

**A More-than-Language Approach to Inclusion of Indigenous Children in Education:
Reflections on Cambodia's Multilingual Education Plan**

Jessica Ball
University of Victoria, Canada

Mariam Smith
Learning Loop Inc, Sweden

Corresponding Author: Jessica Ball, University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care, PO
Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria, BC Canada V8W 2Y2. jball@uvic.ca

A More-than-Language Approach to Inclusion of Indigenous Children in Education: Reflections on Cambodia’s Multilingual Education Plan

ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential of multilingual education (MLE) to support inclusion of Indigenous children in meaningful education. It examines a 2014 initiative by the Royal Government of Cambodia, whose Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP) and subsequent Multilingual Education Action Plan (MEAP) enable Indigenous children to start preschool and primary school using one of five Indigenous languages as the initial medium of instruction. Using an early-exit bilingual model, children transition to the dominant Khmer language and national curriculum in Primary 4. The article identifies and interrogates the assumptions, orientation, and goals that inspired the Cambodian government’s support for MLE for Indigenous children through its two successive five-year plans. Observations and analysis draw on the authors’ independent evaluation of the first five-year plan. The article reinforces an understanding of MLE in which the languages used in education are conceived as a means to transmit culturally diverse ways of knowing, doing, and being so that children become multilingual, multiliterate, and multicultural. This requires a more-than-language approach to MLE whereby nondominant language speakers partner with educators to generate culturally sustaining curriculum content, learning activities and teaching resources that immerse children in the knowledges, thinking, and skills of their own cultural community.

Keywords: Multilingual education, Cambodia, culturally sustaining pedagogy, multiliteracy, Indigenous children

INTRODUCTION

Of 258 million children out of school¹ worldwide and 773 million adults who cannot read and write, most belong to nondominant linguistic, ethnic, religious or Indigenous communities (UIS 2019). Among these, Indigenous children—especially girls—are the most excluded from education (UNICEF 2014). Their exclusion starts before primary school, with monumental challenges associated with poverty and the steady erosion of their rights to traditional territories, community governance, and ways of life. Inadequate nutrition and stimulation in infancy and lack of access to preschool are prevalent. In primary school, they often cannot understand the language of instruction and are denied opportunities to learn culturally based knowledge and their home languages that embody and communicate this knowledge (Lee and McCarty 2015; UNDESA 2019). By failing to provide meaningful education for nondominant communities, states violate international laws, declarations, and conventions and contribute to culture and language loss, inequitable economic growth, and internal conflict (Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). Governments and aid donors have not fully awakened to the need to address inequities in education, specifically the needs of nondominant language communities (Minority Rights Group International 2009). Moreover, governments and development partners have not embraced an expanded view of inclusion that extends beyond enrolling marginalized children in mainstream classrooms. Nor have they responded substantially to the self-identified goals of nondominant language communities and afforded them a privileged place in implementing inclusive education initiatives such as multilingual education (MLE).

¹ This includes 59 million children of primary school age.

MLE that starts with the home language can support Indigenous children’s engagement in meaningful education. In MLE, children start preschool or Primary 1 in their first language (sometimes called mother tongue or home language). In the most effective models, they are gradually introduced to one or more additional languages while continuing to learn in their first language at least until they can read to learn (Cummins 2009). This article explores the potential of MLE by examining a 2014 initiative by the Royal Government of Cambodia, whose Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP) and subsequent Multilingual Education Action Plan (MEAP) enable Indigenous children to start preschool and primary school using one of five Indigenous languages as the initial medium of instruction. Through a transitional early-exit approach (Spolsky and Hult 2010), children transition to the dominant Khmer language² and the national curriculum in Primary 4. This article identifies and interrogates the assumptions, orientation, and goals that inspired the Cambodian government’s support, beginning in 2015, for MLE for Indigenous children in the northeastern provinces where they are most populous. Our observations and analysis draw on our independent evaluation of the first five-year plan. The article reinforces the understanding held by some proponents of MLE that the languages used in education are a means to bring forward culturally diverse ways of knowing, doing, and being so that children become multilingual, multiliterate, and multicultural. This requires a more-than-language approach to MLE whereby nondominant language speakers partner with educators to generate curriculum content, learning activities and resources that immerse children in the knowledges, thinking, and skills of their own cultural community.

CONTEXT

Cambodia’s population is young: of 16 million Cambodians in 2017, 31 percent were under 15 and 20 percent were between 15 and 24 (UNDESA 2017). Approximately 1.2 percent are Indigenous, belonging to an estimated 17 ethnic groups (Ethnologue n.d.). Most Indigenous people live in five northeastern provinces. While this highlands area is fairly remote, recent infrastructure development has led to massive internal migration, changes in market relations and traditional leadership, and loss of large areas of forest, a main source of livelihood for Indigenous people. Loss of natural resources and erosion of traditional ways of life have yielded high levels of poverty and the threat of extinction of the languages, cultures, and livelihoods of Indigenous families (Ironsides 2008; Chea and Pen 2015).

Indigenous children in Cambodia have been significantly underserved by the national education system (Wright and Boun 2015). These children and their parents often feel a lack of cultural safety and relevance when entering schools where teachers are not members of their language and cultural community and there is no common language for reciprocal understanding. A similar situation is found in nearly every country globally and contributes significantly to high numbers of children who never enroll, are not supported to succeed in school, and drop out before completing primary school (Ball, 2011).

