

Educational equity for children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years*

Summary

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In every corner of the world, young children are learning languages at home that differ from the dominant language used in their broader social world. These children arrive at early learning programs such as preschool and primary school with a precious resource: their mother tongue. Since 1953, UNESCO has supported children's right to learn their mother tongue, and advocated maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity through language-in-education policies (UNESCO, 1953, 2003). A recent review of research and program reports discusses mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education for children starting in early childhood (UNESCO, 2010). The review is intended to: (1) inform policy-makers of existing research and practices in mother-tongue instruction in early childhood and early primary school years; and (2) raise awareness of the value of maintaining the world's languages and cultures by promoting and resourcing mother tongue-based education for young children.

Discussion of this topic is especially timely given the slow and uneven progress in meeting international targets for universal education articulated in the Education for All Goals 1 (ECCE), Goal 2 (Primary Education), and Goal 6 (Quality of Education) (UNESCO, 1990).¹ Impetus for the current review was provided by the UNESCO (2008a) "*Global Monitoring Report on Education for All: Will we make it?*" This report calls for unwavering political will to ensure that education from early childhood onwards is a priority of national governments, civil society and the private sector in order to ensure educational inclusion for the 72 million children out of school and to reduce the numbers of young learners who leave school without acquiring essential skills and knowledge. The report calls for increased investments in the provision of quality preschool education for children aged 3 and above, and for policy measures to provide care and early learning programs to children below 3 years of age. UNESCO (2007a) emphasizes the role of early childhood care and development programs in laying the foundation for learning and setting the stage for successful engagement in formal education.

Dominant languages and the manufacture of linguistic minoritization.

While UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary education for half a century (UNESCO, 1953), monolingualism in official or dominant languages is still the norm around the world (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006; Wolff & Ekkehard, 2000). Why? Decisions about which language(s) will be the medium of instruction

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and the treatment of children's home languages in preschools and schools exemplify the exercise of power, the manufacture of linguistic and eventually socio-economic marginalization and minoritization, and the unfulfilled promise of children's rights. Political, social, and technical considerations often collide in policy makers' decisions on language medium, schooling, and curriculum. Considerations include, but go beyond, questions of resources, teacher training, and subjects to be studied. Other crucial factors range from: the political will of local, regional, and national governments; the relationships between countries and their former colonizers; the understanding and patience of international donors; and parents' hopes and anxieties about which languages their children will need to secure employment and participate in their social, legal, and economic worlds. While the broader political ramifications of language-in-education policies and practices are beyond the scope of this report, Rampton (1995), Golding and Harris (1997), and Blommaert (1999) provide excellent analyses of these issues.

Educational success founded on early learning and schooling in the mother tongue

A growing body of empirical research and theory on language acquisition and bi/multilingual learning complement a rights based rationale for basing early education in children's mother tongue before introducing a second language as a medium of instruction. In its report, "*Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*", UNESCO (2007a) points out the overlooked advantages of mother tongue based multilingual education in the early years.

- (1) When children are offered opportunities to learn in their mother tongue, they are more likely to enrol and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005).
- (2) Their parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Benson, 2002).
- (3) Mother tongue based education especially benefits disadvantaged groups, including children from rural and Indigenous communities (Hovens, 2002).
- (4) In the majority world, mother tongue based education can especially benefit girls, who tend to have less exposure to an official language and have been found to stay in school longer, achieve better, and repeat grades less often when they are taught in their mother tongue (UNESCO Bangkok, 2005).

Mother tongue learning without educational program support

Many children speak a home language with a level of proficiency suitable for social communication or basic commerce, but not for technical or academic purposes. Many do not develop literacy in their home language, especially if the orthography of the home language differs from the orthography of the language of schooling. Studies show that six to eight years of education in a language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary school (Cummins, 1986). Typically, when minority and Indigenous language children begin preschool or primary school, the program is offered only in the language of the majority group in their region and most children quickly learn the rudiments of that language in order to fit in socially and succeed in learning tasks. Though exceedingly common, most majority language preschool and formal educational programs do nothing to support minority and Indigenous language children to continue to develop competence in their mother tongue. Moreover, the language policies that inform these programs often

devalue the cultural backgrounds and knowledge associated with minority and Indigenous children's home language. Persistent early school leaving and low academic achievement among minoritised children stem in part from these language-in-education policies (UNESCO, 2000).

