

# MTB-MLE

**Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education**

Lessons Learned from a Decade of Research and Practice

What **role** can language play in **improving education** for minority language communities?

What are language **rights**?

What place does Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education have in realising other **development goals**?

These important questions were addressed by the **4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Language and Education**. The conference brought together over 300 practitioners from 30 countries, reflecting the incredible diversity of the Asia-Pacific region and clearly demonstrating the importance of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). This brochure summarises some of the key messages from this landmark event.

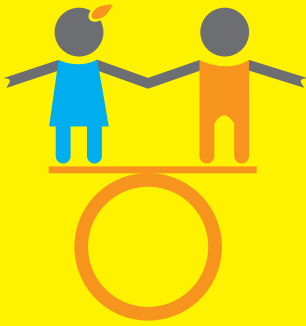
# Language and opportunities

**Researchers** believe that two-thirds of the world's children grow up in a context where more than one language is spoken. Multilingualism is not a problem, but a reality that can be a resource. Sadly, however, when many children start school, they are forced to abandon their first language and try, often unsuccessfully, to learn in a language they barely understand.



Language is the key to communication. It can provide bridges to new opportunities, or build barriers to equality. It connects, and disconnects. It creates unity, and can cause conflict. Language is many things, but it is rarely simple.





## MTB-MLE: helping to redress the balance

*As progress* continues towards many development goals, it is becoming increasingly clear that some groups are being left behind. In many cases these marginalised communities are isolated, sometimes physically but more often socially and politically because of the languages they speak. MTB-MLE aims to address this challenge, providing quality education for all, and through this, engaging the whole community in their own development.<sup>1</sup>

### What is Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)?

➔ **MTB-MLE** is about so much more than just changing the language in the textbook, the test, or that the teacher uses in the classroom. It's about re-envisioning learning so that it centres on the critical thinking and wider social skills needed in a rapidly changing world. And it's about challenging power dynamics in the learning environment so that students can direct their own learning in ways that are meaningful to them.

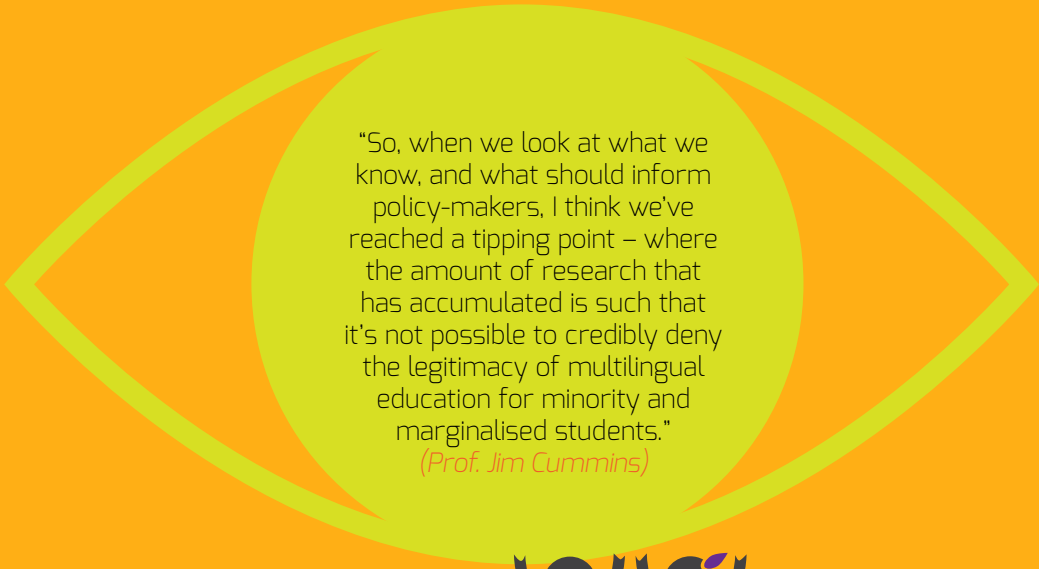
MTB-MLE requires the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction in the classroom, however, it is not about restricting access to national and international languages. Rather, MTB-MLE is about properly preparing children to learn these languages well. Starting in the language they know best allows children to build a strong foundation, which then enables them to make an effective transition into other national or international languages in due course.

1. <http://www.unescobkk.org/resources/e-library/publications/article/why-language-matters-for-the-millennium-development-goals>

# Evidence

**The size of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Language and Education**, as compared to the three previous events, illustrates the growing weight of evidence for MTB-MLE, both in breadth and depth. There is now a wide variety of contextualised examples of the impact of successful MTB-MLE programmes from many different situations around the world. We also now know better what works and what does not.