Building on path-finding demonstrations of MLE in Cambodian primary schools by the global nonprofit CARE (Kosonen 2013), the Royal Government of Cambodia launched the five-year MENAP in 2014 and subsequent five-year MEAP in 2019. The explicit goal is to increase Indigenous children’s participation in “quality education.” No definition of quality has been provided. The plans are being implemented in Mondul Kiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, and Preah Vihear provinces in the country’s northeast. They require that at least 60 percent of the

² Khmer people make up roughly 90 percent of the Cambodian population.

children in a school catchment area are Indigenous in order to introduce MLE using a curriculum developed by CARE for each Indigenous language—Bunong, Kavet, Brao, Kreung, Tampuen, and most recently Jarai. These languages are spoken by approximately 102,000 people in Cambodia.

The plan has been hailed in Southeast Asia as a bold step on the part of an ASEAN member government to support inclusion of nondominant languages in education. It is consistent with numerous international rights frameworks (Skutnabb-Kangas 2012) and supported by international research evidence of MLE’s positive contributions to children’s participation in education and society (Cummins 2000) and to social cohesion and national development (Coleman 2015).

From 2018 to 2019, the authors conducted an independent evaluation originally commissioned by UNICEF on behalf of Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). Our evaluation focused on the four provinces where the plan had been implemented in both preschools and primary schools. As a formative evaluation, it was intended to document lessons learned that could inform a renewed five-year plan for MLE and a new Education Strategic Plan for the country, as well as foster learning in the global community about the implementation requirements and intermediate outcomes of MLE in remote Indigenous communities. It assessed the extent to which the plan had been well implemented, identified enabling factors and barriers, and gauged national and subnational support for MLE. Detailed findings about strengthened human resource capacity and infrastructure, costing and efficiency are reported elsewhere (Ball and Smith 2019). This article highlights convergent and divergent aspirations and experiences of the MLE implementation plan on the parts of Indigenous people and education officials at all levels that surfaced during our evaluation. The discussion identifies issues that must be addressed if initiatives like this are to yield the full benefits of MLE. Similar aspirations and disjunctions are often evident in other countries when governments agree to allow nondominant languages in public education, and the Cambodian example is instructive for other settings where children and families with nondominant languages form part of a country’s education constituency.

METHOD

Overview. The evaluation used a mixed-methods, iterative-inductive approach that allowed for triangulation of data from a variety of sources. Primary data were obtained through direct interviews, focus groups, and outcome harvesting workshops with a wide range of stakeholders, described subsequently. In addition, over 100 policy and planning documents relevant to education, languages, Indigenous peoples, and governance were reviewed to glean background, context, and findings about education and school management in Cambodia and about MLE in Cambodia and globally. Secondary quantitative education data were analyzed, including enrolment and demographic data (achievement data were not made available), and we conducted a summary review of secondary costing data.

School and community visits. Along with a nine-member team of Indigenous nationals, school and community visits were undertaken in 14 districts in the four provinces. MLE primary schools and preschools were selected purposively using a maximum variation sampling strategy including peri-urban/rural/remote locales and high, average, and low-performing schools based on records of Primary promotions for the overall school population (which are not disaggregated by Indigenous identity). The schools ranged in size, but most had one class per level and ranged from Primary 3 to 6.

Participants. A total of 696 Cambodians (45% female) participated in the evaluation; 40 percent were children. Categories of people identified in the MENAP as “duty bearers” and other “actors” in implementing the MENAP who were sampled included school leaders; district, provincial, and national education officers; and representatives of nongovernment organizations (development partners). Parents, children, and other community members participated in focus groups; children participated with the verbal consent of their parent who brought them to the session. An informed consent protocol in the participant’s first language was presented and explained to them verbally. Participants were asked to confirm their understanding of their rights regarding participation either by signing a form or giving verbal consent. This protocol was adapted for children.

Forty-one participants (34% female) in key informant interviews represented various groups of stakeholders, mainly representatives of Indigenous peoples’ or development partner organizations or senior education officers.

Procedures. Methods included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations of school and classroom conditions, teacher-student interactions, survey questions, participatory pictorial mapping of change over time done by children in MLE primary schools, workshops using the outcome harvesting method of evaluation, and review of key government planning documents and earlier formative evaluations by CARE and various independent scholars. Key evaluation questions and subquestions were clustered around the criteria advocated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, gender equity, and impact.

Indigenous research ethics and methods. The evaluation incorporated aspects of Indigenous research methodology. Indigenous research ethics calls for Indigenous involvement in matters that affect Indigenous children and families (Ball 2005; Zavala 2013). Because the intended primary beneficiaries of the MLE plan were Indigenous children, the evaluation prioritized Indigenous participation both in the evaluation team and as respondents in focus group discussions and outcome harvesting workshops. We engaged a team of nine Indigenous Cambodians (four women) to assist with data collection. All had experience in nonformal Indigenous language and literacy education and/or participatory data collection in previous projects. As a group, the team had proficiency in the primary languages used by all stakeholders.

A growing body of scholarship on evaluation methods and research in general confirms narrative and visual methods as preferred approaches to gathering data in many types of investigation involving Indigenous peoples (Chilisa 2012). We used key informant interviews and focus group discussions with open-ended questions that evoked self-reports of experiences with languages in education. Indigenous team members also facilitated outcome harvesting workshops and elicited “most significant change” stories and pictorial mapping of change events related to schooling and language of instruction during the five-year MENAP timeline. The evaluation generated detailed narratives by participants about how the MLE plan had been experienced in local contexts.

Data analysis. Quantitative data were aggregated for each of the four provinces and year to year to show within and between-province trends over time. Qualitative data analysis aimed to triangulate the perspectives of Indigenous children, parents, and school support committees; teachers and education officers at community, district, provincial, and national levels; and international development partners with information gleaned from secondary data and document review. Using outcome harvesting to organize most of the qualitative data, the analysis focused on evidence of concrete behavioral change. The process identified contributions by various

actors, barriers, bottlenecks and enabling factors relevant to understanding how the MLE action plan was implemented and how various stakeholders understood what was happening and why.

