

FIRST LANGUAGE: A FOUNDATION FOR EFFECTIVE BASIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Many Filipino children begin their education in a language they do not speak or understand as well as their first language. In this setting, only the learners' first language can provide the kind of bridge to a personal identity that incorporates both an ethnic and a national dimension. A technical model of literacy acquisition that emphasizes literacy primarily as an economic skill for use in the workplace cannot achieve the 1987 policy goals. Rather, an alternative, ideological model of literacy is proposed which develops the critical thinking skills of the students, builds cognitive and affective domains, and values their local language experience and culture. Thus, by first establishing the empowering role of language in the social system of the students' community, groundwork is laid for the expansion of the students' identity to include their role in the larger national and international contexts.

In the poem "To my Childhood Companions" attributed to the Filipino hero, José Rizal, he says, "*(The man) who does not love his mother tongue is far worse than a brute or a stinking fish*"

In a country such as the Philippines, which Kaplan and Baldauf (1998) describe as "linguistically heterogeneous with no absolute majority of speakers of any given indigenous language," language attitudes and the uses of language and literacy are important issues to be considered by linguists and educators.

1. UNITY AND DIVERSITY

The goals of the Philippine 1987 Bilingual Education policy emphasize the need to develop literacy in Filipino as a linguistic symbol of national unity and identity (Quisumbing, 1987) and in English as a language of wider communication. However, what message does such a policy convey to the minority peoples of the Philippines concerning the value of their language and culture? It would seem that such a language policy can succeed in a multilingual and culturally diverse social context as the Philippines only if it *also* attends to the important role that the languages of the indigenous peoples play in the personal identity of many Filipinos thus promoting national unity through a recognition of diversity.

This is not an issue unique to the Philippines. Internationally, nations are acknowledging and rising to the challenge of linguistic diversity. A recent Newsweek special edition (2002) featured a discussion on the minority languages of China. Fifty five minority groups have been identified (8% of the population) speaking 61 languages. Only 21 of these language have written scripts and only 10 are taught in school today.

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During the 2002 consultation on the Framework of Sub-regional EFA Forum for East and Southeast Asia, appropriate educational strategies for marginalized and isolated ethnolinguistic communities were identified and prioritized by almost every nation state. In the framework development, it is emphasized that these plans should be integrated into wider national poverty reduction and socio-economic development frameworks in order to become optimally effective. Given regional and global linguistic diversity and the close interrelationship between language and culture, it is essential that any thorough consideration of independent cultural identities in the face of development also take into account not only the significant “defensive” questions of linguistic and cultural preservation in an increasingly homogenizing national and international linguistic environments but, also the “proactive” question of local language *development*.

2. MODELS OF LITERACY

As in many other Asian countries, many Filipino children begin their education in a language they do not speak or understand as well as their first language. In this setting, only the learners’ first language can provide the kind of bridge to a personal identity that incorporates both an ethnic and a national dimension. A technical model of literacy acquisition that emphasizes literacy primarily as an economic skill for use in the workplace cannot achieve the 1987 policy goals. Rather, an alternative, ideological model of literacy is required which will develop the critical thinking skills of the students, build cognitive and affective domains and value their local language experience and culture. In addition, decision makers need to evaluate literacy practices of communities – what people do with literacy – rather how literacy affects the community itself (Young, 2002a).

In this view, literacy is what society does with literacy. A social system is defined in part by literacy, which is one of its constituent parts. An ideological approach to literacy emphasizes that literacy cannot be neutral (Young, 2002a). Real learning will take place when people engage with the implications of literacy in their own environment.

Literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the ‘neutrality’ and ‘autonomy’ of literacy by many writers is ideological in the sense of disguising this power dimension. (Street, 1984, p. 161)

This approach requires that we view literacy as more than the ability to decipher or encode messages on paper – we must approach literacy in a dynamic context of politics, social change, development and other aspects of the community life and the potential of giving voice to the voiceless and marginalized, enabling them to demystify literacy and apply it to their own purposes rather than the agenda of cultural and social “outsiders.”