- ➔ Three non-negotiable principles of MTB-MLE include:
- Strong and effective promotion of fluency and literacy in all languages,
  - Effective environment for literacy (in its broadest sense),
  - Learner empowerment – encouraging students to create new power relations together.



"So, when we look at what we know, and what should inform policy-makers, I think we've reached a tipping point – where the amount of research that has accumulated is such that it's not possible to credibly deny the legitimacy of multilingual education for minority and marginalised students."

*(Prof. Jim Cummins)*



# Impact

“Children who do not learn enough are highly likely to become disgruntled youth, depriving them of the opportunity to enter the formal economy and generate sustainable livelihoods. MTB-MLE is critical to help these children learn better and improve their skills.” *(Prof. Kathleen Heugh)*



In this increasingly globalised and interconnected world, MTB-MLE has a particularly crucial role to play. Not only does MTB-MLE improve children’s learning of other more dominant languages, but it has also been shown to improve children’s cognitive and affective development. It gives children the opportunity to embrace their own unique languages and cultures, critically evaluate aspects of other cultures, and build respect and appreciation for diversity and difference.

## ➔ The growing body of evidence around MTB-MLE has revealed some of its key benefits...

- For children: they engage more in class, respond to teachers’ questions, and participate as equals.
- For parents: they are able to be involved in their children’s learning, support teachers and take part in other school activities.
- For marginalised communities: they can retain their own linguistic and cultural identities while proactively engaging with dominant wider cultures.
- For learning: better academic results overall, lower dropout rates, and higher fluency levels in both their first language and other official language(s).
- For the system: better learning means more efficient use of resources, resulting in savings in time (teachers and administrators) and money over the mid/long-term.
- For livelihoods: real learning and better language skills means more access to job opportunities and more peaceful communities.

# Practices

“Since MTB-MLE came to our community, most of the children in Grade 1 are now very participative in the class. They now easily understand the words they read because it’s all written in our language. ... They are not afraid of being called on by their teacher because they are so confident that they can give the correct answer by using our language.” *(A Filipino parent)*



The growing evidence has highlighted some key areas of focus for successful MTB-MLE:



**Appropriate curriculum...** In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the enrolment rate in primary school is less than 60%, with a high dropout rate. One of the most critical contributing factors is that children do not understand the language of instruction (Bangla) and the curriculum does not relate to their culture. To address this issue a MTB-MLE programme was set up to provide relevant learning materials in five indigenous languages. The success of this programme, along with others, has resulted in the Bangladesh government acknowledging MTB-MLE in their national education policy.



**Community ownership...** Writing systems need to be acceptable to the language speakers and other stakeholders, and a participatory process centring around the language community is crucial to ensuring appreciation, acceptability, accuracy and

ownership. In the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines, participatory orthography development has been initiated among several non-dominant language communities, which in turn has encouraged participation, consultation and motivation for MTB-MLE within the communities.



**Inter-agency partnerships...** In Sarawak in Malaysia, good inter-agency collaboration supported the creation of community-owned MTB-MLE pre-schools. Despite this, the schools have continued to face competition from government-run pre-schools, indicating that wherever possible non-government organisations must collaborate with academic and government actors to ensure programmes can be institutionalised appropriately. Similarly, NGOs must also develop partnerships with community organisations and local government units in order that high quality research on language and education can continue to impact teaching methods.



**Teachers...** In Southern Odisha in India, research shows that MTB-MLE teachers from the Saora community were able to use their cultural knowledge and tools to build strong bonds with the Saora children. This facilitated the children's active engagement in class, in direct contrast to the passive learning patterns exhibited in non MTB-MLE classrooms where teachers relied heavily on the black board and rote memorization of texts. In this way MTB-MLE has major potential, not only to improve class results but also to improve both teachers' and students' morale.





# Policies

"MTB-MLE is a good investment choice, and in the long run MLE can provide savings over inefficient dominant language-based systems of education. Currently many education systems are very inefficient, but only a few studies exist showing how much is wasted on unsuccessful models of education in dominant languages that many learners may not even understand."

*(Dr. Kimmo Kosonen)*



**In light of** all this positive evidence, what is holding us back? National policy choices around language in education, often closely linked to misinformed budgetary decisions, continue to be the primary constraint for MTB-MLE. Many education officials remain unaware of the linguistic diversity in their own countries and prioritise the promotion of national and international languages. Building these officials' understanding of the reality in the classroom and communicating about the improved learning outcomes and the lower long-term costs associated with MTB-MLE is a major hurdle in convincing policy-makers to support such programmes.