FINDINGS

A range of positive outcomes of the MLE initiative were found, including increased MLE teachers enabling increased numbers of government-funded schools offering MLE. MLE teacher capacity, school facility improvement, and awareness raising among Indigenous families resulted in increased enrolment, attendance, and engagement by Indigenous children. In primary schools serving at least 60 percent Indigenous children in four northeastern provinces, subnational education officials and teachers had been mobilized to provide MLE in Primary 1–3. This included 247 preschool and primary school teachers trained to deliver MLE and adoption of the MLE curriculum created by CARE. Indigenous parent involvement increased through school support committees and general support for their children’s schooling.

Shortcomings of the implementation included lack of consensus on the purpose and reliability of the government’s commitment to MLE; lack of government engagement with Indigenous people in planning and implementing the MLE plan; limitations of the early-exit transitional model in terms of the potential for bilingualism and bicultural literacy; insufficient financial and technical support; lack of investment in culturally sustaining pedagogy, including creating fully competent MLE teachers; and widespread lack of understanding of what MLE is and how it works. Operational costs for MLE were not much more than for non-MLE schools, but there were shortfalls in dedicated funding for language-specific teacher training, monitoring, and culturally relevant resources to promote literacy in Indigenous languages. This section expands on findings related to (1) engagement in schooling; (2) positive impacts beyond the classroom; (3) out-of-school children; (4) culturally sustaining pedagogy; (5) demand for extension of MLE; and (6) human resource development for MLE. These findings are central to achieving quality in any MLE endeavor and are pivotal to the sustainability of MLE in Cambodia and elsewhere.

Engagement in schooling

The government’s MLE plan was seen as a positive step by Indigenous children, parents, school support committees, village leaders, MLE teachers, and some non-Indigenous members of ethnically mixed communities where children could access MLE in lower primary.

All local participants saw Indigenous parents whose children were in MLE as more engaged in their children’s education: enrolling them, supervising homework, bringing them to school more regularly, and serving on school support committees. In focus group discussions, children attending MLE primary schools were the most vocal proponents of MLE, exclaiming delight in being able to go to school in their own language, relate with friends and teachers who speak their language, and begin to write their language. They described how they could quickly understand and were strongly motivated to learn to read in both their Indigenous language and Khmer. Teachers reported that MLE students were more “brave,” “curious,” and “eager” and responded quickly and accurately to questions, compared to students in previous years who were not in MLE. Children in Primary 5 and 6 who had been in MLE described their ability to communicate through social media in their Indigenous language. School directors and other education officials described how children in MLE could write their own ideas, whereas children not in MLE tended to be limited to rote learning (i.e., recitation and copying from provided texts). Parents reported that their children were now bringing books home to read in their Indigenous language and in Khmer and bringing home the MLE curriculum books to study.

Parents described a new interest in their children’s schooling because they could see that their children were engaged, could understand their teacher, and were being treated well by the MLE teachers. Many Indigenous parents expressed their own new aspirations to become literate in their language.

Demand for MLE by Indigenous communities exceeded the supply of qualified Indigenous teachers and teacher trainers. Some district and provincial education officers explained that, due to limited teacher capacity, they had set population-based criteria for introducing MLE, in many places as high as 90 percent Indigenous children in a school catchment area. For many education officers, Khmer continued to be favored, not only due to human resource capacity but also for ideological reasons even when more than half of the children in a school catchment have an Indigenous home language. Meanwhile, all Indigenous stakeholders voiced a demand for increased MLE classrooms and extension of MLE at least to Primary 6. Students requested greater use of their Indigenous language throughout primary and continuing in secondary school. A few district officers and the senior education officer in the province with the largest population of Indigenous language speakers argued for an extension to Primary 6 to ensure literacy in the Indigenous language.

The pivotal role of the teacher was emphasized across participants’ accounts of the relevance and impact of MLE. Senior education officers saw teachers’ ability to teach effectively as a most significant contribution of the MLE initiative. Many accounts emphasized that MLE teachers attended classes more regularly and were more prepared to teach and use the Indigenous language to support children’s understanding.

Positive impacts beyond the classroom

A cross-section of stakeholders who participated in provincial outcome harvesting workshops concurred that MLE had strengthened Indigenous language in the community and positively impacted relationships within and beyond the community. There were reports that children could switch between their Indigenous language and Khmer as social situations required. Parents explained that they were not as fearful of discrimination by Khmer people because their Indigenous language had been legitimized in the MLE schools.

Out-of-school children

While MLE had a demonstrable impact on participation by Indigenous children in school, hamlet leaders acknowledged that there remained “*lots of children who never go to school. We don’t see them, so how can we count them?*” Indigenous community leaders described schooling as a choice with the potential for cascading negative impacts. They explained that some Indigenous families “*love their own culture and community, and parents may feel that they can only keep their culture by keeping their children with them at home, on farms and in the forest.*” When children go to school and do not learn traditional farming and forest practices, they do not know how to sustain themselves on the land, and so young adults find it necessary to migrate to cities in search of wage-earning jobs. In addition to loss of traditional livelihood skills and cultural knowledge, this out-migration disrupts long-standing intergenerational care, including child-to-child care and family care for the elderly. Out-migration also opens historically Indigenous villages and land to in-migration by other ethnic groups, providing an opportunity for government to issue tenders for harvesting traditionally Indigenous community forests.

