The languages of education in multilingual India: exploring effects on reading and mathematics

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Session summary:

What resources do teachers need to enable them to more effectively implement multilingual education (MLE) practices in their classes?

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To build rapport amongst the participants we opened the session by asking them to share their experiences of teaching and/or working in a multilingual educational context. Two stories were shared by a mentor and a teacher educator, and despite their differing situations, their stories shared several positive characteristics. The stories highlighted the mentor/teacher educator's resilience, where they were able take control of challenging situations and find effective, workable solutions; they also repositioned the teacher/teacher educator as a live resource resting on a wealth of innate knowledge and experience.

Participants were then tasked with discussing their understanding of the word 'resources' in a multilingual education context – one of the key aims of this session was to encourage participants to appreciate the nuances and complexity of the word 'resource' in an MLE context. This was a lively debate and it was broadly agreed that the following areas: **school environment, technology, teachers, learners, community** and **pedagogy,** could be classified as resources in an educational context. Once some parameters were placed around the term 'resources', participants got to choose one area they either wanted to lend their expertise to or develop their understanding of. It was apparent from the group discussions that the participants had much to share, demonstrated by the series of plenary presentations at the end of the session. The main points of each presentation are summarised below:

School environment: This group were keen to point out that school environment included everything in the school from the range of its library books to the teacher-student ratio. They agreed that to foster effective MLE practices, a school needs to provide a print-rich environment, colourful wall displays, authentic materials, moveable furniture, a provision for ICT, child-centred practices in and out of the classroom and the promotion and practice of a safe, inclusive and affirmative culture by teachers and students both in and outside the classroom.

Technology: This group's discussion evolved around general, not specific, technologies to implement MLE successful practices. They listed as resources a multilingual translation tool, a multilingual online dictionary, connectivity, mobile apps, offline software, digital language labs, and the use of gamification. They also mentioned the importance of schools having sufficient monitoring and guidance of the teachers and students so that they are active and ethical digital citizens *(see also the session summary by Prof Atanu Bhattacharya).*

Teachers: The central focus of this group's deliberations was on the teacher as a model of best practice in MLE. Teachers can foster a healthy learning atmosphere through the expressions they use, their voice, knowledge of the students' home languages, the gestures and body language they use when communicating with their learners, ways of connecting

with their learners, using real-life examples, and multilingual written/oral instructions, encouraging storytelling in different languages and using visual aids.

Learners: This group had many ideas on how learners could be utilised in the classroom to enrich and encourage MLE practices. These included learners sharing experiences, participating in activities to compare and contrast languages, peer teaching, giving the teacher feedback, participating in the lesson planning process, using their prior knowledge and experiences, taking class time to sensitise each other to their home environments, culture and socio-culture backgrounds, and using a range of classroom interaction patterns.

Community: This dynamic presentation was delivered in two languages, both on the poster and in the oral summary. This group divided their presentation into three sections. *Language development* focused on encouraging parent reading sessions in school in the home language, students writing to their parents in their home language, and students asking their parents and grandparents to share folklore in their home language. *Socio-cultural development* promoted activities such as celebrating food festivals, sharing recipes, holding visitor days. Finally, *academic development* involved home visits, doing class projects on indigenous knowledge (e.g. medicinal plants) and using parents as resources.

Pedagogy: This group emphasised that development of self-esteem and self-confidence needed to underpin every interaction and activity a teacher employed in the classroom. They promoted the following classroom practices: creating heterogenous class groups that took into account student home languages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, problem solving, role-play and storytelling, using students' prior knowledge and experiences, using audio-visual aids, and creating a stress-free environment where students' mistakes are used as opportunities to help them learn rather than penalise them.

A wealth of ideas and good practices were generated in this session, and the participants had an opportunity to sensitise themselves to the various dimensions that good MLE resources entailed. They also shared a consensus opinion on the need for teachers/teacher educators to respect and value learners' home languages while teaching English. A large number of participants taught/trained in contexts that included learners from various language backgrounds. Consequently, when working in their groups, participants were able to share and learn from the challenges they faced in multilingual classrooms.

Overall, the session highlighted that all the participants had a firm grasp on good practices in the classroom, across the school and the wider community. However, most groups struggled to identify specific MLE practices that could be introduced to their chosen area of focus. The session ended on a positive note, with participants happy to have learnt from one another, and from the various perspectives on effective resources for the MLE context that emerged from the discussions.