1 Introduction

These are exciting times for professionals in multilingual education (MLE). Policymakers are paying more attention to the essential role of learners’ own languages and ways of knowing in improving the quality of education for all. Better yet, practitioners and non-dominant ethno-linguistic communities have come a long way in implementing programs that promote bi- or multilingual competencies while facilitating learner achievement. As a technical assistant and researcher in MLE, I believe this represents a huge step forward in educational development, from a limited focus on getting children into school to a more appropriate focus on giving children a meaningful, useful and relevant education.

The need is great. It has been estimated that 40%, or 2.3 billion, of the world’s people still lack access to instruction in a language they speak or understand (Walter & Benson 2012). According to the World Bank (2005), 50% of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of the school is different than the language of the home. This is unacceptable, when we know that providing instruction in learners’ home languages or mother tongues (abbreviated as L1s) has the potential to improve educational access, quality and equity, particularly for groups that have been socially marginalized (ADEA 2010; Ouane & Glanz 2011; UNESCO 2010, 2012). While language is not the only factor in improving educational quality, it is now widely understood that a mismatch between the learner’s language(s) and the medium of instruction is the root cause of school wastage (repetition, failure, drop-out) and may well influence the high rate of out-of-school youth in many contexts (Benson 2014; Heugh 2011; Walter & Benson 2012).

The use of learners’ best languages (known as L1s) for literacy and learning across the curriculum provides a solid foundation for basic and continuing education and for transfer of skills and knowledge to additional languages. This has been established by large-scale research in North America (Cummins 2009; Thomas & Collier 1997, 2002) and substantiated in low-income settings, particularly in Eritrea and Ethiopia, whose systems use learners’ home languages for up to eight years of primary schooling (Walter & Davis 2005; Heugh et al. 2012). Use of learners’ L1s
Carol Benson

has been linked to increased parent involvement (Ball 2010) and greater participation of girls and women in education (Hovens 2002; Benson 2004; Lewis & Lockheed 2012). Increasingly, countries with former colonial or other dominant languages in education are using at least some non-dominant languages for at least some months or years of early schooling. A recent study found evidence that the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), despite limitations like failing to account for linguistic variation (Schroeder 2013; Graham & van Ginkel 2014), may have raised awareness among development professionals that initial reading and writing should be taught in learners’ own languages (Benson & Wong 2015).

L1-based MLE can be particularly effective for members of non-dominant groups, in contexts where intersecting social and economic disadvantages related to poverty, geography, ethnicity, religion, gender and other factors conspire to keep children out of school or make it extremely difficult for them to succeed (Ball 2010). In this way, MLE offers a pathway for addressing Sustainable Development Goal Four of the 2030 Agenda, to “ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” (UNESCO 2016). MLE is arguably relevant for all learners in the 21st century, since those with oral and written proficiencies in multiple languages will be best able to link local and regional to international domains in this rapidly globalizing world (Benson & Elorza 2015).

Because the potential of MLE is great, there are justifiably high expectations for MLE programs. Meanwhile, there are many challenges, particularly in low-income contexts. One is the widespread adoption of early-exit transitional models rather than more additive, pedagogically sound approaches to language learning. Another is the slow response of education systems to develop appropriate mechanisms for recruitment, training, placement and compensation of MLE teachers. Systems of assessment can also be a challenge if they are only or mainly in dominant languages, because they fail to show what learners can do. Causing and compounding all of these challenges are the often impossibly high aspirations of stakeholders from parents to politicians for proficiency in dominant national or international languages, to the detriment of good pedagogy and effective learning.

This chapter analyzes current policies and practices in L1-based MLE, in the Asia and Pacific region and beyond. The chapters in this volume describe what is being done in individual countries and even comparatively. I focus on the bigger picture, of trends and of demonstrably effective practices, analysing what is being done, where we seem to be going and what issues need to be addressed. I begin by arguing that the best way to address equity issues in multilingual low-income contexts is to support policy that enables L1-based multilingual education to be put into practice. I then explore a range of challenges being encountered by both policymakers and implementers. In response to these challenges, I highlight some innovative and sound MLE practices around the world, suggesting ways these practices can be and have been applied in the Asia and Pacific region. I conclude with a discussion on the directions in which I see MLE going in the near future, and a call for policies and practices that are consistent with research findings on MLE.