Evidence shows that many children whose only option is low-quality schooling learn less than children who are not in school (UIS 2019). School support committee members and local

authorities agreed that Indigenous children learn all kinds of things at home using the Indigenous language and that schooling in the national language and curriculum does not measure up to this rich, direct, experiential learning at home and in the farms and forests. Indigenous key informants explained that, in Cambodia, education serves to transmit Khmer culture, which is represented in textbooks, posters, and school practices and presented as the “right” and only way. Indigenous histories, people, and cultural practices are not visible. Historically and today, cultural practices in the national curriculum describe Khmer lowland water festivals, religious and family ceremonies, and other events that have no significance for Indigenous people in the highlands. Indigenous participants expressed wanting to learn and transmit more about their own history and keep their culture evolving; they struggle to see how non-MLE school supports these goals. They want to transmit knowledge about non-timber forest products and multicropping on the highlands, which are not practices of the dominant Khmer lowlanders. Thus, it was explained that because children can learn so much more of value to their families and their own futures by accompanying their parents to farms and forests than from going to school, some parents choose never to enroll their children. However, it was widely acknowledged that children who never attend school do not become literate in any language, and Indigenous participants viewed this as a dilemma. In communities with no MLE primary school, local NGOs reported that adult literacy classes were mainly attended by children, even where there was a local primary school using only the dominant language; children sought out the classes to compensate for not being able to understand schooling in Khmer and to gain access to culturally based curriculum. In communities with no MLE classrooms, it was reported that parents sometimes enroll their children in school when they are older and have become orally proficient in their home language and can speak and understand enough Khmer to feel both physically and culturally safe with teachers and children who speak only Khmer. Thus, historically, those few Indigenous children who participated in formal education were often 10 or 11 years old in Primary 1.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy

Views of children and parents. Indigenous children and parents voiced strong positive support for the Indigenous cultural content in current MLE curriculum, which was developed by CARE and included in the government’s five-year plan. The significance of cultural content and Indigenous ways of life was shown in children’s visual mapping of MLE impacts, which featured scenes of farming, traditional houses, agricultural tools, musical instruments, and visits to forests,

School committee views. Indigenous school committee members and district education officers reported that MLE was helping to maintain or revitalize Indigenous language and culture.

Before MLE, in our community we all used to speak Khmer 80 percent of the time. Now, since MLE, we use our own language more than 80 percent of the time.
(School committee member, Kratie)

Community members mixed a lot of their culture with Khmer culture, and with MLE they are reviving their own culture. (District education officer, Mondulkiri)

Teachers’ views. Some MLE primary teachers described creating lessons that involved taking students on a village walk to observe, describe, and discuss objects and events in the community, taking children to the forest to find traditional medicine and edible plants, and

planting vegetable gardens with the children. Some teachers described writing stories with students in the Indigenous language and making tools and instruments together with community experts. However, teachers' reports varied as to the amount of time and creative effort devoted to teaching local cultural content.

Although MLE primary teachers are expected to use only the CARE MLE curriculum, some teachers described teaching both it and the Khmer curriculum. Some explained that they did this to prepare students for the transition to Khmer in Primary 4. A few teachers doubted that the government actually approved or would continue to approve MLE and so they used the Khmer curriculum "*to be on the safe side.*"

Demand for expansion of Indigenous cultural content. At the district, community, and school levels, over 80 percent of participants expressed the need for greater quantity and quality of Indigenous cultural content. Children were the most articulate about wanting more culturally grounded curriculum and what this might encompass, including learning how to protect and use non-timber forest plants, designing and making farm tools, agricultural science, animal husbandry, math applied to traditional weaving, crafts and games, and making and playing traditional musical instruments. Both teachers and parents suggested that MLE classrooms that were farther from the provincial capital had less surveillance and more freedom to expand the use of Indigenous language and cultural content beyond the MLE curriculum and, later, by the national curriculum. There was also demand for updating the MLE curriculum to reflect more accurate and more contemporary practices. School support committee members and local leaders suggested that local Indigenous language and culture groups and Indigenous peoples' organizations should be consulted to validate cultural content in curriculum, expand teachers' repertoires of culturally specific ways of teaching and learning, and create new curriculum that would expand cultural content and ensure its authenticity.

Representatives of Indigenous peoples' organizations and local Indigenous community language groups expressed their view that the government needs to seek more input from Indigenous people, not only when creating curriculum, but in all aspects of developing and implementing the MLE plan. They especially expressed a desire for involvement on a regular basis to update and improve teaching of cultural knowledge and practices. Members of CARE, the originators of the curriculum, recounted extensive consultation with Indigenous people when creating the curriculum before the government took ownership of it in 2014. No policy, plan, strategy, activity, actors, or financial resources were articulated in the government's first five-year MLE action plan to consult with the Indigenous people. Members of the national-level Special Education Department responsible for the MLE curriculum expressed their view that it is too hard to consult with Indigenous peoples' organizations and too hard to create and maintain a special curriculum for MLE. They expressed their view that it would be better for their department and for children and teachers if the MLE classrooms used Indigenous language translations of the national curriculum. The expressed goal of Indigenous people for a more-than-language approach to schooling would necessarily involve them as primary knowledge holders, and it is important to put this issue into the context of the narrow understanding of curriculum in Cambodia, and indeed in some other countries in the region. For educators at all levels, curriculum is typically taken to be synonymous with textbook: if one has a textbook, then one reads out of the textbook and examines students on their rote memorization of its content. Curriculum is often not conceptualized in its broader sense of competencies promoted through various, often flexible and learner-centered means, and through various languages. Yet, Indigenous parents and some Indigenous MLE teachers understood curriculum in this broader

sense. They conveyed this in their observation that children who do not go to school in their villages often develop more relevant competencies from the experiential teaching and learning that transpires among family members who work together in the highland farms and forests.