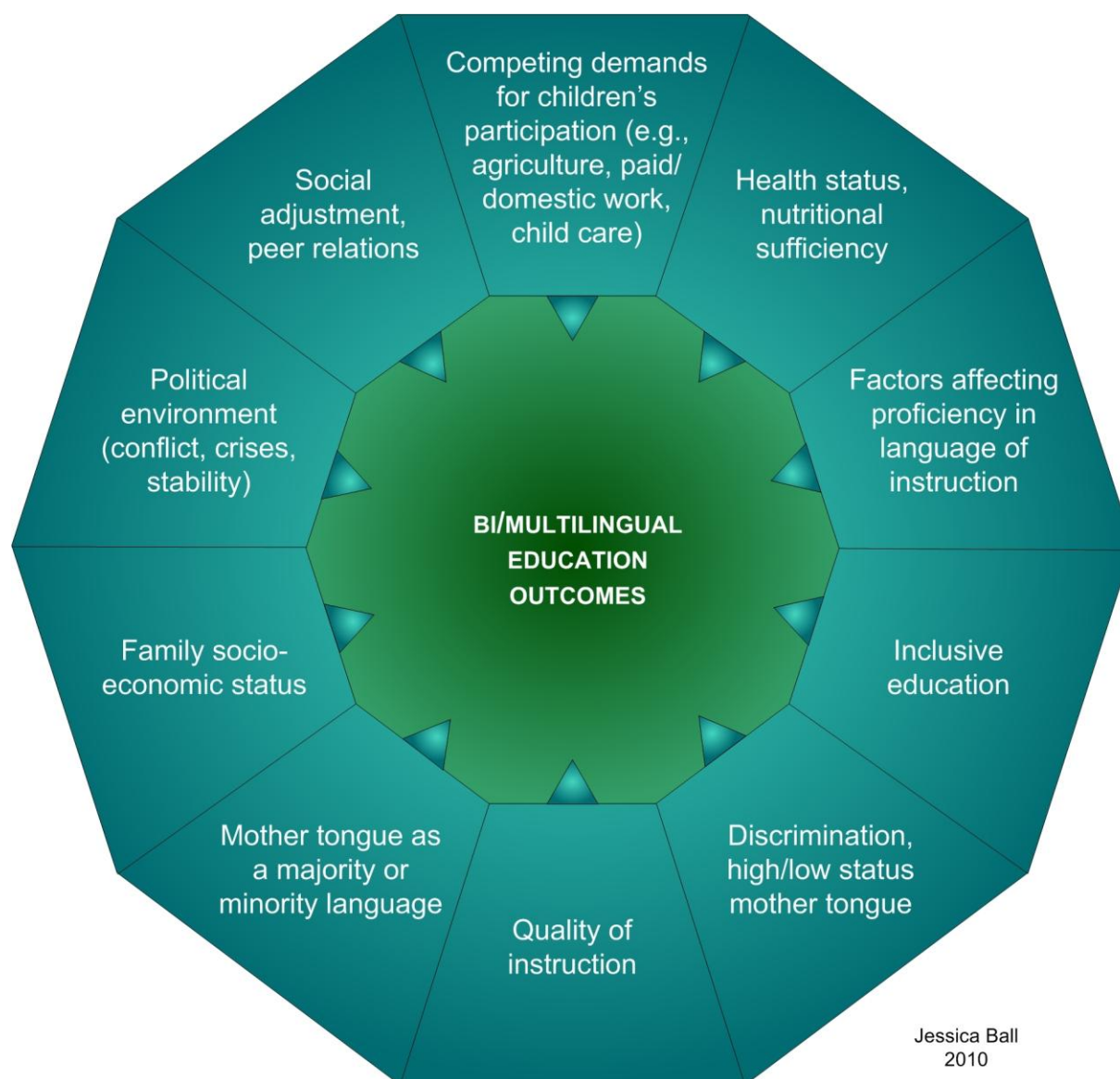
Mother-tongue based bilingual/multilingual education

Research confirms that children learn best in their mother tongue as a foundation for and bilingual and multilingual education. Studies show that six to eight years of education in a language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary school (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Research shows that children's ability to learn a second or additional languages (e.g., a *lingua franca* and an international language) does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout primary school. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages. When children receive formal instruction in their first language throughout primary school and then gradually transition to academic learning in the second language, they learn the second language quickly. If they continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in secondary school, they emerge as fully bilingual (or multilingual) learners. If, however, children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be attenuated or even lost. Even more importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure, and early school leaving.

Most 'transition' approaches tend to introduce the majority language as the primary medium of instruction in primary year three, a practice associated with much less favourable outcomes for acquisition of both the mother tongue and the majority language. Effective language policies for early childhood and primary school must be informed by a careful review of the research and cautious use of terminology to avoid inadvertent support of 'short cut' approaches to bilingual learning. It is advisable to refer to late transition programs as 'transfer' programs to distinguish them from early transition programs, which should be referred to as 'transition' programs.