2 Definitions and their implications

To begin this discussion, I would like to draw attention to how the term L1-based multilingual education—also known as mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE)—is being used, and what it actually means. Across the Asia/Pacific and Africa regions, it has become an umbrella term for a range of programs, but it was never meant to represent programs that exclude learners’ own languages, nor those that use the L1 only for oral explanations or code-switching (Kosonen & Benson 2013). Pedagogically, the term refers to the purposeful and
systematic use of learners’ strongest languages for literacy and learning, accompanied by the explicit teaching of new languages, with the aim of creating learners that speak, read and write multiple languages (García 2009). That is, by the end of an L1-based MLE program, learners should be multilingual and multiliterate as well as achieving the other goals of the curriculum. Inherent in the term is the concept that non-linguistic curricular content is taught in one or more languages depending on learners’ proficiency levels and prior exposure to related knowledge.

The success of the term has been to distinguish between programs designed for the elite to learn dominant international languages and programs tailored to give speakers of non-dominant languages access to basic education and explicit teaching of additional (dominant) languages. In addition, the substitution of multilingual for bilingual encompasses dual-language situations but makes space for the teaching and learning of more than two languages—which is often the case in multilingual African or Asian contexts. For example, in many contexts learners could have more than one home language; likewise, in addition to home languages there are regional languages as well as dominant national or international ones.

Application of the term L1-based MLE has been less successful in calling attention to the fact that learners should fully develop oral, written and analytical skills in one of their best languages to reap the benefits of transfer to additional languages. In reality, many so-called L1-based MLE programs use the L1 for only a very short period of time, often limiting L1 use to pre-primary or the first one or two years of primary schooling. They are intent on switching to dominant languages as soon as possible, whether or not the appropriate cognitive skills have been established in the L1 so that there is a foundation to build upon. I discuss this challenge further below, and find that these programs are short-sighted.

There are lessons to be learned from two related terms from particular contexts. In African countries with historical ties to France, the term convergent pedagogy (from the French pédagogie convergente) refers to a program that values the mother tongue for giving structure to the learner’s thought and personality and aims for “functional bilingualism” (Traoré 2001: 6, my translation). Inherent in this term is the idea of bringing instruction closer to (“converging” with) learners’ identities. A related but distinct term from Latin America is bilingual intercultural education (from the Spanish educación intercultural bilingüe or EIB), which usually involves two languages—an Indigenous L1 and Spanish or Portuguese—and two cultures. The intercultural component is meant to integrate local cultural values and lifeways into the curriculum, linking learners’ experiences and knowledge to new knowledge. According to López (2006), this explicit valuing of learners’ cultures should not only support learning but also raise learners’ self-esteem and empower them to address the power differentials between the dominant culture and their own. In L1-based MLE, cultural relevance is often part of the materials and the teaching, but it is not always explicit in the instructional approach, so this is an area that could be further developed.

3 Analysis of challenges to MLE policy and implementation

L1-based MLE is significantly improving educational access and quality for non-dominant learners, as I discuss in more detail below. However, evidence from high-income countries, along with theories and principles from bi- and multilingual education, would suggest that educational outcomes could be even better for learners in MLE programs. When policymakers and implementers mobilize resources and put effort into bringing MLE into their education systems, expectations are understandably high, raising the question of why we cannot always show large gains relative to monolingual programs. This section explores the challenges of policymaking and implementation that are currently limiting the expected gains of MLE, and what can be or has been done to address these challenges.
3.1 The challenge of depending on early-exit transitional models

The default model of so-called MLE is what is known as an early-exit transitional model, meaning that the learner’s own language is used for only for one to three years, after which the L1 “exits” from the school in favor of a “transition” to exclusive use of a dominant language. This approach has mixed origins; for example, it was promulgated in colonial times by the British in African and South Asian contexts (Heugh 2011), but also in North America in the 1970s and 1980s, until researchers found that the pedagogical and cognitive benefits would be much greater with continued development of the L1 (Cummins 2009; Thomas & Collier 1997, 2002). The pedagogical critiques are compounded by sociological ones; the approach has been called short-sighted and discriminatory, representing a language-as-problem orientation (Ruiz 1984). According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1981), the early-exit model takes a subtractive approach to language development, devaluing learners’ home languages and life experiences, which is not productive for learning, nor for society.

The theoretical basis for modern-day MLE comes from a wealth of research in high- and low-income countries confirming the now axiomatic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins 1981). Simply stated, interdependence means that we only need to learn to read once in our lives due to the way human brains develop and store language skills. Once we understand that our languages can be coded and decoded in written form, we can transfer these skills to any other languages we learn, even if the languages are not linguistically related (Cenoz 2009) or do not use the same writing system (Kenner 2004). To maximize the potential of interlinguistic transfer, the L1 must be effectively developed orally and in writing, and there must be high-quality oral instruction in the new language (known as Lx) (Bialystok 2001; Cummins 2009).

