MULTILILA FINDINGS

The Multilingualism and Multiliteracy (MultiLila) project is a four-year research study (2016–2020). It aims to identify whether or not children who learn through the medium of a language which is not the same as their home languages have different levels of learning outcomes than those children whose home and school languages are the same. Data has been collected in Delhi, Patna and Hyderabad, from children in Standards IV and V.

A total of 2500 children were assessed on their literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills. Classroom observations were also done in their schools to explore teaching practices and how languages are used during English and mathematics lessons. The data tells us that:

- The number of languages a child speaks at home and whether any of them are also used at school has an effect on the child's school and cognitive skills.

- Poverty, lack of rich print exposure at home and migration do not necessarily create cognitive disadvantages. Children living in slum areas in Delhi either did not differ or, in some cases, outperformed children living in non-slum areas. The slum/non-slum distinction did not seem to lead to significant differences in most data from the Hyderabad children. In Patna, there were no differences between children in non-remote rural areas and children in the town areas in Hindi literacy skills, but there were differences in non-verbal IQ with town children performing better.

- Children from Hyderabad showed a strong positive relationship between aspects of cognitive skills and knowing and using many languages.

- The teachers in all three sites used multiple languages as an informal strategy to support learning. Language mixing is used more frequently than the official medium of instruction – both in English medium and regional-language medium schools.

- The majority of lessons observed involved mainly teacher-centred practice which did not encourage children to demonstrate their understanding or skills in a meaningful way.

MULTILILA RECOMMENDATIONS

- Using children's home language(s) in the classroom improves their learning and development of social value.

- All schools in India have multilingual learners. Teachers need training in how to use multilingual approaches to teach students concepts in different subject areas and to support them to learn new language(s).

- Using everyday language to explain mathematics and other academic concepts can aid understanding and learning.

- Children should be encouraged to communicate their understanding in their preferred or strongest language(s), so that any lack of proficiency in the stated medium of instruction does not impede learning of key concepts.

- School systems need to recognise the resilience that children from disadvantaged contexts develop. It is important to build classroom practices on the strengths of the urban and rural poor – including their specific cognitive (e.g. multilingual and applied mathematical knowledge) and metacognitive (awareness of this knowledge) skills.

- Decisions around language use in the classroom cannot be separated from classroom practices that encourage and support learning for all – appropriate language use and effective teaching strategies are equally important.

- Teachers can use storytelling techniques in multiple languages. This uses learners' multilingual resources and develops a deeper level of conceptual engagement and social cognition. This can support children to be proficient multilingual users for academic purposes, generating knowledge and enabling the application of ideas.

MultiLila is led by the University of Cambridge and a strong consortium of partners that includes the University of Reading, UK, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, the British Council and the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore. The project is funded by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and DfID, UK under the umbrella of the Global Education Challenges.

For more information about the project visit https://www.mam.mml.cam.ac.uk/