

**Ninth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
19 – 30 April 2010
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Item 3

Special Theme: Indigenous peoples' development with culture and identity – education for bilingualism and multilingualism in an Indigenous Australian context.

Presentation by Michael Dodson, Member of the Forum, 20 April 2010.

Education is a critical underpinning of this special theme. In particular, the right to education in the mother tongue is fundamental to the maintenance and growth of culture and identity and cultural and linguistic diversity. Para 39 of the report of the international expert group meeting provides an excellent framework for the exploration of the role that education plays to facilitate development with culture and identity.

The issue of bilingual learning in Indigenous languages is not only of vital interest to this theme but also very relevant in my country at the moment in debate on education policy.

Support for Indigenous languages continues to be contested at all levels of the political sphere – locally, nationally and internationally.¹ This is in spite of overwhelming international evidence on the importance and efficacy of mother tongue instruction in improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children.² In many cases, rather than being an education-based discussion, the focus of the debate is political, social and technical. Unfortunately it is these concepts, rather than pedagogical imperatives, that are driving the development, application and implementation of education policy on matters pertaining to the teaching of Indigenous languages, including choices of the language of instruction, choices of curriculum and structures of schooling.³

We know in this debate there are many contested issues and further complications arise from the somewhat problematic and fluid nature of definitions relating to language and literacy teaching and acquisition.

Mr Chairman; The UNESCO position paper *Education in a multilingual world* 'aims to clarify some of the key concepts and issues that surround the debate and presents in a simplified and synthetic form the many declarations and recommendations that have made reference to the issues of languages and education'.⁴

¹ Ouane, A (ed) (2003) *Towards a Multilingual Culture of Education*, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, Germany from http://www.paklife.net/nfer_library/Reports/4-75.pdf (accessed 07.04.10)

² UNESCO (2010) *EFA Global Monitoring Report – Reaching the Marginalized* Oxford University Press, United Kingdom (p. 149); Cummins (undated) *Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?* University of Toronto, from <http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm> (accessed 24.03.10)

³ Ball, J (2010) *Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years*, UNECSO from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001869/186961e.pdf> (accessed 24.03.10)

⁴ UNESCO (2003) *Education in a multilingual world – UNESCO Education Position Paper* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf> (accessed 24.03.10) (p. 7)

The document provides an overview of the key concepts of multilingual education; synthesises the international instruments, including UNESCO conventions; and finally, presents a set of principles and guidelines which clarifies UNESCO's position and makes it more accessible.⁵

According to UNESCO, in 2003, there were some twenty international articles, recommendations and declarations which related directly to the rights of minority groups to access and use freely their own languages, and to mother tongue learning and bilingual and multilingual education.⁶ The UNESCO Position Paper synthesised the relevant international instruments to arrive at three principles with which many are familiar.

The UNESCO paper was produced prior to the General Assembly adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and does not include the related articles in the Declaration. (Nor I note other international instruments produced since then.) Articles 13 and 14 of the Declaration specifically relate to the rights of Indigenous peoples and our languages; and the right to access education provided in Indigenous languages.

Article 3, forms the basis of the theme we are discussing and applies to the issue of first-language and subsequent bi and multilingual learning. The interconnectedness between the concepts of development and education are inescapable. The Interagency Support Group's reflection paper on the special theme "development with culture and identity" demonstrates that:

In this context, the use of a particular language as the language of instruction in a classroom conveys to the learner both a practical and symbolic sense of supremacy. It suggests that the language of instruction is the language of status and the vernacular or the language of transaction, is inferior.⁷

Of particular concern here Mr Chairman are the recent changes to bilingual education in the Northern Territory of Australia. Dominant development paradigms in the context of education mean that education is increasingly seen through an economic lens. Human Capital Theory which correlates investments in education with economic growth⁸ is posited as 'an appropriate basis for analysis of education policy.'⁹

Within the Human Capital Theory model, there are two views – the narrow view, where the acquisition of knowledge and skills can be measured against higher earnings, and the broad view, where learning is a valuable process in itself, even if it does not contribute to higher earnings.¹⁰ This paradigm applied to the model at the micro level, where education is seen in terms of the individual's economic productivity

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNESCO (2003) *Education in a multilingual world – UNESCO Education Position Paper* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf> (accessed 24.03.10) (p14)

⁸ Olaniyan, D.A and Okemakinde. T (2008) *Human Capital Theory: Implications for Economic Development* in European Journal of Scientific Research, Eurojournals Publishing from www.eurojournals.com/ejsr_24_2_01.pdf (accessed 08.04.10)

⁹ Quiggin, J. (1999) *Human Capital Theory and Education Policy in Australia*, *Australian Economic Review* 32(2), pp 130 – 144. From www.uq.edu.au/economics/.../HumanCapitalAustER99.html (Accessed 08.04.10)

¹⁰ Ibid

leads to the prevailing policy response – a focus on that which can be measured – privileging the narrow view over the broad view.