In light of current research, then, an early-exit model represents a very weak version of MLE because it does not spend enough time or effort on any of the components that would promote effective transfer:

a. developing a strong foundation of literacy and cognition in the L1;

b. developing adequate proficiency in a new language (known as an Lx) for learners to effectively “transition” into exclusive use of the Lx as a language of literacy and instruction;

c. use of the L1 as medium of instruction so that learners understand basic concepts from the curriculum that may later be taught bilingually or through new languages.

The result is that around grades 2 and 3, just as the curriculum focus switches from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” an early exit from the L1 forces learners to receive most or all instruction through the Lx, which is neither cognitively nor linguistically easy for them to do (Heugh 2011). Even if short-term use of the L1 is clearly much better than ignoring it (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2011), early exit explains to a great extent why teachers struggle with “transition” to the Lx, and why experimental studies comparing MLE with non-MLE classes do not show even greater gains. The model problem is compounded by teachers’ own limitations in Lx proficiency and/or teaching methods, as well as testing learners only in the Lx, both of which are discussed in more detail below.

What can be done? Current research would support adoption of more additive, pedagogically sound approaches dedicated to L1 maintenance and development throughout the primary cycle, if not beyond. Stakeholders need to consider conducting pilots that expand L1 use through the five to seven years of primary schooling, because greater gains are likely to be demonstrated in terms of learner achievement (e.g. Thomas & Collier 1997, 2002 in North America; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh 2012 in Ethiopia). Greater gains in student achievement will help convince
policymakers that true L1-based MLE, developing multiple languages and literacies, is worth the investment of resources. In the meantime, program outcomes could be improved if the study of L1 as a language/literacy subject is extended beyond its exit as a medium of instruction, which would allow learners to further develop and maintain their L1 literacy skills, allowing more opportunities for transfer.

### 3.2 The challenge of developing MLE teacher support structures

The implementation of MLE for non-dominant language speakers requires first and foremost teachers who are highly proficient in the L1 of learners, and who understand what I call the C1, or home culture, referring to the values and lifeways of the L1 community. In some cases, those best suited to become MLE teachers have never had the opportunity to gain teaching credentials for the very reason MLE is being proposed now: the prior system used only a dominant language, excluding them from attaining more than a basic education. In other cases, members of non-dominant communities have survived dominant language education to gain credentials, only to find themselves teaching in communities with languages and cultures different from their own.

Education systems have generally been slow to respond to the needs of MLE implementation with regard to teacher recruitment, training, deployment and compensation. In many cases, NGOs, donors and national universities have developed mechanisms for recruiting and training MLE teachers from the ethnolinguistic communities. These people are uniquely qualified due to the linguistic skills and cultural values they share with learners; however, they may need to develop dominant language proficiency as well as mathematics and other extra-linguistic curricular content (Benson 2004).

One innovative example was a Catholic mission’s creation of a pedagogical secondary school (bachillerato pedagógico) in Bolivia, where Indigenous girls received secondary education along with L1 literacy and MLE pedagogy, preparing them for teaching jobs in their own communities (Benson & Elorza 2015). This strategy was successful in providing bilingual intercultural schools with L1 and C1 community members who understood MLE methodology, but their lack of formal qualifications meant they could not be put on government teacher rosters. Innovations like these are temporary solutions, and are not always sustainable when education ministries take over.

A more successful model of empowering local community members has been developed by CARE in combination with the Cambodian government; in this model, volunteers chosen by their communities have been trained in L1 literacy and pedagogical skills alongside academic content. Because pathways for career development have now been established through legislation, these acting teachers can finally be recognized by the Ministry of Education and Training as contract teachers, putting them on the government pay scale and giving them a reasonable wage (Lee et al. 2015). The Cambodian government has also established a pathway for qualified teachers who speak Indigenous languages to become MLE teachers, with the help of a fast-track, tailor-made training provided by CARE and regional education officers (Benson & Wong forthcoming; MoEYS 2015).

