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Protecting the Rights of Linguistic Minorities in Education

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Introduction

Linguistic minorities are groups of people whose first language differs from the official language of the country or region in which they reside. For these communities, language is far more than a tool for daily communication, it represents cultural identity, heritage and connection to ancestors. When linguistic minorities are supported through education, these are widely reused. How the linguistic minorities are treated now in education will lead to exclusion, discrimination or assimilation. Many children with a first language different from the country's official language will face challenges with their learning. It is important that children are able to learn new things through their mother tongue based education to improve their learning capacity. Instead, they are often expected to learn in a dominant or official language they do not fully understand. This creates barriers to academic success and may result in erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Atlas of Languages reveals that there are around 7,000 spoken or signed languages in use around the world. It is estimated that at least half of the global population is bilingual, navigating daily life in two or more languages or dialects. Language is more than a tool for communication. It is a very specific human cognitive faculty and the foundation of our shared humanity. It enables the transmission of experiences, traditions, knowledge and identities across generations. Language plays a crucial role in promoting peace, fostering intercultural education and driving sustainable development. They permeate every facet of our lives, from family and work to education, politics, media, justice, research and technology.

Addressing this issue is vital to ensure equity in education and inclusion, a key component of international human rights frameworks. Balancing the educational needs of linguistic minorities with national language policies and unity goals is a complex challenge.

Definition of key terms

Assimilation

The process by which minority groups adopt the language, culture or norms of the dominant group. Often at the expense of their own identity.

Bilingual education

An educational system in which students are taught in two languages, usually their mother tongue and an official or majority language.

Cultural rights

Rights that protect the cultural identity and heritage of individuals and communities, including the right to use and be educated in one's language.

Decolonized education

An approach that promotes indigenous or minority perspectives, languages and knowledge systems in learning, challenging dominant cultural narratives.

Equity in education

Ensuring all students have fair opportunities to succeed by addressing individual needs rather than treating everyone exactly the same.

Intercultural education

An educational approach that promotes understanding, respect and dialogue between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Language policy

Government or institutional rules and decisions regarding which languages are used, taught and promoted in schools and society.

Linguistic diversity

The existence of multiple languages within a community, region or country, emphasizing the value of preserving minority languages.

Linguistic minorities

Groups within a population whose native language differs from the official or majority language spoken in that country.

Linguistic rights

The rights of individuals and communities to use, preserve and be educated in their own language.

Mother tongue-based education

Educational programs that begin instruction in the child's first language before introducing other languages.

Multilingual education

An educational approach that uses two or more languages to teach students, often combining mother tongue instruction with national or global languages.

Social inclusion

Ensuring all individuals, including marginalized or minority groups, feel valued and are able to participate fully in education and society.

Universal access to education

The principle that everyone, regardless of background, should have equal access to quality education.

General Overview

Around 40% of the global population does not have access to education in a language they understand or speak. For linguistic minorities, learning an unfamiliar language can lead to low literacy rates, poor educational outcomes, social exclusion and assimilation into the dominant culture. It might cause more trouble understanding the education when they have to learn new things in a language that is not similar to their mother tongue, which can reduce engagement and retention. The issue is particularly relevant in multilingual countries, where education systems often reflect only one dominant language, limiting linguistic diversity.

Different countries approach this challenge in varied ways. Some prioritise a single national language or official language in education to foster utility and mobility. For example countries like France and Indonesia have historically emphasized a single national language in education, with the goal of unifying diverse populations under a common linguistic framework. While this approach can enhance mobility and communication across regions, it can also isolate minority-language speakers, making them feel excluded and reducing their engagement in the learning process.

Other countries may have adopted multilingual education systems that incorporate minority languages, particularly at the early stages of learning. For instance, in countries such as Bolivia and South Africa, schools offer instruction in students' mother tongues during the first years of learning while later transitioning to the national or official language, effectively implementing transitional bilingual education. However, many countries do not implement multilingual education due to a combination of resource limitations, including a shortage of qualified teachers fluent in minority languages, political priorities favoring a single national language and logistical challenges managing education across diverse linguistic regions. Societal attitudes that undervalue minority languages can also reduce support for such programs. Providing multilingual education is not without challenges: it requires sufficient resources, trained teachers and curriculum development tailored to multiple languages, which can be difficult in regions with limited educational infrastructure.While both have their merits, tension arises when minority communities feel excluded or when education policies result in the marginalisation of their languages.

