

Multilingualism in Education

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Context:

With the advent of the New Education Policy (NEP) and recent initiatives like the NIPUN Bharat Mission that stresses the importance of using the mother tongue in the teaching-learning process and creating educational materials, we have an opportunity to revolutionise education.

Background:

In a diverse and culturally rich country like India, language is more than just a means of communication; it is the essence of our identity.

Multilingualism:

1. It is the ability to speak, understand, read, and write more than one language.
2. It can be individual or societal, depending on whether a person or a community uses multiple languages.
3. It can also be classified into different types, such as additive or subtractive, balanced or dominant, sequential or simultaneous, depending on how languages are acquired, used, and valued.
4. India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with over 19,500 languages spoken throughout the nation.
5. According to the 2011 Census of India, more than 25% of the population speaks two languages, while about 7% speak three languages.

Importance/Significance of Multilingualism in Education:

1. Research shows that learning more than one language can boost brain functions, such as memory, attention, problem-solving, and creativity. It can also improve metalinguistic awareness, which is the ability to reflect on and manipulate language structures and rules.
2. Learning multiple languages can expose students to different cultures, perspectives, and values. It can also help them develop intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds. With over 22 officially recognised languages and hundreds of dialects, each with its own unique cultural and historical significance, language is a crucial aspect of our identity.
3. Studies have consistently shown that students who receive instruction in their mother tongue or home language perform better in school than those who are taught in a foreign or unfamiliar language. This is because they can access the curriculum content more easily and confidently, and transfer their skills and knowledge to other languages.
4. Providing education in multiple languages can ensure that every child has equal access and opportunity to learn, regardless of their linguistic background. It can also foster a sense of belonging and identity among minority language speakers, and reduce discrimination and marginalization.

Ways to implement Multilingual Education:

1. Multilingual education should be based on the linguistic realities and needs of the learners and the communities. It should also respect the constitutional provisions and the three-language formula of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020).
2. Multilingual education should adopt a learner-centered and interactive pedagogy that fosters language awareness and proficiency. It should also promote cross-linguistic transfer and multiliteracy skills among the learners.
3. Multilingual education should use fair and valid assessment tools and criteria that measure the learning outcomes and progress of learners in multiple languages. It should also provide constructive feedback and support to the learners to improve their language skills.

Benefits of Multilingual Education for India:

1. Multilingual education can equip learners with the necessary language skills and competencies to participate in various domains of life, such as education, employment, research, innovation, etc. It can also increase their employability and mobility in the globalized world.
2. Multilingual education can help preserve and revitalize the linguistic diversity and heritage of India. It can also promote the linguistic rights and dignity of the speakers of different languages, especially those who are endangered or marginalized.
3. Multilingual education can foster mutual understanding and respect among speakers of different languages and cultures. It can also enhance social cohesion and harmony among the diverse groups of people in India.
4. Starting education in one's mother tongue provides a solid foundation for learning additional languages, including the national language and English, promoting multilingualism.
5. When students can understand what they are being taught, they are more likely to stay in school and complete their education.

Issues/Challenges for Multilingualism in Education:

1. Implementing multilingual education requires adequate resources, such as trained teachers, appropriate curricula, quality textbooks, assessment tools, and digital platforms. However, many schools lack these resources, especially in rural and remote areas.
2. Although the NEP 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat Mission advocate for multilingual education, there is still a gap between policy and practice. There is also a need for more coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders, such as central and state governments, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and communities.
3. Many parents, teachers, students, and policymakers are not aware of the benefits of multilingual education. They may have misconceptions or prejudices about certain languages or dialects.
4. Balancing the use of mother tongues or regional languages with national or standardized curricula can be challenging. Ensuring that students have access to a well-rounded education while also valuing their linguistic backgrounds is crucial.
5. Developing fair and standardized assessment methods across different languages can be difficult. Ensuring that students are evaluated fairly and consistently can be a challenge when using multiple languages.
6. While multilingual education can be effective at the primary level, transitioning to higher education or the job market might require proficiency in a more widely spoken language, potentially disadvantageous to students who were educated in their mother tongue.