The success of the Cambodian case can be traced to the close collaboration between the government and its development partners, as well as the government’s willingness to deal with different conditions in different provinces though centralized decision-making and appropriate legislation. It could also be argued that some level of decentralization would work in favour of recruiting, training, deploying and recognizing relevant people as MLE teachers. For example, in Ethiopia, a much larger and more linguistically diverse country than Cambodia, the policy
calling for eight years of primary schooling through “nationality languages” is implemented to a great degree by Regional Education Bureaus, which can determine which languages need to be used in their schools and place teachers accordingly (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh 2012). Decentralization also seems to be a secret to success in the Philippines, where “localized realization of a national policy” (Metila et al. 2016: 781) by the Department of Education allows each school to select an appropriate medium of instruction based on local circumstances, but where pragmatic local decisions have the power to undermine policy goals if teachers and school decision-makers do not have enough information on MLE.

### 3.3 The challenge of assessing in dominant languages

When designing evaluations of MLE programs, it is logical to assess learner achievement in both MLE (“treatment”) and non-MLE (“control”) classes so that some kind of comparison can be made. The most valid comparisons, of course, look at how learners from the same ethnolinguistic communities, growing up in the same conditions, fare when taught multilingually or not. In low-income contexts it is not possible—nor ethical—to set up randomized control trials as in medicine by randomly assigning children to receive MLE or not. However, MLE is often piloted in schools or communities where non-MLE classes operate, creating “natural” settings where comparison is possible. In reality, it is often difficult to make clean distinctions between treatment and control. For example, non-MLE teachers may use learners’ L1s at least some of the time, e.g. by orally translating or code-switching; in these cases, it is important to distinguish between classroom communication habits in “control” classes and the systematic use of the L1 for literacy and as a medium of instruction in the MLE “treatment.” This is not always an issue; for example, in a longitudinal study conducted in the Ratanak Kiri province of Cambodia (Lee et al. 2015; see also Benson & Wong forthcoming), non-MLE teachers were Khmer speakers who would not have used learners’ languages in the classroom.

Assuming that there is an effort to distinguish between groups of learners from the same background based on the type of instruction they are given, the next question is how and what to assess. The usual choice is to give the same exact assessment to both groups using the dominant language, since that is a major goal of the curriculum in both treatment and control. The reasoning goes that if MLE is helping the “treatment” group, they will do better than the “control” group. This makes comparison seem easy and straightforward—but wait, is it appropriate? The two groups have not been taught in the same way. The control group is being taught only in the dominant language, so assessing them in that language makes sense. However, the MLE treatment group, whose instruction is based on literacy and learning in the L1, is not prepared for assessment in the dominant language until later, when they transfer skills from L1 to Lx. How can the MLE group be fairly assessed, if not in their L1?

According to Cummins (2009), as discussed above, the acquisition of oral and written Lx is mediated by L1 proficiency. This means that assessing the oral and written proficiency of MLE learners in the L1 will demonstrate what they have learned that is potentially transferable, given adequate oral instruction in the Lx. If L1 literacy is assessed for MLE learners—and even for non-MLE learners, as Hovens (2002) did successfully in Niger1—evaluators get a much clearer picture of how language and literacy development is facilitated by MLE. Further, assessment of non-linguistic content like mathematics should be done in the language of instruction, since the goal is not to test language but to see what has been learned. Studies done in Ethiopia (Heugh et al. 2012) and Cameroon (Laitin et al. forthcoming) suggest that comparable, valid achievement data can be efficiently generated through curriculum-based testing of MLE and non-MLE learners using the language in which they are being taught.
L1-based multilingual education

Another option piloted in the Western Cape Province, South Africa (Mbude-Shale et al. 2004) is to use side-by-side bilingual test instruments, allowing learners to choose the language in which they respond item by item or to cross-check meanings as needed.

3.4 The challenge of aspiring to high proficiency in dominant languages

People look to education to offer their children proficiency in dominant languages, especially when they are not widely spoken in the home or community. Their perception is that learning the languages spoken by people from dominant groups will give their children the best opportunities for jobs and economic success, especially if they can acquire native-like proficiency. This demand for linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) is unprecedented in today’s global world among people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Underlying parent demands, however, are myths about how high proficiency in an Lx can be achieved through education. Other important goals of education, like learning to read and write, developing critical thinking and building knowledge across the curriculum, may be lost in the shuffle.

