



Ensuring inclusive education for ethnolinguistic minority children in the COVID-19 era

This Guidance Note aims to stimulate thinking into the unique challenges facing children from marginalized ethnolinguistic communities as they re-enter school or continue with various forms of distance learning.¹ Links to resources that may not address language directly, but contain information that could be applied to ethnolinguistic minority children, are included as footnotes.

Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Region is home to half of the world's 7,117 living languages.² Impressive regional progress on Sustainable Development Goal #4's vision to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education" has been severely jeopardized by the COVID-19 pandemic. The more marginalized the child, the greater the threat.

The gradual reopening of schools may introduce new challenges. Impoverished families may find it even more difficult to meet the direct and indirect costs of schooling. Parents may hesitate to send their children back to school due to fear and a lack of understanding about COVID-19 guidelines. Long periods of school closure increase the chances of premature labour-pool entry for older children and early marriage for girls, making it more difficult for them to resume formal schooling.³ Children whose previous school experiences were negative may not want to return.

¹ In this Guidance Note, "school" includes educational facilities of all kinds, formal and non-formal, including early childhood and pre-primary.

² <https://www.ethnologue.com>

³ UNESCO. *How Many Students are at Risk of not Returning to School?* Paris: UNESCO, 2020. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992>.

Compounded disadvantages

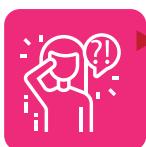
Mother tongue-based education is a key factor in both school enrolment and school survivability for ethnolinguistic minority children.⁴ Such children face multiple and compounding disadvantages in their efforts to enrol and stay in school, including:



Remoteness, as many live in areas with limited infrastructure (electricity, internet, television, sealed roads) impacting conventional schooling as well as delivery of print or online distance learning materials;



Poverty, as many ethnolinguistic minority families lack adequate economic resources to either support online learning or ensure that their children (re)enrol in school;



Language barriers, as many of these children will have lost valuable time in learning in their own languages (where mother tongue-based programme are available) or in gaining exposure to the school language (where they are not), impacting children and parents alike and limiting distance learning options;⁵



Related to this, **the lack of appropriate emergency education materials** (in print or online), which are often available only in national or international languages rather than minority tongues;



Seasonal or permanent migration, related to COVID-19 or other factors, as children on the move may be more likely to drop out of school for financial reasons or from feeling alienated in a new school where peers and teachers speak unfamiliar languages;



The perceived **higher cost of mother tongue-based instruction** (despite research to the contrary) that may cause governments to cut back or eliminate multilingual education programmes;



Teacher attrition, as teachers from outside the local community may have returned to their home areas and be reluctant or unable to return;



The **widening of existing gaps**, as ethnolinguistic minority children whose school performance may have already been low fall further behind.

⁴ UNICEF. *The Investment Case for Education and Equity*. Paris: UNICEF, 2015. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/investment-case-education-and-equity>.

⁵ United Nations. *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond*. New York: United Nations, 2020. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf.

Practical suggestions

Additional considerations for policy-makers and implementers include:

During COVID-19

? Ethnolinguistic minority parents may lack the educational background and language skills to help their children with distance learning.

💡 Suggestion: Encourage parents to share cultural information with their children, including folktales, dance, customs, food, etc., to keep their young brains stimulated and growing. Simultaneously, identify and train local community volunteers to help children with distance learning and communicate crucial COVID-19 health messages to children and their parents. As schools reopen, these local people can serve as teaching assistants, particularly in areas experiencing teacher shortages.

? Students in Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programmes with limited exposure to other languages may perform below their actual ability if emergency materials are only available in national or international languages.

💡 Suggestion: Work with community-based organizations to ensure that emergency education materials are provided in the language(s) the child knows best, in easily accessible forms.

? The global emphasis on digital learning may exclude ethnolinguistic minority children due to limited internet access, lack of funds to purchase electronic devices, and lack of parental familiarity with technology. On the other hand, electronic materials in the mother tongue may be cheaper to create and faster to distribute than printed materials.