3. LANGUAGE CHOICE

Decisions regarding language of instruction for literacy and the relationship between local knowledge and literacy are crucial. Such decisions send both implicit and explicit messages to participants in development and literacy initiatives on the value of their vernacular and the local culture and heritage associated with that language (Young, 2002a). Language is more than just words uttered by a person or read upon a page. Language is so much more than a dictionary or a grammatical description. As Hale (1992, p. 36) says

Language embraces a wide range of human competencies and capacities... (and) embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. Linguistic diversity is a precious resource that, once lost, is irretrievable and irreplaceable.

Sibayan (1967) suggests that the Filipino people have had to face the language problem at practically every stage in their history. Spanish colonization from 1521 until 1898 and the period of American rule from 1900 until the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1946 have both had an impact upon language use in all walks of life, but perhaps none more than in the area of education.

The school has always been a major institution, setting national patterns of language use. Baguingan (1999) highlights the concern within the Philippines for the effective teaching of reading and writing, particularly for students who are speakers of indigenous languages. Students from minority language communities

...do not possess the background, attributes and skills of the dominant language group (they are) distanced from the sources of power and status held by the majority groups who speak the major languages. (Baguingan, 1999, p. 2)

Baker (1996) states that in order to cope in the classroom the child must use a language that is sufficiently well developed to be able to process the cognitive demands of the classroom.

If children are made to operate in the classroom in a poorly developed second language, the quality and quantity of what they learn from complex curriculum materials and produce in oral and written form may be relatively weak and impoverished. (Baker, 1996, p. 148)

Similarly, Castillo (1999) echoes the importance of multilingual education beginning with the first language. She notes that studies in the USA and Canada have shown that, when first language instruction is provided along with appropriate second language instruction, then students can achieve academically at higher levels than if they had been taught in the second language only. There is a significant difference between basic interpersonal communication and the ability to develop context-reduced, abstract reasoning skills in a second language.

3.1 Cognitive development

If the latter, more complex reasoning skills can be developed in the first language, there is the possibility of transfer of the skill to other languages used in the education system. The language itself is a surface feature whereas the cognitive activity takes place within an underlying operating system (Baker, 1996; Murage and Prinz, 1999). This is the basis of the Common Underlying Proficiency model developed by Cummins.

...(although) two languages are visibly different in outward conversation, underneath the surface (they) are fused so that the two languages do not function separately. Both languages operate through the same central processing system. (Baker, 1996, p. 147)

Castillo also suggests that "bilingual learners have a more diversified structure of intelligence and have more flexibility of thought" (1999, p. 1).

Additionally, education is seen by many as empowerment, a means of rising above the disadvantage which geography, economics and culture has imposed upon them. Thus, by first establishing the empowering role of language in the social system of the

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students' community, groundwork is laid for the expansion of the students' identity to include their role in the larger national and international contexts.

Neither Filipino nor English is the mother tongue of the majority of children entering school in the Philippines. Literacy in these major languages does equip the children for the languages used for major functions within the country. However, such a pattern of language use sends a message to the child about the value of their mother tongue and the validity of its use, both in the classroom and beyond. This affects the student in the cognitive realm but also in other non-cognitive areas (Saxena, 1994; Baker, 1996; Dekker, 1999) such as school attendance, self-concept, self-esteem, social and emotional adjustment, employment prospects and moral development. The Philippines Country "Education for All" Assessment (1999) reports that the language of instruction fails, in many instances, to facilitate learning, leading to a high drop-out rate among students.

Many children come from rural and indigenous communities....For many poor children, the long trek (to school) had not been worth their time and effort, especially as learning appeared to be difficult using a vernacular different from that used at home. So they left school. (EFA report, 1999, p. 9)

Literacy is one element of the societal development process and affects many different avenues of life. It involves instrumental knowledge and skills related to words or numbers through print which the individual has mastered but it also incorporates the manipulation of ideas, ideologies and principles in order to influence and impact both the local and national context (Young, 2002a).