The most damaging myth about learning a new language is that it should be used as a medium of instruction (Heugh 2011). Cummins (2010) calls this the myth of “maximum exposure,” and it causes teachers to prohibit L1 use, believing that only the Lx should be used in the classroom. The underlying assumption is that an individual must give up one language to acquire another, but, as discussed above, the opposite is true, because building on the L1 results in better learning of the Lx. Those who believe in “maximum exposure” often look for schools that provide language immersion, exposing learners to the Lx at an early age. Actual immersion education, such as French–English immersion in Canada, has well-resourced classrooms, uses systematic communicative methodology, is implemented by teachers proficient in the languages of immersion, and does not ignore or prohibit the L1 (Genesee 1994; see also Pavlenko 2014). Even in Canadian immersion, near-native proficiency was a myth (White & Genesee 1996). In most low-income multilingual contexts, these conditions are simply not present.

Research shows that the question of time is not as important as the quality of instruction and the proficiency of the teachers (Heugh 2011). The act of calling a dominant language the medium of instruction does not make it a valid language of classroom communication, nor does it miraculously make learners fluent. In fact, there is absolutely no research evidence that having a medium of instruction that is foreign to learners (and often teachers) will result in high-level proficiency in that language. To my knowledge there is no high-income country that uses a language foreign to most citizens as medium of instruction for public education.2

For high proficiency in an Lx, learners require input from highly competent speakers of that language, along with regular and sustained communicative interaction in different domains, usually in an environment where that language is used regularly, in addition to study of grammatical, phonetic and other linguistic features. This has nothing to do with learners’ lack of ability, but rather with the lack of conditions that support such high-quality linguistic input. Learners can, however, gain functional proficiency in a new language if the learning environment enables it by supporting L1 development while teaching the Lx explicitly as a new language. Teachers do not need to be native speakers, but they need to have an appropriate level of Lx proficiency, as well as effective teaching methods. They can also facilitate interlinguistic transfer by teaching learners about the similarities and differences between the L1 and Lx. Additional languages can be added using the same strategies.

In sum, reasonable levels of Lx proficiency can be expected from a school system if a systematic approach to language learning is taken and if enabling conditions are created through teacher training and curriculum development. One example is the L1-based MLE pilot program
in south–eastern Nepal, run by the Nepali National Languages Preservation Institute with support from SIL International (Nepal). This program uses three languages—Rajbanshi, Nepali and English—from preschool (K) through grade 5, working toward literacy in all three languages but expecting different levels of proficiency in each. Key characteristics of the Rajbanshi–based MLE program are:

1 staggered introduction of three languages: Rajbanshi L1, Nepali L2 and English L3;
2 maintenance and development of the L1 throughout the primary cycle;
3 appropriate methods and proficiency goals for each language;
4 bilingual (Rajbanshi–Nepali) methods for content area instruction;
5 adherence as much as possible to the Nepali national curriculum;
6 creation of a child-friendly and participatory learning environment (Benson 2016).

This MLE program begins in K by introducing literacy in learners’ L1, introducing Nepali L2 orally in the second trimester of grade 1, and introducing English L3 orally in the second trimester of grade 2. Based on the national curriculum, appropriate adaptations are made for students to learn Nepali as a new language and to gradually transfer literacy understandings from L1 Rajbanshi to Nepali. Original materials have been developed for the teaching and learning of Rajbanshi literacy using familiar key words, phoneme and syllable analysis, relevant stories and other L1 literature. Total Physical Response (TPR) and other internationally known communicative approaches have been effectively implemented for the teaching of Nepali and then English. Supplementary materials for each level have been developed so that government textbooks can be used as much as possible, with appropriate adaptations for language, level and content. Non-language subjects are taught through Rajbanshi L1 in the early years, with Nepali L2 brought in gradually as a medium of instruction using bilingual teaching methods.

Assessments have found learner achievement to meet the demands of the national curriculum. In June 2015, MLE students at each grade level in each subject including L1 Rajbanshi and math, averaged around 80% on year-end assessments, double the national passing mark of 40%. Given a set of carefully constructed literacy tasks at the same time, Rajbanshi MLE learners outperformed their peers in a nearby government school on all six Nepali reading tasks (grades 2–4) and all five English reading tasks (grades 3–4) in spite of having been introduced to Nepali about half a school year later and to English over one school year later. Further, a representative set of Rajbanshi MLE grade 2–3 students given a standardized story comprehension task outperformed the national average by a large margin. All of these results demonstrate that spending time teaching and developing skills in the L1 exerts no negative effect on Nepali or English; on the contrary, the MLE approach helps learners transfer literacy and academic content from the L1 to their additional languages (Benson 2016).

4 Ways forward in the Asia and Pacific region and beyond

I conclude this chapter by discussing where I see MLE going in the near future, how efforts in the Asia and Pacific region contribute to this future and what needs to be done.