💡 Suggestion: Consider off-line, low-tech and no-tech solutions.⁶ Optimize existing media infrastructure, including TV, radio, loudspeakers, and billboards.⁷ Free open source e-books and talking books may be translated into multiple languages and downloaded onto SD cards for easy access on devices not connected to the internet.⁸

⁶ UNICEF ROSA. *Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach all Children and Youth during School Closures*. Kathmandu: UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, 2020. https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/7996/file/Guidance%20Continuity%20of%20Learning%20during%20COVID-19%20-%20Reaching%20All%20Children_UNICEF%20ROSA.pdf.

⁷ UNESCO. 'Recommendations to Plan Distance Learning Solutions.' 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-10-recommendations-plan-distance-learning-solutions>.

⁸ SIL International. 'Talking Books Digital Technology Boosts Learning in PNG.' n.d. <https://www.sil.org/about/news/talking-books-digital-technology-boosts-learning-png>.

Post COVID-19

? Children and their parents may hesitate to return to school, for a variety of reasons.

💡 Suggestion: Utilize appropriate local media and community influencers to generate “Back to School” momentum, addressing questions and concerns in local languages.

? Due to school interruptions, a large number of ethnolinguistic minority students may not meet grade-level expectations, especially in national language programmes, and thus be expected to repeat a grade.

💡 Suggestion: Grade repetition **increases** the risk that a child will drop out of school. Instead, consider extra assisted or accelerated study, preferably in the mother tongue.⁹

? High-stake national examinations and evaluations are stressful for teachers and children in the best of times, and may compound the stresses brought about by COVID-19, resulting in an actual decrease in learning as teachers “teach to the test.” This is especially true for ethnolinguistic minority students whose exposure to the examination language may have been disrupted by the pandemic.

💡 Suggestion: If assessments cannot be postponed or alternative evaluations developed, test ethnolinguistic minority children in the language(s) in which they studied each subject, whether that be the mother tongue (for younger children in MTB-MLE programmes) or the dominant school language.¹⁰

? The COVID-19 experience has traumatized people all over the world. Children may find it difficult to process their fears and hopes verbally, especially if asked to do so in a language they do not speak well.

💡 Suggestion: Allot extra time in schools for non-verbal creative expression, such as drawing and painting, as well as local art forms (music, dance, drama) which are familiar to the students and can enhance resilience while restoring a sense of stability, self-worth, cultural identity, and well-being. Sports and small group games can return enjoyment and normalcy to schools. Such activities reduce stress and enhance emotional healing, making children more ready to learn.¹¹

9 UNESCO. *Don't Remediate, Accelerate! Paris: UNESCO and Johns Hopkins School of Education, 2020.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374029?fbclid=IwAR0RpCfkHaTCPhtcO9i5QMRPnTdw3nNBtuoC2-QzISKY1Og5wdICF0Mc6Xg>.

10 UNESCO. *COVID-19: A Glance of National Coping Strategies on High-stakes Examinations and Assessments.* Paris: UNESCO, 2020. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_review_of_high-stakes_exams_and_assessments_during_covid-19_en.pdf.

11 Save the Children. ‘Social Emotional Learning.’ n.d. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12410/pdf/226_sc_social_emotional_learning_-_brief.pdf.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis need not have a devastating impact on education. Indeed, the pandemic provides an opportunity for innovation and for fresh solutions to longstanding problems.¹² Ethnolinguistic minority children, typically among the hardest to reach in any country, can sustain and even build on their pre-pandemic gains if their unique linguistic situation is factored into educational policies, plans, budgets, and programmes during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

¹² World Bank. 'Building Back Better: Education Systems for Resilience, Equity and Quality in the Age of COVID-19.' 2020. <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/497341595425543327/Building-Back-Better-Distance-Learning.pdf>.

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