State of the Evidence

Description of the Evidence

Experimental and non-experimental evidence from a variety of contexts indicates instruction in a child’s L1 (mother tongue) has a positive effect on learning (including in literacy, math, and general school performance), or does not have a negative effect on learning in these subjects (see examples from Ethiopia (Seid 2016), India (Jain 2017), Kenya (Piper et al. 2016), Peru (Hynsjö and Damon 2016), and Uganda (Brunette et al. 2019 and Kerwin and Thornton 2020).

Additional evidence suggests that establishing a foundation of learning in a child’s L1 before learning an L2 (second language, often English) may have a positive effect on the acquisition of the L2 (see initial findings from Ethiopia (Seid 2018) and South Africa (Taylor and von Fintel 2016). Offering schooling in the L1 of a population may additionally increase participation in school (see initial findings from Ethiopia, Ramachandran 2017 and Seid 2016). The World Bank’s report, “Loud and Clear: Effective Language of Instruction Policies for Learning” provides additional resources, evidence, and examples of mother tongue policies.

While in the short-term, there is general consensus on the value of providing instruction in the mother tongue, it’s unclear whether and when it may be useful to diversify to metropolitan or international languages. Such shifts could have implications in the long-term such as on labor market outcomes though more research on this question would be beneficial. Additional data on cost-effectiveness may also benefit policymakers as they determine which mother-tongue-based multilingual approaches to implement in their contexts.

Notes on Context

Education actors may hold a variety of different viewpoints about mother tongue instruction so careful contextual analysis to learn the preferences of the community is beneficial. For example, parents may prioritize mother tongue instruction out of a desire for cultural preservation or because that is the language they are most comfortable in. However, they may also prioritize the metropolitan or international language (e.g. French in West Africa, for example) that is thought to be the lingua franca for business transactions or high-paying jobs in the country. Careful consideration must therefore go into the decision of when to introduce L2s such as English, how to create bilingual environments, etc. Mother tongue instruction may also be more difficult in contexts where many different indigenous languages are spoken, whereas it may be easier if there is one common indigenous language that can be added to a classroom in addition to the colonial or commonly spoken language in which education is currently offered. Some indigenous languages do not have a written tradition, which may complicate the creation of teaching materials in that language.

Equity Considerations

Language may be a barrier for some children who speak a language at home that is different from the language spoken in the typical educational setting. As such, mother tongue programs may ease these concerns or barriers and increase equity among students, especially those from marginalized linguistic communities. However, it is important to do an appropriate analysis of the languages spoken in a community to determine which languages might
be appropriate to add into an educational setting. If a mother tongue program introduces one commonly spoken indigenous language but excludes another, some students may continue to be marginalized in the classroom. Finally, it is important to ensure that the instructional quality and quality of resources in the new language are of the same quality as those in the original language. This is an important equity concern to ensure that mother tongue or bilingual programs do not exacerbate inequalities and instead promote equity among groups.

**Operationalization**

**Generalizability**

Drawing on J-PAL’s Generalizability Framework, below are questions that will help you determine if a mother tongue program might increase learning outcomes in your context. The below questions are not meant to be an exhaustive list of questions you will need to answer to determine if this type of program is appropriate for your context. They can, however, provide a starting point for applying the global evidence on this type of program to your specific context.

**Local Conditions**

- What languages are spoken in your context?
  - Is there a language typically used for instruction/formal settings that is different from the language commonly spoken in informal settings?
  - Are there several indigenous languages spoken by groups in your context that aren’t typically used in formal instruction?
    - If so, are there one or more of these indigenous languages that are spoken by a plurality of people?
- Do the languages you might consider for mother tongue instruction have a written tradition, or just an oral one?
- What political considerations might come into play when introducing mother tongue instruction into your education system? Might there be pushback from certain local groups, from parents or others in the community, from teachers, etc.?
- Is there a past history of bilingual education or mother tongue education in your region that you should take into account? Were past attempts successful? What challenges did they face?

**Generalized Lessons on Behavior**

- There is some evidence to suggest that learning in a child’s mother tongue may be beneficial. More evidence from RCTs would further support this finding.

**Local Implementation**

- Are there enough teachers in your context who speak the language in question?
- How will you train teachers in the language? Will the training be the same as the training for teachers of the original language?
- If there might be a bilingual component of the instruction, will there be separate training to help teachers understand bilingual pedagogies?
- Are there textbooks and other written resources and materials in the language in question?
- Is there a way to ensure consistency in quality across languages of instruction? How will monitoring and evaluation systems be put in place to ensure that quality in one language is not significantly higher or lower than quality in another language?

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**Successful Examples**

- A mother tongue program in Kenya (Piper et al. 2016)
- A mother tongue reading program in Uganda (Brunette et al. 2019)

**Implementation Guide**

RTI International’s Mother Tongue Guide

**Further Action Options**

For approaches with mixed evidence or high variation of effectiveness in the literature, more evidence generation is recommended to close evidence gaps. Based on the evidence for this category, potential next steps might include:

- Connecting with implementers to learn more about evidence-based programs in this category;
- Connecting with researchers to identify relevant open questions that would benefit from further research;
- Other activities to think through the policy implications and/or research needs of this evidence in your context.

If you are interested in exploring these or other options, please contact the J-PAL Education team at JPAL_Education@povertyactionlab.org, to set up an initial exploratory meeting. The team will be happy to brainstorm potential next steps.