

The educational and economic value of embracing people's mother tongues



In Uganda, only 32 per cent of school children are literate in their mother tongue. They grow up in one of the country's 65 ethnic tribes, each of which has its own language. But from their fourth year at primary school they are taught in the country's official language, English. Yet [research shows](#) that to achieve their full potential children need to develop their own languages in the first place.

Authorities in Asia use a similar approach to deal with the equally rich language tapestry there. For example, Pakistan's children are taught in their national language, Urdu, that has origins outside the country and is only spoken by around 6 per cent of the country's people. And Indonesia's future generation has its local languages neglected in favour of Bahasa Indonesia, which is currently used by only around 10 per cent of the overall population.

There are many more cases around the world of local languages neglected in schools. This is the result of two concurrent assumptions: that dominant languages are more 'useful'; and that education should follow a monolingual model, that is, be provided in one language only. The resulting drive to use more salient languages as the means of teaching has serious consequences. It means that millions of pupils are denied the right to [maintain, enjoy and develop](#) their mother tongue. According to UNESCO, 40 per cent of people have no access to [education in a language they understand](#), and 617 million children and adolescents do not achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading.

Mother tongue matters

Such decisions about languages in education mean that children can grow up without knowing their own mother tongue. They end up disenfranchised. Being taught in a language that is new to them leaves them with a [cognitive gap](#) they cannot bridge. They struggle to keep up, and many drop out of school early. Yet ample [evidence](#) shows that this deficit will be reduced if pupils are taught in their mother tongue during the course of primary school, or even beyond it.

Refreshingly, around the planet, there are numerous localised initiatives as examples of good practice. Particularly successful are community-based education programmes such as those emerging in the Philippines or in Mexico, where indigenous speakers are trained to teach in the community languages. African countries such as Namibia are also paying growing attention to the educational role of languages belonging to their cultural heritage, including both indigenous and ex-colonial ones.

Access to schooling in the mother tongue is increasingly seen as a human right. It promotes a multilingualism that typically involves both a local and a more widely spoken language, and practices of translation as ways to move between them. Apart from its proven individual benefits, organisations and whole countries can gain culturally, socially and also materially by [embracing multilingualism](#).

Resilience through diversity

Our world has always been linguistically plural, and humankind has always found ways to deal with this. How we engage with language diversity has to do with how we value languages and their economic and cultural capital. Arguably a multilingual society is more resilient than a monolingual one would be. And living in a multilingual environment also makes us more conscious of the importance of efficient and effective communication, in any language as well as between them.

We have to find ways to live sustainably with this diversity and to promote equity. The goal is to create an inclusive society which recognises the intrinsic value of languages and does not discriminate against any speakers (or signers) on the basis of their language repertoires. We have to learn from the past and ask: What are the consequences of not including the languages children know best in their education?

The [Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World](#), launched today, on [International Mother Language Day](#), calls for individuals, corporations, institutions and governments to adopt a multilingual mindset that celebrates and promotes language diversity as the global norm, tackles language discrimination, and develops language policies that advance multilingualism.

If this happened, the world would be taking a giant step towards achieving the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) of “ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all”. Promoting multilingualism and multilingual education might also disclose an exhilarating secret: speaking multiple languages may actually increase our individual and collective level of happiness.

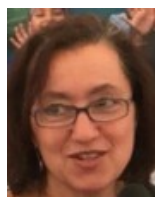


Notes:

- *Gabrielle Hogan-Brun and Loredana Polezzi are Salzburg Global Fellows and among the co-authors of the Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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