Laying a Solid Foundation for Learning: Lessons from the Kom MLE Project in Cameroon

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What is “MLE”?

• Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE or just MLE)
• Using the child’s mother tongue as the initial language of instruction
• Introducing an additional language or languages subsequently, first in oral form, and later in written form
• “Mother tongue”, “Home language”, “First language”, “A language the child understands well”
Why use an MLE approach?

• Children can learn if they understand
• Easier to teach reading when the child knows the language
• Greater educational success
• True even for the second language
Why isn’t MLE used more often?

• Official language more valuable?
• Move to the new language quickly
• Using first language waste of time or hindrance?
Kom Education Pilot Project (KEPP)

- English-speaking North West Region of Cameroon
- Approximately 250,000 speakers
- Kom is primary language in the area
- School staff speak Kom
- English is primary language of instruction
- Performance very poor
What was the intervention?

• Grades 1-3: Kom is language of instruction
• Students also learn oral English
• Third grade: learn to read and write in English
• Fourth grade: transition to English
Baseline

• Reading comprehension in English:
  – 4% after one year of school
  – only 20% in Class 6
• Math scores:
  – under 10%
  – even counting under 15%
• Some children in Class 4 “had never held a pencil or written on a piece of paper”
One year—comparison of scores

Histogram of Overall Performance - Grade 1

Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>StDev</th>
<th>N</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>18.36</td>
<td>13.13</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEPP</td>
<td>59.57</td>
<td>25.04</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Percent of Students

Scores (Percent)
Comparison on sub-tests

- Average Score (Percentage)

**Test Components**
- Reading
- Math
- Oral English

- English-medium
- Kom-medium
Comparison on reading sub-tests

- Word identification
- Grammar
- Reading comprehension
- Overall

Average Score (Percentage)

Test Components

- English-medium
- Kom-medium
Specific features of the intervention

• Children learn to read in Kom
• Reading out loud to students
• Phonics to teach decoding
• Integrated reading curriculum
• Questioning strategies to promote comprehension and reasoning
And there’s more!

- 10 minutes daily for independent reading or writing
- English language development
- Instruction in math
- Teacher training
- Teacher support
Results after five years

Comparisons Across Grades

Group Mean Performance

Grade 1 | Grade 2 | Grade 3 (Kom) | Grade 3 (Eng.) | Grade 4 | Grade 5

Control KEPP

[Bar chart showing performance comparisons for different grades and years]
Conclusions after five years

• Use of mother tongue has brought significant improvements
• Gains of more than 60%
• Stronger reading comprehension, oral proficiency, knowledge of English
The difficulties of early exit programs

- “Early exit”: complete transition to another language early in primary school
- “Late exit”: use the mother tongue throughout primary
- Late exit programs have stronger outcomes
- Kom project shows weaker outcomes
In their own words...
Questions? Comments?
Credits

• Dr. Stephen L. Walter, Professor Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics, Dallas, Texas USA
• Dr. Kristine Tramell, International Consultant in Literacy and Education, SIL International
• Kain Godfrey Chuo, Literacy Specialist, SIL Cameroon