Working with officials in this way has seen major successes over recent years in parts of Asia, with pro-MLE policies being enacted or strengthened. Changes in the Philippines provide the clearest example, where long-term advocacy and evidence from longstanding pilot projects contributed to the enactment of law securing MTB-MLE for early years education. In Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Nepal, MTB-MLE-related policies have been strengthened based on the success of pilot projects. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, opportunities continue to grow as officials acknowledge the necessity of integrating ethnic languages into educational planning.

# MTB-MLE and rights

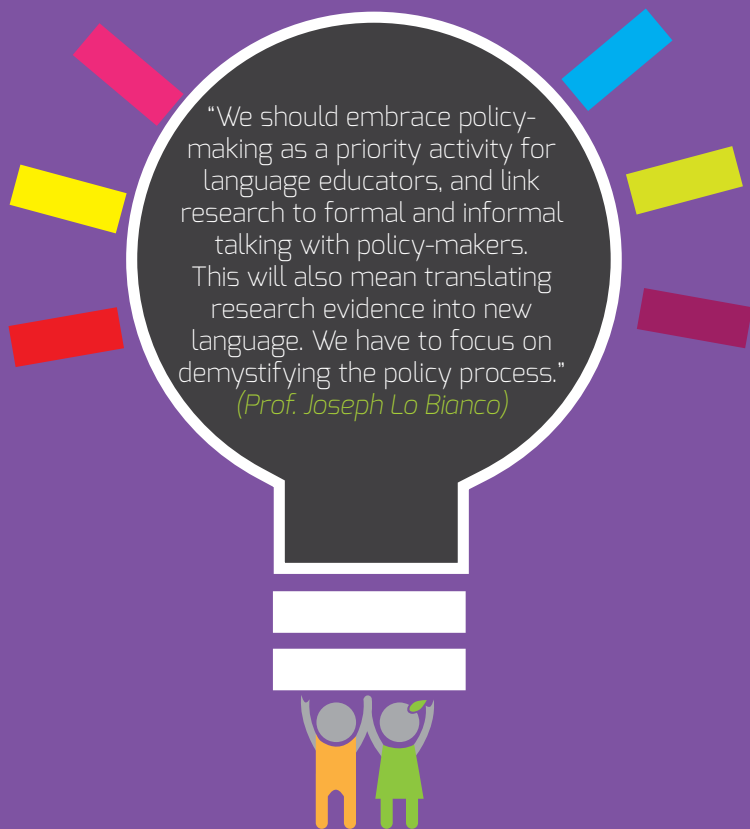
“There would appear to be an evolving recognition that, when reasonable and practical, state authorities should make every effort to provide education in the mother tongue to the degree and extent possible...”

*(Prof. Fernand de Varennes)*



**From the very beginning,** education for all has been acknowledged as a human right. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education that is free, available and accessible. Where education is not provided in a child’s first language this is increasingly seen as a form of discrimination, limiting the application of this right. MTB-MLE provides a clear way for education to be available to all.

# The Future



"We should embrace policy-making as a priority activity for language educators, and link research to formal and informal talking with policy-makers. This will also mean translating research evidence into new language. We have to focus on demystifying the policy process."  
*(Prof. Joseph Lo Bianco)*

*Despite such progress*, further research is still needed to confirm the extent of the needs in many marginalised communities. Classroom mapping projects, such as those conducted in Viet Nam, can provide essential data that enables governments to better understand the language situation in classrooms and act appropriately.

Finding suitable solutions to the complex challenges faced by many marginalised communities can only be achieved by working together. Looking for ways to dialogue with policy-makers and across organisational and disciplinary boundaries is also central to any future advances. It is our hope that the 4th International Conference on Language and Education, and this publication, has played a small part in that process.



© UNICEF/NYHQ2008-0559/Naing

This information is based on presentations and discussions at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Language and Education, ‘Multilingual Education for All in Asia and the Pacific: Policies, Practices and Processes’, held in Bangkok, Thailand in November 2013.

For more information and original presentations please visit:

[www.lc.mahidol.ac.th/mleconf2013](http://www.lc.mahidol.ac.th/mleconf2013)

Edited by: Matt Wisbey

Drafting committee: Kimmo Kosonen,  
Kirk Person, Vilasa Phongsathorn,  
Catherine Young, Min Bista and  
Kyungah Kristy Bang

To find out more about the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (MLE WG) visit:

[www.asiapacificmle.net](http://www.asiapacificmle.net)