Demand for extension of MLE

Across all four provinces, there was an appeal not only for more cultural content but for more years of MLE, including requests to extend up to Primary 6 or throughout secondary school. The Khmer script, which is also used by Indigenous languages in their orthography, is notoriously difficult to learn, especially through traditional teaching methods. These tend to be used by teachers with limited training who fall back on their own experience of rote learning in school, rather than using sight words, storytelling, and meaning-focused literature. As well, many parents in Cambodia are not literate and there is no culture of reading in homes. As a result, children are often unable to write more than a few words or simple sentences until Primary 4, when those in MLE must switch to solely Khmer instruction. This means not only that children have no support to become biliterate, but also that they have no opportunity to use their Indigenous language to produce meaningful text.

If we can have MLE for more years in school then children will be able to use the language properly for cultural purposes, for example, dramas and recording the history. This could make the education come to life and have a future. (Indigenous parent)

We want MLE extended through Primary 12. Our goal is to keep the culture. They need to study longer, not just for the sake of our written language, but to keep their culture. (School support committee chairperson)

Human resource development for MLE

In three of the four provinces, provincial education authorities recognized the importance of both language and culture in MLE for inclusion. Yet, provincial education officers identified a lack of Indigenous people trained as teachers and on teacher training and curriculum teams. In fact, when the government took ownership of MLE, they furloughed the 12 Indigenous core teacher trainers who had been trained and employed by CARE to train MLE teachers.

Across the four provinces, lack of Indigenous language proficiency among teachers and core trainers, including functional literacy and knowledge of the culture, was cited as the most significant barrier to success of the MLE initiative in terms of producing multilingual, multiliterate, and multicultural learners. There were no Indigenous members and no Indigenous language speakers in national education offices charged with leading the MLE action plan.

At the national level, the lack of Indigenous people to support the authenticity and currency of cultural curriculum and to scale up MLE to meet increasing demand contributed to education officers' lack of confidence in their effectiveness. They expressed that they had no Indigenous team members, no Indigenous language proficiency, no knowledge of Indigenous cultures, and little understanding of MLE pedagogy. While most subnational stakeholders agreed that the most important determinants of success of MLE to date were the MLE trained teachers and the culturally informed MLE curriculum, national education officers doubted that an MLE-specific curriculum was really necessary. They suggested instead that teachers could translate the national curriculum or use a curriculum more similar to the national curriculum. This view aligned with the understanding by many national-level actors that MLE was only temporary "*until all Indigenous children speak Khmer before school age and then they won't need MLE*"

(national education officer). Rather than investing financial and technical resources to improve and expand on cultural content in curriculum, they argued that culture-specific content in the MLE curriculum could be scaled back and parents could be encouraged to use Khmer at home during children's early years.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation found that Indigenous participants, including children, parents, school support committees, MLE teachers, village leaders, and representatives of Indigenous peoples' organizations and community forest associations were unified in their goal to ensure that Indigenous children become linguistically proficient and culturally competent. They were beginning to see that formal education could play a role in attaining this goal through MLE. There was increased demand for education if it offered meaning and relevance through MLE. They perceived a need for quality improvement of MLE to include an expanded, more accurate and holistic approach to culturally sustaining pedagogy and continuation to Primary 6 or beyond. They sought an approach to MLE that supported literacy in the Indigenous language and ensured intergenerational transmission of contemporary, locally specific knowledge about how to protect land-based resources and earn livelihoods through sustainable forestry and farming practices. They embraced the multilingual, multiliterate, multicultural ideals of effective MLE.

With few exceptions, the closer education officers were to Indigenous communities both geographically and socially through direct interactions (e.g., district education supervisors), the more they supported MLE, including its expansion to Primary 6. They reported firsthand observations of improvements in children's and teachers' engagement in school and parents' support for school-based learning. However, significant numbers of children never enroll and instead are reportedly learning important knowledge and skills by participating in family sustenance activities in forests, farms, villages, and homes. With few exceptions, the farther education officers were from Indigenous communities, both geographically and socially, the more they saw MLE as merely a utilitarian tool to attract Indigenous children to school and a stopgap measure to bridge the language gap until Indigenous children could be fully assimilated into the dominant language and national curriculum. Senior-level decision-makers, particularly at the national level, were ambivalent about the need for longer and more culturally enriched MLE. In fact, those responsible for MLE opined that the national curriculum was preferable to a culturally specific curriculum.

The government plan for MLE made no provision for collaboration with Indigenous language speakers, community language groups, Indigenous peoples' organizations, or representatives of Indigenous community forest associations. Yet meaningful collaboration with speakers of the languages included in MLE is critical to effective planning, human resource development, implementation, and evaluation. Why? One explanation offered by development partners in Cambodia is that the government sees national and subnational education authorities as the agents of change (referred to as duty bearers) and Indigenous people as downstream beneficiaries (referred to as rights holders). Decentralized education officers are expected to communicate MLE plans to Indigenous villagers in a one-way transmission approach. However, organizations are increasingly recognizing the value of including intended beneficiaries of a planned change as essential actors in planning, implementing, and providing feedback on the planned change (Shutt 2016; Smith 2017). Another explanation offered by government leaders is that when Indigenous leaders are invited to meetings in the capital they fail to respond. During

our evaluation, Indigenous leaders were keen to participate; they either reported that they had never been invited to meetings about MLE in the national or provincial capitals or suggested that engaging in language planning in education first depends on relationship building between Indigenous language groups, representative organizations, and education officials. Establishing these relationships requires an intentional, long-term commitment that explicitly recognizes power imbalances and resource inequities and seeks to create conditions for authentic engagement. As well, they acknowledged the competing demand on their time engaging in political action to protect their land which is the basis of their livelihoods. Indigenous peoples in Cambodia, as elsewhere, have experienced significant environmental and cultural losses, challenging trust, relationships, and the ability to work collaboratively with those wishing to implement education reform. The question of who participates in language-in-education planning is partly a question of whether the language(s) and the terms of participation are accessible to those whose voices need to be heard. Further, as Wong and Benson (2019) note, in projects and policies affecting Indigenous peoples, there are potentially implicit agendas of nationalism and assimilation, and financial motivations promoting or disrupting Indigenous participation.

