

Linguistics' role in the right to education

In primary schools across the world, 40% of students must learn all academic subjects, including how to read, in a language that they do not speak fluently (1). Excluding students' native languages from the classroom leads to academic failure for hundreds of millions of children throughout the world (1), contributes to their communities' socioeconomic underdevelopment (2), and violates their human rights (3).

Postcolonial communities in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific are most likely to subject their students to instruction in a non-native language (4). This correlation is no accident: The exclusion of noncolonial languages in education is one of the most insidious tools of class-based and geopolitical power struggles in colonial and postcolonial societies (5). In Haiti, for example, French is spoken fluently by no more than 5% of the population (6), whereas Haitian Creole ("Kreyòl") is spoken by virtually everyone. Yet French is the primary language of formal education. This language barrier has handicapped generations of students who speak only Kreyòl and has contributed to Haiti's status as one of three countries with the highest levels of inequity in the world (7).

Hawaii can serve as a model for a way forward. Hawaii has a successful language-immersion program with high enrollment of indigenous children whose first language is Hawaiian (8). The immersion schools have enhanced the students' learning gains, including the learning of second languages such as English (8). Through recent legislation that strengthens education in noncolonial languages (9), the United States is expanding language-immersion and dual-language education to include Native

American and other minority languages (10). These models should be extended to communities worldwide. One crucial step is to develop high-quality active-learning methods and resources for teaching in every student's native language [e.g., (11)].

Access to education in all languages, including those of disadvantaged communities whose languages have been excluded in education, will allow everyone to "enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications," as provided by Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (12). To accomplish this goal, we need more research and international collaboration among linguists, scientists, mathematicians, engineers, and educators. Together, we can work to include noncolonial languages in the design of high-quality educational resources that enhance active learning and are anchored in local culture and local needs. Academic and government leaders, as well as granting agencies and international organizations, can help encourage and fund such research.

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