Over the years, the situation has evolved. In the mid-20th century, education policies in many countries emphasized national language instruction almost exclusively, often marginalizing minority languages. For example, in post-independence Indonesia, the government prioritized Bahasa Indonesia in all schools to promote national unity, often at the expense of local languages. Similarly, in France, regional languages like Breton and Occitan were excluded from formal education. From the 1980s onwards, international awareness of linguistic rights and educational inclusion increased, influenced by UNESCO reports and the growing recognition of minority cultural rights. Countries such as Bolivia introduced mother tongue-based education in the 1990s and South Africa incorporated mother tongue instruction in the early grades after the end of apartheid. In Canada indigenous language education programs gradually expanded following the Indigenous Languages Act of 2019. Despite these efforts, access remains uneven and many linguistic minorities worldwide continue to lack education in a language they fully understand.

International frameworks recognize the importance of linguistic rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that everyone has the right to education, while the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities emphasizes the protection and promotion of minority languages. Despite these frameworks, performance remains uneven across the world. Political reluctance, limited funding and a shortage of qualified teachers fluent in minority languages often hinder the development of effective multilingual education systems. Approaches such as decolonized education and the validation of indigenous knowledge can improve outcomes by respecting cultural heritage. Additionally, in some contexts, societal attitudes toward minority languages may devalue their use in formal education, further complicating efforts to achieve equitable learning outcomes.

Efforts to address this issue must consider the cultural, historical and political context of each country. Effective strategies could include early-grade mother tongue instruction, followed by a gradual language transition to additional languages, active involvement of communities in curriculum design to ensure relevance and inclusivity, teacher training programs focused on multilingual instruction and policy frameworks that prioritize the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity. Beyond the classroom, broader societal recognition of minority languages and cultures can reinforce students' learning experiences and help create more inclusive equitable education systems.

Providing education in languages that students understand is not merely a technical challenge, it is a matter of social justice, human rights and sustainable development. Ensuring that all learners can access education in their mother tongue is essential for reducing educational inequalities, fostering social unity and empowering individuals and communities to participate fully in society.

Major parties involved

Canada

Canada recognises both English and French as official languages and supports Indigenous language education through legal and policy frameworks, such as the Indigenous Languages Act (2019). The government has invested in programs aimed at revitalising and teaching Indigenous languages, especially in early childhood and primary education. Despite these efforts, access to Indigenous language instruction is uneven, especially in rural and remote communities. Many Indigenous communities continue to advocate for increased funding, teacher training and community-led curriculum development. Canada's commitment to reconciliation, particularly through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, has placed renewed emphasis on Indigenous education and linguistic rights, but significant gaps remain between policy and performance.

India

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of regional dialects. Its constitution allows states to choose their own official languages, and the education system reflects this decentralisation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes mother-tongue instruction in the early years of education, ideally until at least Grade 5. Performance of this policy, however, varies across states due to logistical, political and resource challenges. Some communities benefit from instruction in regional or traditional languages, while others continue to experience educational exclusion. The federal structure allows experimentation and local adaptation, but inconsistencies in infrastructure and teacher availability present obstacles.

UNESCO

UNESCO has been a vocal advocate for inclusive and multilingual education as part of its mission to promote cultural diversity and human rights. It offers technical support and policy guidance to member states through publications, toolkits and data collection. One of its key documents, Education in a Multilingual World (2003), outlines best practices for performing mother-tongue-based instruction. UNESCO also coordinates the Global Education Monitoring Report, which tracks the status of language rights in education systems around the world.
It emphasises that education in a language familiar to the learner improves access, retention and learning outcomes. UNESCO encourages partnerships between governments, civil society and communities to build education systems that reflect linguistic diversity.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia has adopted a unique approach among African nations by officially recognising the use of regional languages in education. Under its federal structure, regional states have the authority to select their own working languages and provide primary education in them. This policy has led to an increase in literacy rates and cultural preservation in many areas. For example, languages such as Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali are used as mediums of instruction in their respective regions, ensuring quality materials in all languages and enabling transitions into secondary and higher education, which often use Amharic or English. Ethiopia's experience demonstrates both the potential and complexity of performing language-inclusive education in a multilingual society.