A further shadow casting doubt on the prospects for a more fulsome embrace of MLE is the government's choice of an early-exit transitional model. Indeed, many senior government officers, including the leading teams for implementing MLE in the five northeastern provinces, explicitly stated that the MENAP was intended to attract more Indigenous children to primary school and speed their assimilation into mainstream, monolingual (Khmer) education by Primary 4. During the evaluation, many MLE teachers and Indigenous-led community organizations expressed doubt in the reality or mission of the government's MLE initiative or the government's commitment to the MLE initiative. The sense of MLE as a short-term investment towards assimilationist outcomes would account for the government's lack of investment in updating culturally specific curricula, training enough Indigenous language teachers and teacher trainers to meet demand for MLE and furloughing Indigenous language specialists who had been working with provincial education offices until the government took ownership of MLE.

With rare exception, globally in MLE there is a disturbing lack of visibility of members of nondominant languages at the top level of policy decision making and strategic planning. The traditional understanding of language policy change as a top-down/bottom-up process (e.g., Kaplan and Baldauf 1997) recognizes input from members of nondominant language communities members in activities such as advocacy, demonstration projects that provide proof of concepts, and consulting on matters pertaining to orthography. However, they are not often visible in discussions of the essential components of successful MLE (e.g., UNESCO 2016) or analyses of how policy change is made and how strategic plans are constructed. It is generally understood that government actors, planning authorities, development partners and others "at the top" have disproportionate power in policy decision making, strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation (Johnson 2013). Notwithstanding that many theories of change in education and elsewhere fail to identify actors of any kind (Smith & Ball 2020), the failure to center the intended beneficiaries of MLE as key actors in planning and implementing MLE seems contradictory given that the purported goal of MLE is typically to promote equality of opportunity to quality education and other rights. In Cambodia, formal education has never been seen by Indigenous people as a means to prepare Indigenous children for their futures in the highlands where most Indigenous people live. It will take more than the current low level of financial and technical resources and early-exit transitional model of MLE to turn that view around.

Strengthening the knowledge of and commitment to MLE among planners and education officers in national, provincial, and district offices of education requires a major shift in perspective about the value and purpose of introducing MLE. To put it in terms of Ruiz's (1984) taxonomy, a shift is needed from a language-as-problem to a language-as-resource perspective. Currently, Indigenous languages are seen as a barrier to children being ready to learn. Using the transitional model, children can feel welcomed in school because Primary 1 is offered in the Indigenous language and then their "language barrier" is overcome by quickly initiating reading and writing in the dominant language. In contrast, from a language-as-resource perspective, Indigenous languages, multilingualism, and multiliteracy are perceived as resources, not only for Indigenous people but for the country. With this positive view of MLE, decisionmakers may be more likely to seek out and invest in long-term collaboration with Indigenous peoples, including national Indigenous peoples' organizations, local Indigenous language groups, and Indigenous language speakers.

Across the globe, dominant languages are overwhelmingly marketed to parents and policymakers as the best (and often the only) media for education. Yet, education systems in many countries have been the crucible in which Indigenous children have been separated from their heritage, identities, intergenerational relationships, land, and ability to draw from land-based resources for physical, economic, and spiritual sustenance. Indigenous people are often faced with accepting concessions to include Indigenous languages or content, however tokenistic. Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous children in school requires education reforms that are not only intended to prepare young people to participate equally in the dominant education system and social order, as the Cambodian investment in MLE is intended to do. Rather, an authentic effort to address the exclusion of Indigenous children must also support Indigenous-specified goals that go beyond the medium of instruction to address their right to cultural continuance through culturally sustaining pedagogy. Lack of cultural relevance or inaccurate portrayals of one's culture in curriculum are well-known barriers to successful engagement of members of nondominant communities in education in high-income countries (Ball 2004; Battiste 2013; Coulter and Jimenez-Silva 2017). MLE that quickly replaces Indigenous language and literacy with Khmer language and literacy and lacks cultural relevance must be understood as subtractive education. Our evaluation findings point to an experience of subtractive education on the parts of Indigenous children and families as a likely contributor to the large number of children who never enroll or never transition from primary to secondary school in Cambodia. Culture must be more thoroughly theorized and integrated as an essential component of MLE. A plethora of education frameworks center students' language and culture as pivotal to meaningful education. These include, for example, funds of knowledge (Moll and Gonzalez 1994), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995), pedagogical third space (Gutierrez et al. 1999), and generative curriculum (Ball 2002). Offering a next step in education that goes beyond using children's home language and culture as a bridge to engagement and success in school, Paris (2012) advocates for culturally sustaining pedagogy to consolidate children's connection to the traditional and contemporary or evolving linguistic and cultural competencies of their communities as well as to those of the dominant culture. Just as the Indigenous participants in our study expressed, Paris emphasizes that cultures are not static, and neither are the cultural identities that emerge from them; they are dynamic, shifting, and ever-changing. McCarty and Lee (2014) extend this approach to conceive of culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy that responds explicitly to ongoing legacies of colonization, ethnocide, and linguicide experienced by Indigenous peoples. These forward-facing approaches ensure that an active, living pedagogy in