Whether children successfully retain their mother tongue while acquiring additional languages depends on several interacting factors, including those shown in Figure 1. To retain their mother tongue, children whose first language is not the medium of instruction must have: (1) continued interaction with their family and community in their first language on increasingly complex topics that go beyond household matters; (2) ongoing formal instruction in their first language to develop reading and writing skills; and (3) exposure to positive parental attitudes to maintaining the mother tongue, both as a marker of cultural identity and for certain instrumental purposes (e.g., success in the local economy or global trade).

Figure 1. Contributors to bilingual/multilingual language acquisition outcomes



Mother tongue based early learning initiatives: Promising practices

As more cultural groups around the world are realizing the need to ensure the transmission of their linguistic heritage to the youngest members of their communities, a variety of models, tools and resources are being explored (see UNESCO 2007b and 2008b for compendium and bibliography of examples). However, most documented initiatives are at the primary school level. Very few research studies of programs focus on the roles of family members as children's first teachers for learning their first, and often more than one language, or the roles of early childhood educators in supporting mother tongue acquisition. A few initiatives that have successfully developed mother tongue based early learning opportunities for minority and Indigenous children and that have been well documented are noted below.

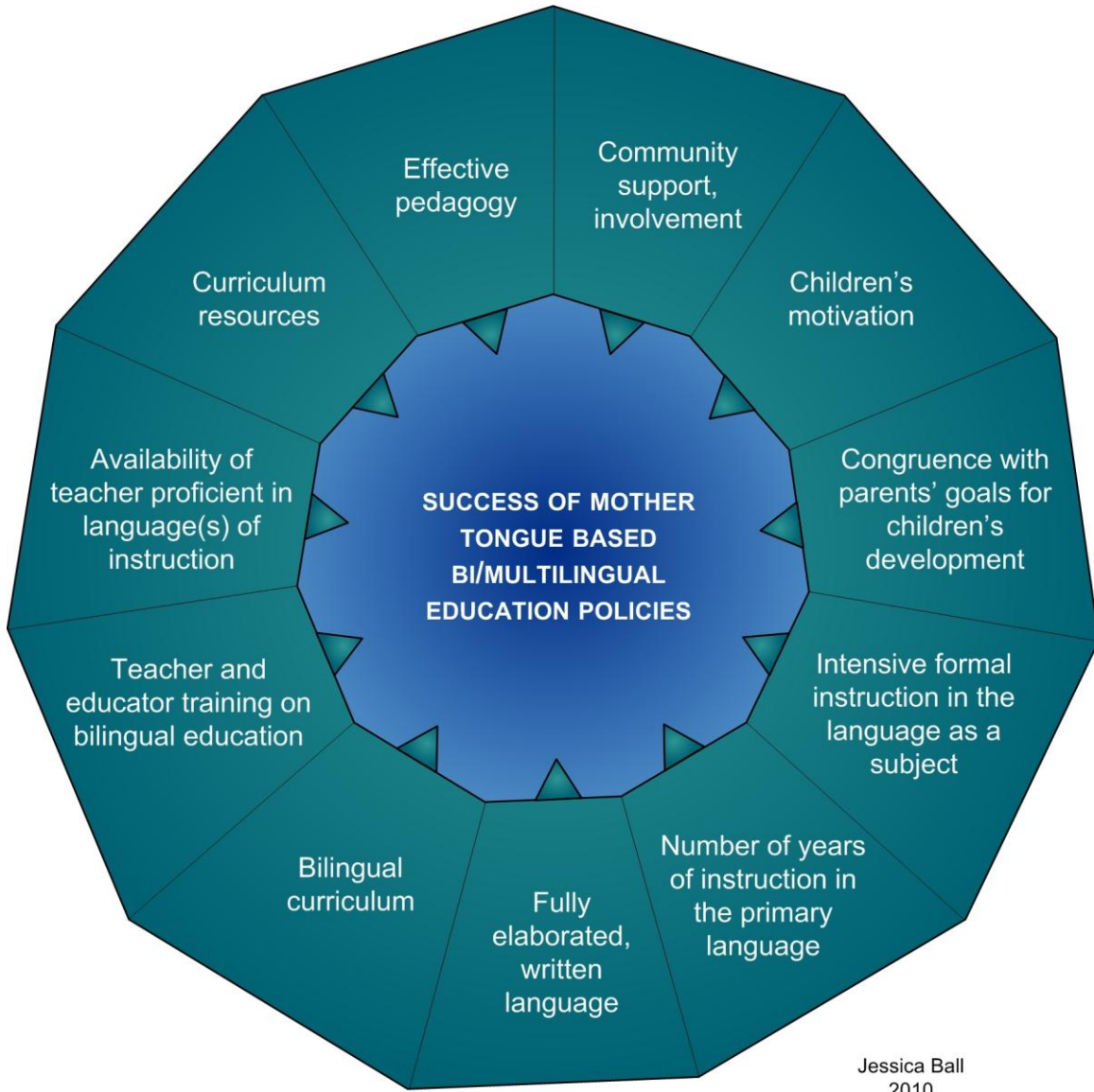
- (1) *Kohanga Reo* in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which affords opportunities for young children to learn both Maori and English (Durie, 1997; King, 2001; McClutchie, 2007);
- (2) *Punana Leo* in Hawaii, which combines Indigenous Hawaiian language immersion, pedagogical practices, and content (Wilson & Kamana, 2001);
- (3) *Kaugel First Language First* education program in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, where children learn to read and write in their mother tongue before they enter primary school, and continue their education in their mother tongue until they are proficient before transitioning to English as the medium of instruction (UNESCO 2007b);
- (4) *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* – the Association of Welsh-medium playgroups - which has prioritized early bilingualism (Welsh and English) and revitalization of Welsh cultural activities through their programs, including Welsh immersion programs and drop-in centres for infants, toddlers and caregivers (Children in Europe, 2007).

