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E-Language

INTERESTING DISCUSSION ON THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE

KENYA:

Mother Tongue Education Both Effective and Elusive

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NAIROBI, Apr 20 (IPS) - A debate about the extent to which mother tongue schooling improves the quality of education is emerging in Kenya, with certain experts campaigning for children's mother tongue to be used as the language of instruction in schools.

Kenya, as with a number of other countries across Africa, has a majority of its children going through an education system that sometimes fails to provide instruction in the language they speak at home -- which is the language they understand best.

This, it has been said, contributes to illiteracy -- and results in people entering the workforce with inadequate skills.

Experts maintain that pupils are better placed to become literate when they start learning in their first language, and then gradually move to another language, than when they try to learn directly in a second language.

Studies conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation have also shown that children who receive basic education in their own language perform better than those only educated in English.

Campaigns surrounding mother tongue education are now focused on introducing policies that will effectively address mother tongue instruction in schools.

Kenya, for example, has a mother tongue policy which allows children in pre-school and lower primary to be taught in their mother tongue. In the later years of primary education and in secondary school, English becomes the language of instruction.

However, this policy only seems to have been implemented in rural areas, according to Mary Njoroge, director of basic education at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. "The policy is supposedly in effect in the rural areas. In urban areas, there is no uniform mother tongue (instruction)," she told IPS.

In urban areas, it is not unusual to find children as young as two years speaking English, which is widely used as the language of instruction.

There is even concern that Kiswahili (Kenya's national language), has been neglected. It is only taught in schools as a subject.

"There is not as much emphasis on Kiswahili as there is on English, which is a foreign and

colonial language," says Francis Ng'ang'a, secretary general of the Kenya National Union of Teachers.

"Kiswahili should equally be developed as a language of instruction. The level at which it has been underutilised raises a lot of questions. This shows a lot of colonial hangover, and the trend must change."

While he admits that English is useful, Ng'ang'a says local languages play an important part in promoting culture -- and giving children a sense of belonging and identity.

"It is therefore important to promote these languages at the very basic level of learning such as nursery schools, and then let the children slowly be introduced to Kiswahili, and then English as they come up the ladder. This must be done both in rural and urban areas," he notes.

However, the promotion of mother tongue learning requires broad support.

"It needs a lot of sensitisation on parents so that they can understand why it is important for children to be taught in their vernacular," said Njoroge. English remains sought-after by many, who view it as a superior language, for the educated.

The campaign to have mother tongue learning intensified in schools also enjoys the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

"We uphold that mother tongue education is important, just like English, because we live in a global world and we have to prepare children to be both local and international citizens," says Haregot Teija Valladingham, UNICEF's acting regional education advisor for Eastern and Southern Africa.

"Besides, when we are talking about achieving education for all, we must deal with it (mother tongue learning)."

But the cost of implementing a mother tongue education system poses a challenge.

"This is expensive because teachers have to be trained and books translated into the various languages. Most countries have many mother tongues," notes Valladingham.

Uganda has experienced this challenge. With a policy that provides for the relevant local language to be the medium of instruction in rural areas during the first four years of primary education, one of the major hurdles has been the high cost of preparing and producing text books and other basic learning materials in several languages (Uganda has more than 30 languages).

The government has reportedly been able to produce material in about 20 languages.

Certain subjects also resist translation into the mother tongue.

"It is difficult to teach and translate concepts such as maths and biology into local languages...Why not use English? English is easy to communicate," Nelson Kaperemera, the director of basic education in Malawi, told IPS recently.

Malawi has embraced mother tongue education, where the national language, Chichewa, is used as a medium of instruction in the first four years of primary schooling. (END/2006)
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