classroom practices goes beyond teaching vocabulary and writing in two or more language systems—and beyond the problematic study of folk traditions in past tense. These approaches are well suited to education that aims to support multilingual and multicultural literacy in integrated classrooms of mixed heritage children. Examples of this approach and implications for practice are illustrated in a recent collection by Coulter and Jimenez-Silva (2017). In line with these approaches, the MLE program in Cambodia uses a “do-talk-record” pedagogy, where children use their experiences of village walks or forest excursions as a basis for meaningful writing and communication. Even before government support for MLE, local nonprofits offered nonformal bilingual literacy classes that used songwriting, basket weaving, other local practices to teach vocabulary, writing, math and sciences, and introduced biographies of contemporary Indigenous people and folktales to promote critical thinking skills. Indigenous participants valued these aspects of MLE that brought meaning to their communities and generated a wealth of ideas for deepening and lengthening their children’s access to this kind of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Indigenous lifestyles are often strongly connected to biodiversity hotspots around the world, where Indigenous peoples hold extensive, context-specific knowledge about the local environment. When development organizations aim to create a “better world” through “quality education,” Indigenous input is required to confirm their agreement with the ideological agenda and associated development targets and strategies (Ball 2005; Smith 2017). Through the delivery of education, teachers communicate a depiction of history, the present, and possible futures which will shape young people as citizens. Education decisionmakers, curriculum writers, and teachers need to be held ethically and politically responsible for the legitimacy and utility of these depictions (Dahlstedt and Olson 2013).

Indigenous knowledges, transmitted through Indigenous language and pedagogy as part of integrated multilingual, multiliterate, multicultural classrooms, are key to preparing children for a pluralist world. A more-than-language approach to MLE, guided by members of participating language and culture communities, can situate future generations within the relational flow of life where the interconnections among members of different ethnolinguistic and cultural communities and between humans and their ecologies are fully and responsibly engaged. MLE in Cambodia will only succeed if government can be convinced that a fully multilingual, multiliterate, multicultural approach will produce citizens who not only retain the country’s intangible cultural heritage but are also well-prepared to contribute to the nation’s economic development and social cohesion. This requires a deeper understanding and embrace of MLE’s potential and pedagogy than is currently in evidence, and the political will to collaborate with Indigenous people towards a culturally authentic approach to MLE that supports Indigenous rights to retain their culture and participate in mainstream society.

REFERENCES

Ball, Jessica. 2002. “The Generative Curriculum Model: A Bicultural, Community-Based Approach to Building Capacity for Early Childhood Care and Development in Indigenous Communities.” In *Best Practices Using Indigenous Knowledge*, edited by Karin Boven and Jun Morohashi, 198–217. Nuffic and UNESCO/MOST.

Ball, Jessica. 2004. “As If Indigenous Knowledge and Communities Mattered: Transformative Education in First Nations Communities in Canada.” *American Indian Quarterly* 28, nos. 3–4: 454–79.

Ball, Jessica. 2005. “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’: Restorative Research Partnerships Involving Indigenous Children and Communities.” In *Ethical Research with Children*, edited by Ann Farrell, 81-95. Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education.

Ball, Jessica. 2011. *Educational Equity for Children from Diverse Language Backgrounds: Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual or Multilingual Education in the Early Years: Summary*. UNESCO.

Ball, Jessica and Smith, Mariam. 2019. *Independent Evaluation of Cambodia’s Multilingual Education National Action Plan*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/reports/evaluation-multilingual-education-national-action-plan-cambodia>.

Battiste, Marie. 2013. *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. Purich.

Chea, Phalla, and Ratana Pen. 2015. *Large-Scale Land Grabbing in Cambodia: Failure of International and National Policies to Secure the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights to Access Land and Resources*. Paper presented at the 2015 World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, Washington, DC, March 23–27. <https://www.oicrf.org/-/annual-world-bank-conference-on-land-and-poverty-2015>.

Chilisa, Bagele. 2012. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 2nd edn. SAGE.

Coleman, Hywel, ed. 2015. “Language and Social Cohesion: An Introduction and Lessons Learnt.” In *Language and Social Cohesion in the Developing World*, edited by Hywel Coleman, 1–11. British Council and GIZ.

Coulter, Cathy, and Margarita Jimenez-Silva. 2017. “Culturally Sustaining and Revitalizing Pedagogies: Language, Culture, and Power.” *Advances in Research on Teaching*, vol. 29. Emerald.

Cummins, Jim. 2000. *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, Jim. 2009. “Fundamental Psycholinguistic and Sociological Principles Underlying Educational Success for Linguistic Minority Students.” In *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*, edited by Ajit K. Mohanty, Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson, and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 21–35. Orient BlackSwan.

Dahlstedt, Magnus, and Maria Olson. 2013. *Utbildning, Demokrati, Medborgarskap [Education, Democracy, Citizenship]*. Gleerups Education.

Ethnologue. n.d. Cambodia. <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/KH>.

Gutierrez, Kris D., Patricia Baquedano-López, and Carlos Tejeda. 1999. "Rethinking Diversity: Hybridity and Hybrid Language Practices in the Third Space." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 5, no. 4: 286–303.

Hornberger, Nancy H. 1998. "Language Policy, Language Education, Language Rights: Indigenous, Immigrant, and International Perspectives." *Language in Society* 27: 439–58.

Ironside, Jeremy. 2008. "Development – In Whose Name? Cambodia's Economic Development and its Indigenous Communities – From Self-Reliance to Uncertainty." *Proceedings of the Conference on Mainland Southeast Asia "At Its Margins: Minorities and Borderlines in Cambodia and Southeast Asia,"* 91–127. Center for Khmer Studies, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Johnson, David C. 2013. *Language Policy: Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Springer.

Kaplan, Robert B., and Richard B. Baldauf, Jr. 1997. *Language Planning from Practice to Theory*. Multilingual Matters.

Kosonen, Kimmo. 2013. "The Use of Non-Dominant Languages in Education in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back." In *Language Issues in Comparative Education: Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Non-Dominant Languages and Cultures*, edited by Carol Benson and Kimmo Kosonen, 39–58. Sense.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1995. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3: 465–91.

Lee, Tiffany S., and Teresa L. McCarty. 2015. "Bilingual-Multilingual Education and Indigenous Peoples." In *The Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, edited by Wayne E. Wright, Sovicheth Boun, and Ofella Garcia, 409–27. Wiley.

McCarty, Teresa L., and Tiffany S. Lee. 2014. "Critical Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy and Indigenous Education Sovereignty." *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1: 101–23.

Minority Rights Group International. 2009. *Education Special: State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. <http://www.minorityrights.org/7948/state-of-the-worlds-minorities/state-of-the-worlds-minorities-and-indigenous-peoples-2009.html>.

Moll, Luis C. , and Norma E. Gonzalez. 1994. "Lessons from Research with Language-Minority Children." *Journal of Literacy Research* 26, no. 4: 439–56.

Paris, Django. 2012. "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice." *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 93: 93–97.

Ruiz, Richard. 1984. "Orientations in Language Planning." *Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education* 8, no. 2: 15–34.

Smith, Mariam and Ball, Jessica. 2020. "Focusing on Actors in Context-Specific, Data-Informed Theories of Change to Increase Inclusion in Quality Basic Education Reforms." *Global Education Review* 7, no. 1: 20–40.

Shutt, Cathy. 2016. "Towards an Alternative Development Management Paradigm." Report 2016:07 to EBA [Expertgruppen for bistandsanalys]. http://eba.se/www-content/uploads/2016/09/Rapport2016_07_webb.pdf

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. 2012. *Linguistic Genocide in Education—Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Smith, Mariam. 2017. "Whose Story? Exploring Communicative Practices among International Development Organizations Using Learning Approaches Designed for Complex Situations." Master's thesis, Skövde University, Skövde, Sweden. <http://his.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1117376/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

Spolsky, Bernard, and Francis M. Hult. 2010. *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*. Wiley-Blackwell.

UNESCO. 2016. *MTB MLE Resource Kit—Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education*. <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/mtb-mle-resource-kit-including-excluded-promoting-multilingual-education>.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 2019. *New Methodology Shows that 258 Million Children, Adolescents and Youth Are Out of School*. Fact sheet no. 56, September (UIS/2019/ED/FS/56). <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf>.

UNICEF. 2014. "Indigenous Children Left Behind in Their Countries' Progress." UNICEF Press Centre, August 14. https://www.unicef.org/media/media_74728.html.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). n.d. Indigenous Peoples: Education. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/education.html>.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division. 2017. *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Table*. Working Paper 248.

Wong, Kevin M., and Carol Benson. 2019. "Language as Gatekeeper for Equitable Education: Multilingual Education in Cambodia." In *Education, Ethnicity and Equity in the Multilingual Asian Context*, edited by Jan Gube and Fang Gao, 69–86. Springer Singapore.

Wright, Wayne E., and Sovicheth Boun. 2015. "Striving for Education for All through Bilingual Education in Cambodia." In *The Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, edited by Wayne E. Wright, Sovicheth Boun, and Ofella Garcia, 515–28. Wiley.

Zavala, Miguel. 2013. "What Do We Mean by Decolonizing Research Strategies? Lessons from Decolonizing, Indigenous Research Projects in New Zealand and Latin America." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 2, no. 1: 55–71.

Geolocation: The study reported here was conducted in Cambodia. The main argument illustrated in this case study is relevant globally.

Disclosure Statement: No financial interest or benefit has arisen from direct applications of the research reported in this article.

Authors' biographical note:

Jessica Ball, MPH, PhD, is a Professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria in Canada. Her program of research uncovers processes that produce marginalization and inequities for Indigenous and minoritized young children in Canada and the Asia-Pacific region. Her recent work evaluates the impacts of colonial and innovative, post-colonial language-in-education policies in ASEAN countries. Her scholarship seeks to inform new and revised policies, curricula and teacher education that includes the perspectives of minority language speakers including parents and children. Jessica is also a specialist in early childhood care and development program design, implementation and evaluation, and capacity building for the profession (www.ecdip.org). She directs a program of research and intervention focused on forced migrant youth in Southeast Asia (www.youthmigrationproject.com) and a program of research on fathers' involvement in early family formation (www.pfige.com).

Mariam Smith, MSc. specializes in professional education on program planning and evaluation, with expertise in multilingual education. Currently working as a consultant from Sweden, Ms. Smith has been part of many human resource capacity development initiatives and evaluations for international development organizations in Asia, Africa, and Sweden. She uses outcome harvesting as one of her main evaluation tools, while also ensuring that evaluation findings are utilizable. She has published on actor-focused theories of change and strives to include Indigenous community members and participants in needs assessment, program development and evaluation. Ms. Smith is proficient in Khmer, Bunong, Swedish and English and has basic knowledge of other languages.