Commentators on these promising programs have all underscored the critical ingredient of parent demand and involvement, not only to create the business case for offering the programs but in order to ensure ongoing support for children to develop proficiency in their mother tongue as they move from home-based to centre-based early childhood programs and then to formal schooling. The availability of highly proficient speakers of the language who have some pedagogical training and are prepared to engage energetically with very young children is another critical ingredient. As Beller (2008), Lightbown (2008) and others have argued, there is an urgent need for research on these kinds of initiatives to evaluate their long-term effects, to convince governments of the potential pay-offs for investments, and to show parents the long term outcomes that can be expected by supporting children's mother tongue as their primary language for early learning.

Home-based and parent-focused initiatives characteristically receive little attention in the field of early learning, despite popular rhetoric about 'parents as first teachers.' Given that mother tongue acquisition originates at home, working with parents is no doubt the most effective entry point. As noted earlier, this begins with assuring parents of the value of making their home language(s) their child's primary language(s) and reinforcing their central roles in supporting their child's speech and language development. Infant development workers, home health nurses, family daycare providers, early childhood educators, and speech and language pathologists need training and resources to enable them to support parents' use of their mother tongue to promote their child's speech and language acquisition and learning in the mother tongue. In Canada, the Toronto District School Board (n.d.) distributes a DVD and booklet, *Your Home Language: Foundation for Success*. This resource, produced in 13 languages, provides minority language parents with information about dual language learning, the importance of their home language, and the roles of both mothers and fathers in working as a team to facilitate their children's mother tongue or bi/multilingual development.

Overall, based largely upon research on programs for school-aged children, the success of mother tongue based bi/multilingual initiatives appears to depend upon on a number of factors, including those shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.
Contributors to success of mother tongue based, bi/multilingual learning programs

