How could multilingualism benefit India's poorest schoolchildren?

Multilingualism is the norm in India. But rather than enjoying the cognitive and learning advantages seen in multilingual children in the Global North, Indian children show low levels of learning basic school skills. Professor lanthi Tampi is trying to disentangle the causes of this paradox.

The crowded and bustling streets of Delhi teem with life. Stop to listen and, above the din of rickshaws, honking horns, you'll hear a multitude of languages, as more than 20 million men, women and children go about their daily lives.

Many have been and raised there, and many millions more have made India's capital their home, having moved from surrounding neighbourhoods, cities and states across the country, often in search of a better job, a better home and a better life.

Some arrive speaking fluent Hindi, the dominant language in Delhi (and the official language of government), but many arrive speaking any number of India's 22 officially recognised languages, let alone the hundreds of regional and tribal languages in a country of more than 1.3 billion people.

Around 560 miles south of Delhi lies Hyderabad, where more than 70% of its seven million people speak Telugu. Meanwhile, in Bihar, in the northeast of India, Urdu has replaced Hindi as the dominant language across this poor and populous state of more than 100 million people.

What links Delhi, Hyderabad and Bihar is a four-year project. Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development. Led by Professor lanthi Tampi, from the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, the project involves Dr Dineshu Sico from the Department of Psychology, and researchers from the University of Reading and project partners in Karnataka, Hyderabad and New Delhi.

The overarching aim of the project is to find out why in a country where multilingualism is so common (more than 255 million people in India speak at least two languages, and nearly 90 million speak three or more languages), the benefits and advantages of speaking more than one language, observed in Europe for instance, do not apply to many of India's schoolchildren.

For Tampi, the answers to this conundrum may lie within the dataset she and her colleagues are compiling with the help of more than 1,000 primary-age schoolchildren across Delhi, Hyderabad and Bihar.

“Each year across India, 600,000 children are tested, and year after year more than half of children in Standard 5 [ten-year-olds] cannot read a Standard 2 [seven-year-old] task fluently, and nearly half of them could not solve a Standard 2 subtraction task,” says Tampi, who co-leads Cambridge Language Sciences, the University's Interdisciplinary Research Centre that brings together researchers from different fields to tackle 'grand challenges' where language is a factor.

"Low literacy and numeracy limit other important capabilities, including critical thinking and problem solving. Low educational achievement can lead to many dropping out of school — a problem disproportionately affecting female students. And the gap between state schools and private schools increases every year.”

She and colleagues are looking at whether these low learning outcomes could be a by-product of an Indian school system whereby the language that children are taught in often differs from the language used at home.

"We are looking at eight to 11-year-old schoolchildren in rural and urban areas,” she explains. “Within those urban areas we make the distinction between boys and girls living in slum and non-slum areas.”

"Many children are internal migrants who move from remote, rural areas to urban areas. They are so poor they have to live in slums and, as a result of migration, these children may speak languages that are different to the regional language.

"By looking at the mismatch between home and school languages, and by using tests and other socio-economic and educational variables, we try to find out whether these children are advantaged or disadvantaged in literacy, numeracy, mathematical reasoning, problem solving and cognitive skills.”

Two years into the four-year project, the team has discovered considerable variation in the provision of education across government schools in the three areas, with different teaching practices and standards.

Having talked to 1,000 children, they will now embark on researching them, looking not only at test results, but also allowing for other variables such as the standard of school, the environment and the teaching practices themselves. It's possible that one of the causes of low performance is the lack of pupil-centred teaching methods; instead, the teacher dominates and there is little room for independent learning.

Although the findings are at a preliminary stage, Tampi and her team have found that the medium of instruction used in schools, especially English, may be used, but perhaps not as the medium of instruction in primary schools. It could, for example, be one of the subjects that are being taught alongside other subjects, starting perhaps from the third year of primary school.

"We are not suggesting that English be withdrawn — that ship has sailed — but we perhaps have to think more about learner needs. There is perhaps too much uniformity in teaching and less tailoring to the children's language abilities and needs.”

While the preliminary results show that there is no difference in general intelligence among boys and girls from slum versus urban poor backgrounds, a surprising finding has been that children from slum backgrounds in Delhi do not seem to lag behind other children from other urban poor backgrounds - and in some cases perform better (e.g. in numeracy and literacy tasks). This unexpected finding may be down to the life experiences of children growing up in slums, where they are likely to mature faster and come into closer contact with the numeracy skills essential for day-to-day survival.

Tampi says that, despite the project only being at its midpoint, it has already caught the attention of government ministers, including Delhi’s Minister for Education, who is keen to use their findings to inform and adjust school policy in India’s capital city and the wider state.

“Delhi may be keen to adopt root-and-branch reform if our findings support it,” explains Tampi. “They are as keen as us to understand how the challenging context of deprivation can be attenuated when focusing on the languages children learn and use while at school.

“Our findings don’t mean that you’re doomed if you’re poor. It may be that these low learning outcomes are because of the way education is provided in India, with a huge focus on Hindi and English as the mediums of instruction, to the potential detriment of children unfamiliar with those languages.”

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