4. INDIGENIZED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Alangui (1997) points out that most approaches to the understanding of the learning process take the view that life can be segmented into stages in a somewhat rigid set of rules and boundaries. However, this does not appear to take account of cultural variables in the ways in which communities view knowledge and train their young people to take their place in society. If learning is to have meaning, people's culture and ethnicity must be studied holistically. When the language of education is divorced from the every day life of the child, there is a low level of expectation by the child of the relevance of education. Literacy curriculum should be based on the multiple literacy needs of the community members rather than simply on the autonomous skills of decoding and comprehension (Young, 2002). If the written word is the unique focus of a literacy program, to the exclusion of the visual symbols and oral literature of a community, the image of schooling and education as the domain of the privileged is retained. The written word can be placed alongside other forms of dialogue indicating a repositioning of literacy practices which incorporates cultural knowledge and learning styles. Group processes involving critical reflection are crucial to the application of literacy in this context.

Community-based, indigenous education should involve more than a centralized education system delivered in the vernacular – curriculum content should reflect the needs of participants and empower learners to act within the dominant culture as well as preserve their unique sociocultural identity (Young, 2001). There is a need to challenge assumptions resident in the formal education processes and promote debate on appropriate educational strategies for cultural minorities. We need to ask - how can educators be advocates for the marginalized children from the cultural communities of the Philippines?

Characteristics of an empowering schooling system

Cummins (Baker, 1996) believes that students, particularly minority language students, are empowered or disabled by four major characteristics of school. These are the extent to which

1. the student's home language and culture are incorporated into the curriculum.
2. smaller communities are encouraged to participate in their children's education.
3. education promotes the inner desire for the children to become active seekers of knowledge and not just passive receptacles.
4. the assessment of minority language students avoids locating problems in the student and seeks to find the root of the problem in the social and educational system or curriculum.

Curriculum development, teacher training, materials production and not least, institutional and community support need to be in place before a successful multilingual education program can become established. A constraint in the implementation of a localized curriculum using the mother tongue is certainly the attitude of pupils, parents and other stakeholders to their language and culture. SIL assists disadvantaged ethnolinguistic communities in their efforts not only to preserve their linguistic and cultural identities through documentation – but also in their attempts to strengthen the dynamism of their languages through community-driven literacy, locally-supported educational planning and through local authorship and local-language literature development. These aspects of a language development program have been effective not only as means of strengthening the relevance and sustainability of local-language use but also in strengthening the ability of community members, empowered by the new-found status of their independent linguistic and cultural identities, to engage effectively in a wider cultural and economic context.

When a nation contains such cultural and linguistic diversity, the need increases for a range of community members to be involved in decision-making. The 1999 Education National Development Plan underlines the need for community members, including family members, to be active participants in the process, planning and management of education in order that it will effectively meet the needs of children and young people. In the Philippines, there is increased opportunity for national non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and people's organizations (PO's) to be involved in both formal and non-formal education. It may be that pre-school education and early years education may require significant input from these types of agency in order that vernacular education can be developed to the greatest benefit of children and young people from the cultural communities. The Asian Development Bank study (1999) suggests that small-scale educational programs in rural areas may be more efficiently run by non-government organizations and, thus, more effectively target the needs of pupils from the cultural communities.

5. MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

The support of appropriate materials is a constraint often identified in the development of a localized curriculum. Sibayan (1985) notes that some of the problems of bilingual education among the linguistic minorities in the Philippines are related to the lack of materials in the language. The Council for the Welfare of Children Report (1999) states that schools must change to serve the Filipino child - locally-developed learning materials using vernacular language are suggested in order to maintain pupil's interest in

the curriculum. This would serve to build the child's perception of the value of their language and increase their self-esteem and promote continuing involvement in the education process. Baguingan (1999) highlights the significant financial resources investment and teacher training required to prepare instructional materials for the many languages of the Philippines. However, she has been conducting a program for training teachers from the indigenous communities at Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology to produce quality instructional materials and visual aids at limited cost and train teachers in their appropriate use. Such an approach could be extended to other central teacher training institutions in the Philippines.

