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Research Report

Topic 1: Debating the implementation of funds for native language education in colonial and post-colonial countries.



Divit Jagdish Renu Bhojwani & Aras Bora Derinoz

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Introduction

Language is one of the foundations for civilizations. It is a fundamental aspect of our society, and is an aspect that shapes characteristics such as human identity and culture. An important value that language brings into our society is the ability to communicate with others, and to share ideas and values. Native Languages also carry the history and heritage of the people from where the language originates. A UNESCO report notes that 40 percent of the global population does not have access to an education system which educates in a language they understand¹. This places millions of the population at a disadvantage when it comes to learning.

In colonial and post-colonial countries, native languages were marginalised due to education systems prioritising colonial languages to educate, as well as in aspects like governance and administration, resulting in long-term inequalities. Particularly, in regions where children are taught in a non-native language, have shown to have much higher rates of learning poverty². This can disproportionately affect indigenous peoples and other language minorities, by trapping them in a poverty cycle and cause the erosion of their culture.

¹ (UNESCO, “40% Don’t Access Education in a Language They Understand | Global Education Monitoring Report”)

² (Ross)

In recent decades, linguistic rights have gained traction as a vital aspect of human rights and sustainable development. Research consistently shows that native language focused education results in better long-term educational attainment³. Despite the benefits, numerous countries around the world, debate the importance of funding and utility of native languages. Moreover, countries also cut back on funding for native language and indigenous peoples. Hence, the allocation of funds for native language and indigenous peoples education remains an issue when talking about the post-colonial affects on a society as well as promoting inclusive development.

Definition of Key Terms

Native Language/Mother- tongue⁴: The first language a person has been exposed during early childhood, and is closely linked to cultural and ethnic identity. Often contextually interpreted as a language which is local or indigenous that predates colonization.

Colonial Country/Colonialism⁵: When a powerful nation seizes political, economic, and cultural control over a weaker society, for its own gain. The weaker society is then controlled by the stronger nation, and then becomes a colony. For example: India, South African, Angola, and etcetera.

Colonial Language: The language which is imposed upon colonised people by the colonising power. This becomes the primary language of the colonised nation, and can suppress indigenous linguistic roots. Examples: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and more.

Post-Colonial Country⁶: A nation that has gained independence from colonial rule, and the becoming of a sovereign state. Typically emerged after World War II, and contains leftover effects from colonial rule, such as economic challenges.

³ (“If You Don’t Understand, How Can You Learn? - World | ReliefWeb”)

⁴ (Wikipedia Contributors, “First Language”)

⁵ (“Colonialism”)

⁶ (Ivson)

Learning Poverty⁷: When a 10-year-old child is unable to read and understand a simple, appropriate text. It highlights the lack of foundational educational skills.

Linguistic Rights⁸: The set of rights to use, maintain, and develop any chosen language in both a public and private context. Not limited by discrimination, and ensuring the freedom to promote cultural identity.

Background Information

After World War II, around 80 colonies had gained independence and became sovereign states, and there are around 17 territories under colonial rule, and is being monitored by a UN special committee⁹. Though colonies gained independence, they still retained the systems that their colonisers left behind, such as education systems in English or French as the main language of teaching. This occurred due to states prioritising state unity, refrain from ethnic favouritism, and maintain global relations with other nations. The retention of the colonial systems further suppressed the native languages and indigenous peoples, as even post-independence they were unable to communicate and use their native language due to governments favouring colonial languages for the aforementioned reasons.

UNESCO has been supporting the right for people, especially children, to learn their mother-tongue and in their mother tongue since 1953¹⁰. There is a vast amount of research which proves that literacy rate and educational value a person can receive differentiates based on the fact if the person is taught in their native language or not. From the research it showed that children are likely to improve in reading comprehension, cognitive development, and perform better long term academically¹¹. Despite this evidence, governments lack the urge to fund and sustain teaching in native languages, due to high costs to implement and maintain, shortage of skilled teachers, and concerns on prioritising multiple languages could lead national division.

