languages and cultures to come into the classroom and interweaving of languages to promote smoother transition from home to school language.
- To facilitate learning to read with meaning.

Based on review of literature on multilingual education and study of some best practices in ECE in India, some suggestions that help in promoting multilingual ECE classroom are provided in the following section.

- **Oral-aural skill development:** We know that language development occurs in children when they get ample opportunity to listen to

and use language in a warm and non-threatening environment. The curriculum and pedagogy must be planned such that aural-oral (listening and speaking) skills are promoted in children in the languages which children are required to learn. This applies to learning of English also in the so called 'English Medium Schools' in most cases when the child's home language is not English. How can this be done?

- **Stories/ Rhymes:** Teachers must tell stories and sing rhymes with children in mother tongue/home language but also in the regional language or language of textbooks and schools which will later be the medium of instruction.



- **Extending children's thinking:**

Teachers must encourage children to narrate stories, express their thoughts, opinions, and doubts after storytelling events in whichever language they choose to, home or school language. S/he can extend children's thoughts by asking 'how' and 'why' questions, not just 'what' questions. If encouraged to speak in their own home language, children will feel secure and confident to share and think and this would help develop their language skills better.

- **Circle Time conversation:** Circle time is when all children are gathered together as a group to talk and listen to others about anything new

that they have learnt, heard, seen or experienced recently. Children should be allowed to express themselves in an uninhibited manner, in whichever language they choose. A child's language should not be corrected as s/he learns to communicate because it is important for him/her to be secure and confident.

- **Peer interaction:** The day's routine must be designed in such a way that children get a chance to be in pairs and small groups. Alternating group compositions to allow children to mix children of similar and different language backgrounds will foster learning and sharing of language experience. It is especially important





to enable children to dialogue in a language they are comfortable with, for extension of their imagination, development of thoughts and language.

- **Free Play:** Doll's corner, Picture books' corner, and Blocks' corner help in promoting language development in children, both through peer interaction but also with the teacher. Children find a lot to talk about because they get an opportunity to externalize their inner worlds by enacting different roles and acting upon objects. Again, encouraging home language use is important in these interactions and verbalisations.
- **Planned exposure to school language:** To include all children in the classroom processes and feel welcome, the teacher can initiate activities such as asking children to share certain equivalent words/phrases in their mother tongues or

teach others their language. This may also help children to think that meaning of a word is in the mind and not in the word itself and can be expressed in multiple ways.

Reading Readiness:

Children come to ECE centres and schools with proficiency in their mother tongue or home language. This skill and knowledge should become the base to foster reading and writing and number sense in children. Learning to read and write first in the mother tongue or home language enables children a smoother transition from home to the new environment of school and to the unfamiliar school language.

- **Literacy in mother tongue:** Children learn to read better with meaning when it is done in mother tongue or home language. Therefore, introducing the script through home language or mother tongue, facilitates learning to read, if the script is same as that of



Teacher using name cards to encourage sight word reading



the standard language.

- **Print rich environment:** ECE classroom must be print rich. It implies that there should be labels, charts, storybooks and children's work within their reach, in the languages existing in the classroom. The print in and around the classroom must be relevant and meaningful. Labels can be put up by teachers before children come into the classroom or can be done as part of an activity where each child is asked to place the appropriate label where it belongs. Labels such as 'window', 'dustbin', 'door' "doll's corner' in both home and school language can be put on respective items in the classroom. Some instructions can also be labelled such as 'keep the mat here' or 'shut the door softly'. Teacher can help children 'read' the day's routine, calendar during circle time from the charts put up on soft boards or walls which are within their reach.

- **Sight word reading:** Children can be encouraged to 'read' by sight word reading and this will make children 'print aware'. Helping a child recognise his/her name can be an activity that fosters sight reading. The teacher prepares name tags of all

children before hand. She calls out one child at a time to her. The child picks up his/her name tag from a box of name tags despite not knowing or recognising all the letters.

- **Interaction between teacher and child:** Teacher must talk to each child after s/he has scribbled or drawn on paper. S/he must ask her the story behind her work and write down what the child narrates. The child's



work and the story penned down by teacher on a different sheet of paper must be put up on the board. Later in the week, the teacher can read out from the page to the whole class after describing the activity. The child will not only feel a sense of pride and belonging, but also encouraged to create more.

- **Storybooks:** A variety and ample number of storybooks must be available for children to read. It would be preferable to have storybooks in more than one language – in the





Displays with Marathi, Hindi, English words and poems

mother tongue and regional language. Storybooks in English can also be made available.

- **Shared book reading:** Shared book reading helps children learn 'print concept' which is critical for learning to read. In this activity the teacher introduces the book to children by showing and telling them about the front cover, back cover, spine, author and title of the book. S/he reads out the book by putting her finger under each word from left to right. Children learn that unlike pictures, print conveys the whole story. The teacher may continue the discussion after reading out the story to expand children's thoughts and imagination by asking 'what if' or 'what do you think happened with...' or 'what would you have done if you were in that position' and so on.
- **Phonemic awareness:** Phonemic

awareness is an important predictor of successful reading. To foster this skill, teacher must play different games or do activities with children around sounds using both the home and school languages. Games such as asking children to find an item from a basket which begins with a specific phoneme ('ha' or 'ma' or 'ka') , rhyming games; what is different?; identifying beginning sounds, end sounds and making more words with them etc.

- **Use of local artefacts and resources:** Teaching-learning material, especially in tribal communities, must use local artefacts and cultural resources and contexts of the tribal children. The materials prepared may include subject textbooks in tribal language, big and small books based on certain themes, alphabet and number charts, story books, glossaries, tribal language phrase books, teacher handbooks and picture dictionaries. (draft longitudinal study on MLE programme in Odisha & Andhra Pradesh)
- **Resources:** Ample and variety of pencils, pens, crayons, sketch pens, paper, clay, dough, blocks etc. should be available in the classroom. It is important for children's uninhibited expression and learning.



- **Use of more than one language:** It is beneficial to use more than one language while interacting as well as in written form. Teacher can display poems and some vocabulary (e.g., body parts, relationships, animals) in two or three languages (mother tongue, regional language, Hindi and English). The teacher needs to read them out with children everyday; s/he must also tell which language the poem is in and read and recite together.
- **Bringing in parents and community:** Parents and other members from the community can be brought into the classroom to talk about food, festivals, rituals, religion and so on. Children learn languages over a period of time. They gradually learn to appreciate the similarities and differences in the cultures and languages.
- Pre-service and in-service programmes for teachers must sensitise them to the nature, structure, and functions of language, process of language acquisition in children, language change, emergent and early literacy, and equip them with strategies that can help build on the resources of a multilingual classroom.
- Research in the areas of language-learning and language-teaching methods must be supported and promoted by higher learning institutions in the country. (National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages, 2005)
- For languages which are oral in nature, they must be written down in a script form so that the children of those communities have access to their culture and learn in their own language till they become proficient in state/regional language.

8. Recommendations for multilingual education

To enable teachers and other professionals, who are closely working with children, to practise multilingual approach in different classrooms, some recommendations are reiterated below:

- Fellowships must be encouraged to document oral cultures and to explore possibilities to invent or use the available script to document history, culture and folklore.
- Publishers must be encouraged and supported to publish print material in lesser known/ minority/ regional/ tribal languages.



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