The teachers of Lubuagan, Kalinga school district, where a first language component education program is implemented with the support of SIL Philippines, have prepared a series of bilingual traditional stories of Lubuagan and other materials for use as readers by pupils in the elementary school. These stories reflect the culture and lifestyle of the students and encourage comprehension development and reflection on the content by including familiar situations and increased contextual clues. These books have been successfully used with both early elementary children and non-readers in the upper grades of elementary school to motivate and interest the students.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE INVOLVEMENT

Administrators need to actively promote a system before those at the grassroots level feel free to implement an approach. In personal conversation, elementary teachers have told me that students make better progress when the vernacular is used, but they feel reticent to use the vernacular freely because official policy limits its use. Leadership needs to endorse a strategy before it will be widely practiced.

The bilingual education effectiveness study by Lucas, Henze and Donato (Baker, 1996) suggests that teachers should be provided with staff development programs to sensitize them to the students' language and cultural backgrounds. This would help develop appropriate indigenous curriculum materials to increase the relevance of content and approaches. International research in Wales and Canada indicates that the level of commitment of the teacher and educational administration towards bilingual education programs is a significant indicator of the success of the programs (Baker, 1996).

7. CONCLUSION

In a document prepared by the Council on the Welfare of Children (1999) outlining the vision for Philippine education 2000-2005, "child-friendly" conditions for successful education include

- providing education based on the realities of the children's lives in terms of a relevant and locally enriched curriculum
- allowing the children to use their first language during the school day.
- seeking to understand the home and family environments of the children.

Multilingualism does not simply exist between individuals or within their cognitive systems. It is woven into the social and cultural milieu and the political environment. A nation's search for and development of a linguistic symbol of unity and national identity will reveal a great deal about that society and its state of maturation in nationalism (Gonzalez and Alberca, 1991). Thus, the development of a language-in-education policy is not only an educational issue, reflecting curricular decisions or beliefs about child psychology. A multilingual approach in education embodies national beliefs concerning cultural diversity, equal opportunities and human rights (Saxena, 1994). Neither the

national language policy nor the educational literacy strategy can stand in isolation. A debate on the meaning of literacy for a linguistically diverse nation such as the Philippines will inform national decision-making.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 29 and 30) promote the right of a child to use his or her own language (Council for the Welfare of Children, 1999). However, this brings organizational challenges to the process of educational policy development in a nation such as the Philippines which is economically disadvantaged and has huge diversity in language groups. Gonzalez (1998) states some of the disparities in the community which may be caused by a language policy which benefits the culturally advantaged and more affluent classes, often those living in urban areas. He admits that (Gonzalez, 1998, p. 520) "the poorer classes, owing to poor teaching and regrettable working conditions, barely attain literacy and basic interpersonal communication" in the major languages of education.

It would then appear that there needs to be resolve on the parts of all agencies concerned to determine an on-going language-in-education policy with a long-term plan for implementation, evaluation and resource preparation. Gonzalez and Alberca (1991) consider the extent to which language rights, similar to those described in the UN Convention can be upheld in the light of financial constraints. The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank (1999) have both seen the need for new investments in elementary education targeting under-served areas and groups. Baguingan (1999) sees such investment in the indigenous languages bringing great rewards.

My vision for my country is that we could claim the status of a diversified yet unified nation which has as citizens of great originality and creativity because we have supported and saved out indigenous languages, preserving the millennium of knowledge and skills accumulated by the speakers of all our languages.

The protection and development of minority languages is a vital issue in the Philippines today. Their inclusion in the education system is a crucial factor in the attempt to ensure that education is truly for all the population, giving equal opportunities to each cultural group in the nation.

The options for education in a multilingual situation are many. It seems that for the student to learn in his mother tongue provides the best opportunity for cognitive and affective development and the retention of cultural identity. Financial and training resources need to be focused on these groups in order that this may happen. However, without a national language-in-education policy and a realization by all that true education takes place both within and outside of the school, any strategy will be short-lived and lack sustainable impact. The current UN Decade of Literacy is an ideal season in which to develop the debate on literacy and the relevance of the language component to holistic development activities.

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