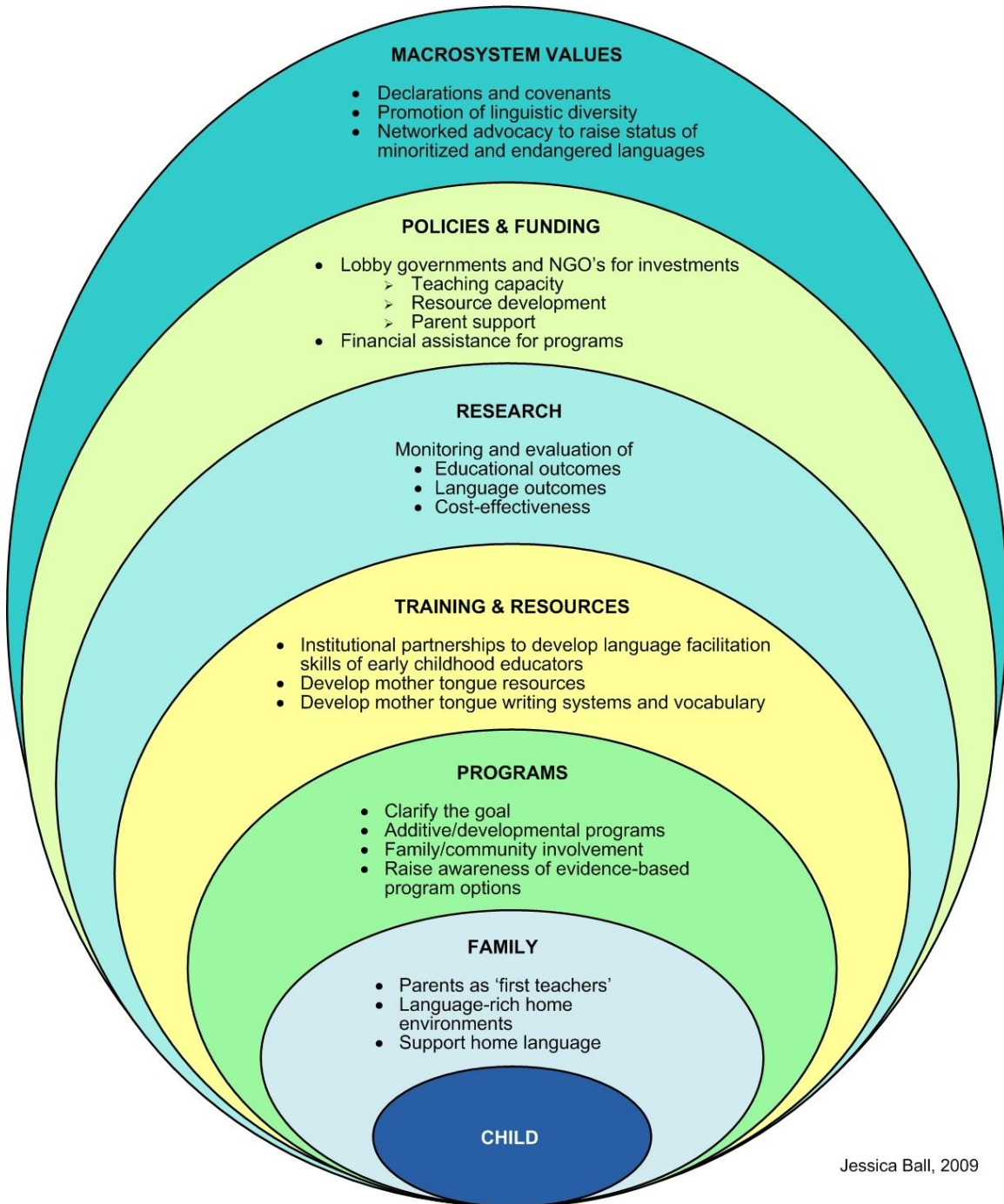


Blueprint for beginning advocacy, innovation, and research

Investments are needed to increase innovation and research on approaches to developing the competency of young children in their mother tongue based on local languages, literacies, parent-child communication styles, and pedagogies in order to equalize school readiness and success for all children. A first step to fulfilling the right of parents to set and pursue goals for their children's development is to raise awareness among policy makers, educators, community-based organizations, and parents of the value of promoting and resourcing mother tongue based early learning opportunities for young children. Increased demand may help to shift macro-system attitudes to recognize the rights of children and parents to mother tongue based early learning opportunities and the value to humanity of preserving linguistic and cultural diversity.

Figure 3 offers an ecological model for working at various levels – from homes, to institutions, to policies, and cultural values – to pursue these goals.

Figure 3. Levels of advocacy and support for mother tongue based bi/multilingual early learning opportunities



Drawing upon available research-based theory and documented program examples, the following recommendations are provided to help inform policy guidelines and program innovations.

- Carry out awareness raising campaigns on the importance of the development and use of mother tongue-based instruction.
- Advocate for the critical role of governments in promoting effective mother tongue-based bi/multilingual education programs.
- Promote clear, sustained political commitments to mother tongue based and bi/multilingual education in policy frameworks and administrative contexts at national and local levels.
- Encourage mother tongue development to the level of cognitive academic language proficiency with gradual scaffolding of additional language learning.
- Promote precision in the use of a common conceptual vocabulary for describing language-in-education models to avoid confusion between immersion, submersion, early-exit (subtractive) and late exit or ‘transfer’ (additive) bilingual education.
- Recognize mother tongue acquisition, rather than acquisition of a dominant national or international language, as the first priority in assessing children’s achievement in preschool and throughout primary school.
- Recruit early childhood educators and school teachers who are fluent in the mother tongue at the level of cognitive academic language proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking.
- Provide pre-service and in-service teacher education to ensure that early childhood educators and school teachers can engage in effective pedagogy, be culturally competent, have subject-matter knowledge for the topics they teach, and can teach energetically with young children.
- Promote policies that position parents and other family members as ‘first teachers’ and that engage parents and community members in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

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¹ Goal 1: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Goal 2: Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

Goal 6: Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills.