

Research Article

A Case of Mother-Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education

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Date of Submission: 21/05/2019; Date of Acceptance: 30/06/2019

ABSTRACT

This working paper describes the efforts of making mother tongue-based multilingual education possible at the ground level. It takes a position that in Indian context, democracy can be considered 'good' if diverse ethnicities, multiple cultures and varied languages are included in the education system. The organisation in this paper demonstrates an example of such inclusion in primary grades of schooling. The suggestions are for policy makers and the implementers.

Keywords: Mother tongue based education, Multi-lingual education, Tribal education, Education of Korku children, Policy recommendations on MTB MLE

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

The operational area of Unnati Institute for Social and Educational Change (Unnati ISEC) is in the Akola district of Vidarbha region. The area is situated in hilly terrains of Akot and Telhara blocks of Akola district, also the southern tip of Melghat region of the Amravati district. The ST population of Akot and Telhara blocks is 9.28% and 6.21% respectively (Census, 2011). Communities in this area are mostly ethnic Korku as well as a few Nimadi, Gond and Bhil.

Although the rapid deforestation has alienated these tribal communities from their natural habitat and forest-based livelihood, they have maintained their habit of living as homogenous group in small hamlets on hilly terrains. Due to homogeneous living, generally a tribal child is exposed only to her mother-language (Korku) during the formative six years since birth. At 6 years, a tribal child gets enrolled in school where the medium of education is the State's Marathi language, which has a very different structure than the Korku language. Mainly Hindi television programs are watched by

households with access. Hindi and local dialect Marathi is the second language used by the Korku speaking population to communicate with the external world.

From the household survey, Unnati ISEC conducted in July 2015 in eight villages, it was noted that from among 1614 parents of these children, 49% are uneducated whereas 23% are studied till 5th grade and 13% studied till Grade 8. As the locality is relatively cut off from the main village, and lacks transportation and wider exposure to other services, there is a high likelihood that, parents who have studied till class 5th have forgotten the basic reading writing skills after a gap of long time. So these parents could almost be considered illiterate. Conversely, majority of school going children from this area are first generation learners with illiterate parents.

There is a lack of reading culture and print-rich environment in the villages. The Korku language has never been scripted. Written literature is conspicuously absent – rather the transmission of life from one generation to the next happens solely orally and ‘being together’.

The early childhood education other than home is said to be and expected to be started from Anganwadi centre. But the Anganwadi centres are restricted here only for nutritional food supplement and few mother and child welfare services. The expected pre-primary education is not imparted.

Primary school teachers are from totally different socio-cultural background; the curriculum framework doesn't include tribal upbringing; and the scope to stimulate a child's creativity is but small.

The mismatch between tribal children's life and the school environment obviously results in low retention rate and an inability to attain basic educational skills.

CHILDREN ARE NOT LEARNING IN THE TRIBAL BELT

Data shows that the drop out rate of ST children in classes is 35.6% at classes I – V which further increases at classes I – X and becomes 70.9%. The gap in the drop out rate between ST and non-ST children in classes I – V is 8.6% and 21.6% in classes I – X (Affairs, 2013).

It is clear that the struggle to ensure equitable access to STs continues.

In order to map the exact issue, in 2014, Unnati ISEC conducted a survey with 1186 school going children from 38 tribal villages in Akola district of Maharashtra. The purpose was to gauge the status of basic skills in reading and writing of Marathi and basic skills in Arithmetic. The survey reflected the abysmal state of children's learning. Only 6.48%

children from third class could read paragraph in Marathi, whereas 64% children were at the level of reading letters and words. Only 25% children could not even read a word. Only 12.9% children from fifth class could read Marathi story. Percentage of reading paragraph in fifth, sixth and seventh standard was 22.7%, 29.5% and 45%, respectively.

In the case of Arithmetic, the situation was grimmer. It is expected in third class that children should be able to do subtraction. However, only 1.8% children did well in subtraction whereas 72% children were at the level of reading numbers and remaining 24% could not read even numbers. Only 2.4% and 4% children from fifth and sixth class, respectively, could successfully do basic division. Situation is not different in Classes 7 and 8. Only 3.5% and 9.6% children from 7th and 8th classes, respectively, knew the basic division skill.

Although Unnati ISEC is active in the Akola district, the population of the Korkus is high in the Melghat region in Amravati district of Maharashtra, which comprises Dharani and Chikhaldara geographical blocks. According to the Indian Census 2011, the population of Dharani and Chikhaldara is 1,60,904 and 1,18,815 with STs comprising 77% and 78.32%, respectively (Census2011). There is no data available of recent times of the linguistic population. However, a report in 2004 records that among the STs, a substantial 89.27% belong to the Korku tribe and others to Gond, Nihal, Mongia, etc. (Khandare, 2004).

Hence, a Korku population of approximately 2.5 lakhs is affected by the children's lack of learning.

WHY HAS LEARNING SUFFERED?

Tribal children are not learning despite the availability of schools. Reasons we found was the linguistic and cultural distance between the children and the school.

Children's mother tongue - Korku - is completely different from Marathi, the school's language. For these children, Marathi becomes a second language in schools but the syllabus is designed such that Marathi is considered as the first language.

Their mother tongue does not have a place in school, as:

- No educational material is available and used in school in their mother tongue
- Teachers, with few exceptions, do not know children's language. Who know it, do not use it in the classroom as a resource for learning.
- No special methods of teaching Marathi language to the children having different mother tongue is used

Teachers do not know Korku and children, while entering school, do not know Marathi. Unnati ISEC has seen that this detached position creates a major barrier to learning. The mismatch leads to the loss of language proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills in Marathi and in even their own native languages.

School curriculum and textbooks do not feature these people's culture which is different from the people living on plains. The other school processes, that is, communication between teacher and children, evaluation systems, curriculum transaction exercises devalue the tribal children's culture and language. As the connection between the children's daily life and school education is adrift, probably children do not enjoy the education.

During field visits, Unnati ISEC has observed that teachers need knowledge of the pedagogy addressing children's differential learning needs/styles. There is also a need to work on teachers' prejudice which presupposes that '*these children will not learn.*'

UNNATI ISEC'S RESPONSE—MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

In Maharashtra, organisations have worked on developing methods for teaching and learning language. When searched for the efforts in order to learn from them and apply the model to Unnati ISEC's area, it was found that no structured efforts have yet been made to develop and document methods and materials required for education and language learning in multilingual context. So Unnati ISEC initiated its own work around development of literacy in multilingual situations.

Maharashtra government has developed a guiding document that urges to respond to the differential educational needs of the tribal children, with special focus on their language. So this became a positive ground for Unnati ISEC's work. As the teachers and officials from education department were aware of the state government's approach, Unnati ISEC didn't face opposition to its MTB MLE approach.

1. The work Is Based on the Following Thoughts and Principles

Strengthening the Democracy

Of the languages documented by People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), 480 are languages spoken by tribal and nomadic tribes, where as about 80 are coastal languages (Jakhade, 2013).

In Maharashtra, there are more than 20 tribal and nomadic languages spoken by communities. Acquiring Marathi language skills from regular schools is a problem for them. Exceptions exist, i.e. where teachers commit to extra efforts.

Despite having so much variety in languages in the state, non-creation of any material in children's own language and not creating systems and practices for including children's languages and culture in the education system is a policy failure. In a way, government is supporting the domination of Marathi over other spoken languages and communities are compelled to forget their language and culture. We do understand that this is not just disappearance of language, but of the whole culture. India can be called a democratic country in its true sense, if the state respects cultural diversity in the country and creates spaces and systems for inclusion of the diverse cultures and various languages in the education system. But, on the contrary, we believe that schools are becoming a place of killing the linguistic variety and cultural diversity and willy-nilly they spread mono-cultural and mono-lingual society. We believe that if the different languages and cultures have to exist and thrive, they should become a part of school's medium of instruction and curriculum.

Right to Learn in Home Language

Article 350A of the Indian Constitution states that *It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups*; However, the media of instruction in the schools of India are the State languages or Urdu, English and even Sanskrit, which is not a spoken language of any societal group (NCERT, 2006). Unfortunately, there is not single evidence that school education is provided in tribal children's mother tongue in India, where they are in minority.

We acknowledge community's right to learn in own language. Whether to exercise it or not is their choice. But, non-availability of an opportunity is an injustice, which we believe is happening with tribal and nomadic communities.

Learning Is Possible Only If Education Is Founded in Children's Mother Tongue

We believe that foundations for learning can be developed if education is delivered in the language children speak at home and if the education is relevant to children's lives.

2. Our Work -the practice of MTB MLE in Akola district of Maharashtra

Unnati ISEC is working since 2015 in the domain of MLE in Maharashtra. We have adopted mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) approach in our work, which echoes UNESCO's frame of MTB-MLE (Malone, 2018).

In our approach, formal education starts in child's mother tongue, which continues for 3 years. Literacy and education are provided in children's home language situated within

their own culture, value and habitat. The exposure to state language Marathi starts from the beginning in the form of listening and speaking activities.

In our approach of MTB–MLE, we thrust on following:

- Facilitating improvement in Korku (mother tongue) literacy in tribal children and in Marathi which is the school's medium of instruction.
- Developing the pedagogy to be used for language learning of these children, which include instructional strategies and teaching learning materials.
- Creating spaces and culture in school where children's language and culture has a dignified place in school processes, which, apart from pedagogy, include textbooks and story books.
- Developing children's literature in Korku language in order to make available the reading resources to the children from Korku community.

The perspective, pedagogy developed from UNNATI' ISEC's programme will be one of the answers to the issue of learning of children from Tribal and nomadic communities and for conservation of linguistic and cultural diversity by providing it a station of honour within a school's processes.

Components of the Work

Unnati ISEC conducts classes before school starts in four Korku speaking villages. The work in a few villages should be able to guide and help the government and non-government agencies to develop instructional design and frame of education and buttress efforts at admission and retention in schools, thousands of out of school children from tribal and nomadic communities having a different language than the state's official Marathi language.

a) MTB–MLE-Based Pedagogy

Learning centres are running in four villages by rigorously trained local youths throughout the year, 5 days a week before the school time. The literacy class of the two and a half hours develop pedagogy of literacy based on MTB MLE approach, which includes (1) instructional strategies in the classroom which use Korku as a resource (2) developing teaching learning material, language games, songs and other reading material in Korku language (3) oral activities in Korku and Marathi (4) library of story books in Korku and Marathi (4) art, minor sport and board games.

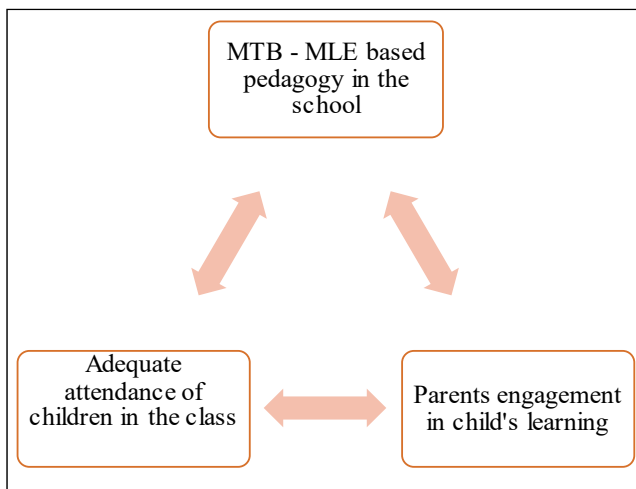
For first 2 years, the focus is to develop literacy in Korku language and create opportunities for listening and speaking Marathi. In the third year, strategies are used to develop

Marathi reading skills. At Unnati ISEC, Literacy is not just developing skills like Listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) but promoting thinking in the wake of LSRW skills.

The benefits of the pedagogy are manifold. The children from the learning centres progress on developing literacy. Diffidence melts away, children become vocal in the classes and participate in the oral activities. They now enjoy reading storybooks.

b) Parents’ participation in child’s education

However, we have understood that thrust only upon using appropriate pedagogy in the classroom is not sufficient. Student absenteeism in the class is rampant. After Dussehra (an Indian festival), their cultural events start. Various Yatras, offerings to their gods and goddesses, Holi, marriages, protection of their agricultural fields are some of the reasons for



increased child absenteeism. The whole village participates in such occasions. Getting back children to the learning centre after a gap of three to four days becomes a difficult task. We have seen that freedom is a part of their culture. So there is a freedom to children not to go to the school or learning centres. Life experiences and participation in these occasions becomes important than attending the learning centre. In this backdrop, strategies need to be designed for increasing attendance of children in learning processes and increasing parents’ engagement in their child’s learning. Unnati ISEC experienced that regular and continuous dialogue with parents regarding their children’s learning and their supportive role has helped increased the attendance at the learning centre. Well designed parents monthly meetings and regular home visits play a critical role in children’s attendance and learning.

c) Teachers Learn and Respect Children’s Language and Culture

It is non-negotiable that teachers use children’s language in primary grades. It plays a vital role in connecting with children and making them feel close with the school and their teachers. At Unnati ISEC’s learning centres, Shiksha Mitras (Education volunteers)

have been recruited who know Korku. Initially, until teachers learn the children's language, they need to identify children's second language and use it while communicating with children. In Korku speaking areas, Hindi is a second language.

It has been observed that often teachers are negatively biased of tribal society's life and culture. They tend to perceive tribal culture as undeveloped and thus, substandard. So, the teachers need to be oriented around the children's culture, lifestyle nuances and language structures. They need to understand and respect that it's a different culture and language, with its own worldview, esteem and values.

d) Creating Literature in Children's Mother Tongue

In the process of development of literacy, ample opportunities to children for reading and exposure to written language is critical. Children's literature should be available not only in schools but also in public domain, that is, in people's homes, public libraries, bookshops are important. It is a sign of dignity and respect to the language, when written forms are available in public domains. Unnati ISEC has witnessed people purchasing the Korku books for their children, when access and availability was easy e.g. during Yatras. This certainly would help develop reading culture in the community, which is otherwise absent as their language was never scripted.

As an effort for creating children's literature in their mother tongue, Unnati ISEC:

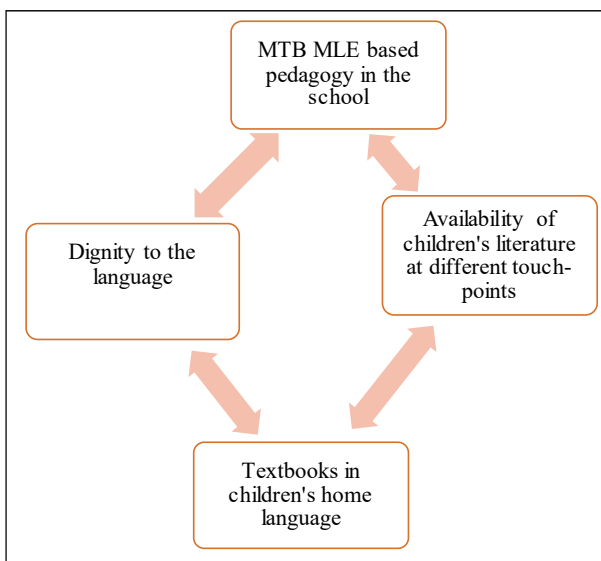
- Has translated over 140 stories in Korku of various publishers, such as, National Book Trust, Pratham and Jyotsna Prakashan— a reputed publishers from Marathi. Of these, 75 are available on “story weaver”, a global digital platform for children's stories in many global languages.
- A system of translations has been learned and inculcated, in which the selection of books and the process of translation is thoughtfully designed.
- Eleven stories situated in children's own context are authored.
- Created a pictorial glossary (Khushite Ithuba) cum practice book for children in the Korku language, which can also be used by parents, teachers or anyone who is interested in learning Korku language.
- Created a pocket book of kids' rhymes (Khushite Shirinje) for children in Korku and Marathi is.
- Created workbook of reading pedagogy for children.

e) Creating Textbooks in Korku

As a strategy of using children's languages in schools, efforts of including some text in tribal language in the Marathi language textbook of Classes I and II are evident of the

positive approach of the Maharashtra government. However, this symbolism does not render justice to the education of children from tribal communities. Efforts are required to situate the learning process within the closest socio-cultural context of the children from tribal community. During its fieldwork, Unnati ISEC realised that offering children’s language a place in the textbook and curriculum requires deeper understanding of the context and culture of the children. Special efforts are required as the culture, values, worldview and living patterns of the tribal community is very different from the communities living in plains.

For Unnati ISEC, textbook is a wider sweep. It not only consists of the traditional ‘textbook’ but also a package of text and picture material absorbed in the classroom. It’s a combination of i) ready-made material in the form of textbooks, selected storybooks or stories ii) text and pictures created by the children in the classrooms iii) specially created pictures and text having local stories, proverbs etc. This position is guided by the



recommendation of NCF 2005 that plurality of textbooks and other material, which could incorporate local knowledge and traditional skills, and a stimulating school environment that responds to the child’s home and community environment. The Position paper on curriculum, syllabus and textbooks also observe that learning happens when the ‘content’ of the curricula is contextualised in the child’s experiences and cultural knowledge, whether of plants, animals, people or processes.

We are engaged into creating text material for children of Korku community. We have understood that mere development of MTB–MLE pedagogy would be incomplete if creation of textbooks and children’s literature in children’s home language is not considered and focused upon.

SUGGESTIONS TO THE POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

MTB–MLE requires policy support for its effective and successful implementation. From our experience, we have some suggestions.

1. Systematic development and documentation of MTB–MLE pedagogy and making it accessible to the implementers is necessary. It is important to understand that, instead of Marathi or state language, language teaching–learning methods need to treat children’s home language as the first language.
2. Pedagogy for teaching and learning of Marathi as second language should be developed and used initially in multilingual situations.
3. In Korku majority area, after Korku, Hindi is the language of communication with other society. Marathi is rarely used. This fact needs to be taken into consideration while formulating language pedagogy in such situations.
4. The Government should develop the courses for teachers for learning children’s languages and cultures and using MTB–MLE pedagogy.
5. It is seen that generally teachers treat tribal parents condescendingly and perceive them as illiterates and hence not worthy of respect having zero nuisance value. Efforts for engagement of parents are very crucial on the part of teachers to ensure their participation in children’s learning. Strategies have to be worked out to seek even illiterate parents participation in their children’s education.
6. Creating TLM for MTB–MLE is a major task, which the teachers alone cannot deliver. Role of district institutes and training is crucial in developing relevant TLM for the languages in their respective districts.
7. Creating children’s literature has to be given primacy in the use of MTB–MLE. Language institutes of the State and Central government, agencies tasked with creating children’s literature and agencies responsible for distribution and access at reasonable rates need to take responsibility of creating it in many mother tongues.
8. Decentralisation of creating text material is necessary to ensure justice to the diverse cultures to be included in the education system.
9. The Government should urgently pursue continuous and rigorous efforts for capacity building of teachers and district agencies in developing MTB MLE text material.

CONCLUSION

The paper argues in favour of MTB–MLE. Policy and systemic supports are required for its effective and successful implementation. MTB–MLE is not limited to the use of children’s mother tongue in the schools, but the focus should also be on developing children’s literature, text material situated in the context of tribal community, making it available and accessible in public domain. It is imperative to develop teachers who speak the children’s language and appreciate the children’s culture. Without parents’

engagement, the efforts for strengthening MTB–MLE will be incomplete, so the teachers and parents developing mutual respect becomes a pre-cursor to successful MTB MLE implementation and greater learning outcomes.

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How to cite this article: Hemangi Joshi (2019) 'A Case of Mother-Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 183-193.