At the macro level, the application of the Human Capital Theory model leads to a focus on the measurement of the social and private rates of return on education. Examples of social returns in the macro application of the model include health and well-being outcomes and the development of greater social capital. However, as these rates of return are difficult to measure, governments often default to the micro level measurements – the private rates of return vis-à-vis educational attainment and earnings.

The application of this theory to the education sphere has typically seen measurements constructed in the form of standardized tests, delivered in the language of instruction. In my country this means that Aboriginal children, many of whom do not speak Standard Australian English, are being tested in a language they do not understand. This results in lower average standardized test scores for Aboriginal children across Australia. As in other parts of the world, there is a direct correlation between remoteness and lesser results, with those living in the remotest parts of the country achieving the lowest results of all.

As mentioned, the focus of the debate on bilingual learning in Australia has become political, rather than pedagogical, with the political imperative now being to improve the results of Aboriginal children in the standardized tests, delivered in English.

There is no doubt (or argument against the fact) that Aboriginal students in Australia should become proficient in English as the language of transaction. However, recent policy developments are based on political imperatives driven by the short-term need to improve standardized test scores, regardless of the preponderance of evidence that well-resourced bilingual and multilingual education programs improve educational outcomes. Furthermore, the evidence shows that “having the official language of instruction as a home language significantly lowers the risk of having fewer than four years in education at age 17 to 22.”¹¹

Another concerning consequence is the impact that these decisions will have on the on the extinguishment of Aboriginal languages in Australia. The 2009 UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger of Disappearing states that in Australia, 108 languages are in various degrees of danger.¹² Numerous academics have commented on the ‘naivety’ and ‘unintelligence’ of developing ‘a state or national literacy policy...on the basis of a debate of test scores and methods without an understanding of the changing places and contexts where people are using literacy for their and their communities’ own cultural interests and capital gains.’¹³

¹¹ Ibid (p. 159)

¹² <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00206>

¹³ Luke, A (2001) *How to Make Literacy Policy Differently: Generational Change, Professionalisation, and Literate Futures* - Opening plenary address delivered at the Joint National AATE/ALEA Conference, Hobart, Tasmania from <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/curriculum/standards/english/english/teachers/discussion/luke> (accessed

Finally, the Interagency Support Group's report to this Forum challenges all mechanisms of the UN and all states is to develop and implement, with appropriate resourcing, effective means of doing so.

Recommendations

1. The Forum recommends UNESCO, CBD and other relevant agencies convene an expert meeting, in conjunction with the Permanent Forum consisting of intercultural and educational experts and UN agencies to explore themes and concepts related to bilingual and multilingual education in the context of teaching in mother tongue Indigenous languages.
2. The Forum notes that in order to facilitate the high level meeting on Indigenous language instruction, there is a need for country-specific situation analyses. The Forum invites UNESCO to conduct this analysis, given the agency's experience and expertise in the area. The Forum also invites UNESCO to transmit such situation analyses to the Forum. This analysis should identify the legislative and/or policy frameworks that states employ to facilitate successful models of bilingual learning, multicultural and multilingual learning and mother tongue education and identify the barriers to implementation of these frameworks.
3. The Forum recommends that the United Nations system, the World Bank Group, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank & other multilateral development banks formulate policies to ensure that Indigenous education projects which are financed take in to account the use, protection and intercultural preservation of Indigenous languages through supporting bilingual and multilingual education in Indigenous languages. The International Monetary Fund should respect the rights of Indigenous peoples recognized in International Law.
4. On the basis of information received at this session, the Forum expresses its deep concern at the changes in policy on bilingual education in the Northern Territory, Australia. The Forum urges the Australian Government to work with its state and territory education systems to develop models of bilingual and multilingual education which are consistent with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.