Timeline of events

1992 December 18th	The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.
2003 February	UNESCO publishes Education in a Multilingual World, offering policy guidance on language use in education.
2015 September	The Sustainable Development Goals are adopted, with SDG 4 emphasising inclusive and equitable quality education.
2019 June	Canada passes the Indigenous Languages Act. It recognises indigenous languages and supports revitalisation through education and teacher training.
2020 July	India releases its National Education Policy, promoting mother-tongue education in the early years.
2022 December	The UN launches the International Decade of indigenous Languages (2022-2032). It raises awareness of linguistic diversity loss and encourages intercultural education.
2023 March	UNESCO reports that 40% of students worldwide lack access to education in their own language
2023 September	The Global Education Monitoring Report reviews language policy in education. It identifies progress and challenges in expanding mother tongue-based instruction.
2025 February	UNESCO releases Languages matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education. Providing updated principles for language in education policies and emphasizing multilingualism as essential for inclusive learning.

Possible solutions

Expanding access to mother tongue education

To address the lack of education in native languages, governments can adopt mother tongue-based multilingual education and transitional bilingual education models. These programs involve teaching in the child's first language during early education before gradually introducing official or majority languages. This approach improves comprehension, confidence, academic performance and social inclusion, while respecting cultural rights and promoting linguistic diversity. Governments can consider implementing multilingual education that ensures that children gain foundational skills in a language they understand, which makes it easier to acquire additional languages later. Starting with the introduction in local languages during early grades and gradually transitioning to the national or official languages. This approach improves comprehension, retention and inclusion, especially when supported by national policies, phased curriculum design and well-tested pilot programs. It ensures that children develop strong foundational skills in a language they understand, making it easier for them to acquire additional languages and engage fully in their education.

Strengthen teacher training and resource development

Effective multilingual education relies on qualified teachers who are fluent in minority languages. Strengthening teacher training and resource development is essential to support linguistic inclusion. This can involve developing culturally relevant textbooks and learning materials as well as offering continuous professional development focused on multilingual teaching strategies. Governments may also establish professional development focused on intercultural education, decolonized education and bilingual education strategies. Training programs can additionally prepare teachers to manage transitional bilingual education, blending mother tongue instruction with the gradual instruction of the dominant language, while reducing the risk of assimilation. Digital platforms with open-access resources may further support teacher collaboration across regions, enabling exchange of practices related to equity in education.

Support community participation in education planning

Community participation in education planning further is crucial for ensuring the success and acceptance of language-inclusive policies. Involving local stakeholders, such as parents, cultural leaders and minority-language speakers, ensures that education systems reflect cultural realities and local needs. It encourages trust, ownership and cooperation through initiatives like community advisory councils, inclusive curriculum development and outreach programs that engage families in children's education. Community-driven approaches may also promote intercultural education by recognizing diverse cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems as resources for learning. Such participation can lower risks of assimilation by affirming the use of minority languages in schools. Involving communities in decision-making processes may further strengthen social inclusion, increase student engagement and support teaching that is both culturally relevant and academically effective.

Promote international cooperation and funding

International cooperation and funding can provide support for countries performing multilingual education policies. Organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF can offer technical assistance, funding and guidance for multilingual education, sharing global best practices and contributing to monitoring progress. Regional cooperation between multilingual countries such as India, South Africa and Ethiopia, may also allow for the exchange of training programs, resources and policy models. International funding mechanisms can help overcome financial barriers, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, making it possible to invest in training, materials and infrastructure needed to promote linguistic rights in education. The sharing of practices and progress monitoring may also contribute to social inclusion, limit risks of linguistic marginalisation and help ensure broader universal access to education in languages understood by students. Such cooperation is further aligned with global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals.

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