⁷ (World Bank)

⁸ (Wikipedia Contributors, "Linguistic Rights")

⁹ (United Nations, "Decolonization")

¹⁰ (Ball)

¹¹ (UNESCO, "Driving Literacy through Linguistic Diversity and Mother-Language Based Learning")

In the 21st century, globalization has furthered the decline of indigenous languages. This comes as media, higher levels of educations, and economic opportunities heavily rely on dominant international languages like English, Mandarin, and Spanish. These further stress indigenous peoples to adopt these dominant languages to compete within the modern world. With UNESCO estimating that at least 40 percent of the remaining 7000 languages spoken on the world are endangered, with a language going extinct every two weeks¹². With every language lost, culture, knowledge, and heritage is lost, further stressing the importance in the preservation of native languages.

Plans such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 alongside modern technology can help alleviate the risk of native languages going extinct, however debates over public funds being used on native languages is still a matter of debate, with differing opinions on the value of preserving native languages.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Bolivia: Bolivia's education system is legally required to be intracultural, intercultural, and plurilingual at all levels¹³. Their 2009 constitution officially recognised 36 indigenous languages, and introduced Law 070 in 2010 which state that English, Spanish, and an Indigenous language be a part of the national curriculum¹⁴. Bolivia is a strong example of how a government can implement policies to preserve indigenous languages.

Philippines: In 2012, Philippines implemented the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) across the nation. The program essentially dedicates time for students from kindergarten to grade 3 to develop their mother tongue alongside Filipino and English, which they slowly transition into their primary languages later on. This is beneficial as it promotes mother tongue development at a younger stage, while still retaining more dominant languages in the form of English and Filipino.

¹² (UNESCO, "Multilingual Education, the Bet to Preserve Indigenous Languages and Justice")

¹³ ("La Educación Intracultural Intercultural Plurilingüe En Bolivia")

¹⁴ (Jahic)

Australia: Australia has its own Indigenous Languages and Arts program in which they support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to sustain their cultures. The program will invest over 48 million AUD during the 2026-27 period for Indigenous languages and arts¹⁵. Australia is an example of direct funds to sustain culture and language of indigenous people within their region, regardless at what stage as members of indigenous communities can apply for funds to preserve their languages.

UNESCO: UNESCO is heavily invested in the preservation of indigenous peoples and their culture. The organisation conducts research into the effects of education in native languages, and uses the knowledge to advocate for public investments to increase on the basis of the positive outcomes their research provides.

Relevant UN Resolutions

Universal Declaration of Human Rights – General Assembly Resolution 217 A¹⁶

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) – General Assembly Resolution A/RES/61/295¹⁷

¹⁵ (Office of the Arts, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications)

¹⁶ (“Resolution 217A Document Viewer”)

¹⁷ (“A/RES/61/295 Document Viewer”)

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1¹⁸

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Previous Attempts to Address the Issue

Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions - UNESCO (2005)¹⁹

Member states convened to establish a binding treaty which affirms states' sovereign right to protect cultural and linguistic diversity through public policy and education.

Immersion Programs²⁰

¹⁸ (“A/RES/61/295 Document Viewer”)

¹⁹ (UNESCO, “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity Of”)

²⁰ (Hermes and Kawai‘ae‘a)

Wicoie Nandagikendan (Minnesota, USA) and Waadokoodaading Ojibwe Immersion School (Wisconsin, USA) – Early Years immersion program in Ojibwe

Ojibwemotaadidaa Omaa Gidakiiminaang (Wisconsin, USA) – Adult immersion academy in Ojibwe

Māori-medium programs (New Zealand) – Various education programs ranging from 51 per cent instruction to 100 per cent instruction in Māori, available for students ranging from 5 – 18 years of age.

Ka Papahana Kaiapuni Hawai'i (Hawaii, USA) – A public school system from kindergarten to grade 12, where the Hawaiian language is used to teach and run the school.

Proposed Solutions

- Dedicate national funds for native language and mother-tongue education programs.
- Incorporate native language studies within the education system, particularly at early childhood and primary, while maintaining access to international and national languages.
- Invest funds into teacher training to acquire the ability to teach in multilingual environments.
- Collaborate with members of the indigenous community to develop curriculum and upgrade education systems.
- Use international organisations for support with funding and technical aspects , such as UNESCO and UNICEF.
- Utilise technology to digitally preserve languages as a last-ditch effort to prevent the extinction of the language.

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