First, evidence has accumulated from research in low–income contexts that children in MLE generally do better in literacy and learning than children in dominant language classrooms. Even though early–exit multilingual programs do not reach the full potential of MLE, as discussed above, learner assessments demonstrate that use of the L1 does not in any way impede the learning of additional languages; in fact, it provides advantages that could be maximized if L1 use were expanded, at least throughout primary education.
A greater convergence of donor and researcher discourse seems imminent. For example, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and other agencies have all issued clear statements about the need to provide basic education in learners’ own languages (e.g. Pinnock 2009; UNESCO 2012, 2013; World Bank 2005). In a study of the Global Monitoring Reports documenting progress toward Education for All between 2002 and 2015, we found that there was a significant increase in positive mentions of MLE from 2002 to 2015, of which the brief mentions reflect an underlying assumption that L1-based MLE is desirable, and more detailed mentions are consistent with the research on effective policies and practices (Benson & Wong 2015). Further, wider discussions have been promoted by partner countries and organizations, of which one landmark was the International Conference on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals in Bangkok in November 2010, which brought together UN agencies, bilateral donors, NGOs, political leaders and scholars to discuss the importance of the learner’s first language (L1) in achieving quality Education for All (UNESCO 2010, 2012). UNESCO Bangkok and partners in the Asia and Pacific region have been leaders in bringing policymakers, researchers and practitioners together to discuss MLE, most recently at the 5th International Conference on Language and Education Sustainable Development through Multilingual Education in October 2016.

What still seems to be missing is policymaker and donor commitment to implementing full maintenance and development models of MLE—multilingual education as it was meant to be—so that results can be optimized. This requires a better understanding on the part of everyone from governments to communities that the learner’s L1 holds the key to effective learning of literacy, curricular content and additional languages. Developing multiple literacies during one’s school career is an aim of schooling that calls for more attention. The research would call for long-term, high-quality instruction in the L1, developing oral and written as well as analytical skills, to form an optimum foundation for literacy and skills transfer to additional languages, which should be taught explicitly by teachers proficient in those languages.

Multilingual education should work for everyone, not only people from non-dominant groups. MLE is arguably relevant for all learners in the 21st century, since those with oral and written proficiencies in multiple languages will be best able to link local and regional to international domains in this rapidly globalizing world (Benson & Elorza 2015). In Europe, policymakers and practitioners are exploring the idea of plurilingualism, or the development of communicative competence in multiple languages over one’s lifetime according to one’s needs (Council of Europe 2006, 2007). This concept is not strange to multilingual people in low-income contexts, but in today’s world, communicative competence must be expanded to include multiple literacies.

Recent research shows that pluri-/multilingual individuals do not use all their languages in the same way and for the same functions, but draw from their varied language repertoires and switch between languages in a dynamic process reflecting their communicative needs (Herdina & Jessner 2002). As a consequence, the language proficiency of multilinguals will develop and change as a reflection of the sociocultural conditions in which they live, depending on the domains of use and the functions of the various languages in their everyday lives. What this means for early education is that schools should give learners a strong foundation in their L1s and an introduction to additional languages, combined with critical thinking skills and strategies to promote interlinguistic transfer that will serve them in their future lives and learning experiences. What it means for later education is that there should be continuity in maintaining and developing all of the learner’s languages.

Finally, plurilingualism in is now being seen not only for its pedagogical benefits but for promoting democratic citizenship, pluralist attitudes that accept and even celebrate diversity, social
coherence and mutual understanding (Council of Europe 2007). That is why our call for MEFA or Multilingual Education for All (Benson & Elorza 2015) is a call not only for good pedagogy but also for a better, more just world. This is why MLE merits stronger efforts on the part of policymakers, practitioners and all of us to design schools that meet the linguistic, cultural and academic needs of all learners.

Notes

1 Hovens (2002) was able to demonstrate that even those with no access to L1 literacy instruction did better when assessed in the L1 than when they were assessed in the dominant language.

2 The only possible exception to this is Singapore, which has a controversial English medium policy, but instruction includes people’s L1s, and the policy is meant to promote multilingualism.


4 For example, I referenced results from Cambodia (Lee et al. 2015; Benson & Wong forthcoming), Cameroon (Walter & Benson 2012; Laitin et al. forthcoming), Eritrea (Walter & Davis 2005), Ethiopia (Heugh et al. 2012), Nepal (Benson 2016) and the Philippines (Metila et al. 2016).


References


L1-based multilingual education


**Further reading**

