

A more-than-language approach to inclusion and success of indigenous children in education: reflections on Cambodia's multilingual education plan

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of multilingual education (MLE) and culturally sustaining pedagogy to promote school inclusion and success of children who speak a non-dominant language is explored. This potential is examined with reference to the authors' formative evaluation of the Royal Government of Cambodia's implementation of a five year Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP). The plan and its subsequent Multilingual Education Action Plan (MEAP) have enabled Indigenous children to be taught using one of five Indigenous languages during the first three years of school. Our interpretation of findings reinforces a conceptualization of MLE as a means to transmit culturally diverse ways of knowing, doing, and being so that children become multilingual 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, multiculturalism, Indigenous children*

Introduction

Governments, education sector leaders, and aid donors have not fully awakened to the need to address inequities in education, specifically the needs and goals of nondominant language communities (Minority Rights Group International 2009). Of 258 million children out of school worldwide, including 59 million children between 6 and 12 years of age, 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 often 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. In primary school, they often cannot understand the language of instruction and are denied opportunities to acquire culturally based knowledge and their home languages that embody and communicate this knowledge (Lee and McCarty 2015, UNDESA 2019). When they fail to provide meaningful education for nondominant language communities, states violate international laws, declarations, and conventions and contribute to culture and language loss, inequitable economic growth, and internal conflict (Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). Moreover, governments and development partners rarely embrace an expanded view of inclusion that extends beyond enrolling marginalized children in mainstream classrooms. There is an urgent need for education system to respond substantially to the self-identified goals of nondominant language communities and afford them a privileged place in implementing inclusive education initiatives such as multilingual education (MLE).

MLE is a term that is used generally to refer to instruction using more than one language in a wide variety of configurations. This might include the use of a national language and a regional or local language – which might also be referred to as bilingual education. This is the case in Cambodia. MLE may start at any point in a schooling trajectory. In Cambodia, when MLE is offered to Indigenous children, it starts either in preschool or Primary 1 (Wright & Boun 2015). MLE that starts with the home language can encourage parents to enroll their children in school and MLE can support children’s active engagement in meaningful education (Ball 2011). Increased school enrolment and attendance by Indigenous children was the primary motivation for introduction of MLE by the government of Cambodia (Ball & Smith 2019).

MLE is a teaching method and learning experience, but it does not assure specific outcomes. MLE may be used to achieve various outcomes, ranging from awareness of various language systems and/or the cultures embodied by them, to proficiency in more than one language and/or knowledge of different cultural systems of knowing, doing and being. Whether children actually become proficient in more than one language (that is, able to read to learn in more than one language) or develop bi/multicultural competency is an empirical question that must be asked in each scenario where a particular approach to MLE is implemented. Research suggests that the most effective MLE for supporting multilingual proficiency involves children starting school in their first language (sometimes called mother tongue, home language, or non-dominant language) and gradually being introduced to learning in one or more additional languages while continuing to learn in their first language at least until they can read to learn (Cummins 2009). Further, some proponents of MLE, including us, contend that a fully developed, authentic approach to MLE also supports multicultural learning by explicitly teaching children about the distinctive worldviews, practices and ways of knowing embodied in each language system and the pragmatics of language communication in the cultural contexts where each language is spoken (Brock-Utne & Skattum 2009). As well, MLE helps learners transfer their skills between languages so that they are more likely to become multilingual and multiliterate (Cummins 2009). The devaluation of non-dominant languages and cultures, and the persistent failure of monolingual education systems to support the educational success of ethnolinguistic minority children, can be overcome through a rigorous approach to MLE that incorporates the cultural knowledge of ethnolinguistic minority communities. In what we describe as a *more-than-language approach* to MLE, 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 cultural community.

This article explores the potential of MLE by examining the implementation of a 2014 initiative by the Royal Government of Cambodia, whose Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP) and subsequent Multilingual Education Action Plan (MEAP) have enabled 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 & Hult 2010), children transition to learning in the dominant Khmer language¹ using 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, formative evaluation of the first five-year plan.

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

¹ Khmer people make up roughly 90 percent of the Cambodian population.

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, disruption of Indigenous leadership, dispossession of large swaths of forested land, and resulting struggles to sustain traditional livelihoods. These conditions threaten the extinction of Indigenous languages and cultures (Ironsides 2008, Chea & Pen 2015).

Indigenous children in Cambodia have been significantly underserved by the national education system (Wright & Boun 2015). The use of the dominant, Khmer language and a national curriculum that only presented Khmer culture, values and ways of knowing has alienated Indigenous families. Indigenous parents have shown their lack of interest in mainstream education by not enrolling their children or by bringing their children to school sporadically while preferring to take children with them to the forests and fields to learn the skills needed to sustain family livelihoods.

Building on path-finding demonstrations of MLE in Cambodian non-formal education (Wright & Boun, 2015) and 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 by the Cambodian government.) MLE teachers use a unique 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. About two-thirds of the children in a school catchment area must be Indigenous in order for district education officers to petition the provincial office of education to offer MLE.

The two five year plans have been hailed in Southeast Asia as a bold step on the part of a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to support inclusion of non-dominant languages in education. This step 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, formative evaluation originally commissioned by UNICEF on behalf of Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). As a formative evaluation, the findings were used to inform a renewed five-year plan for MLE and a new Education Strategic Plan for the country. The evaluation was also intended to foster learning in the global community about the implementation requirements of MLE in remote ethnolinguistic minority communities. The evaluation assessed the extent to which the plan had been implemented, identified enabling factors and barriers, and gauged national and subnational motivation and support for MLE. As the evaluation focused on implementation rather than learning outcomes, the methods used drew out the experiences and viewpoints of multiple stakeholders regarding how well MLE was being practiced and its initial impacts on Indigenous children's enrolment and learning engagement; the evaluation did not assess outcomes in terms of children's language proficiency or multicultural learning. Detailed findings about strengthened human resource capacity and infrastructure, costing and efficiency are reported elsewhere (Ball & Smith 2019, 2021). This article offers a more high-level reflection on the 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, we argue, must be addressed if MLE initiatives like this are to yield full benefits. Similar aspirations and disjunctions are often evident in other countries when governments agree to allow nondominant languages in public education, thus 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. A mixed-methods, iterative-inductive approach was used, enabling triangulation of data from various stakeholders and records. Direct engagements with a wide range of stakeholders yielded the primary data. Document review yielded indirect findings regarding the context, school management, and exploratory MLE learning outcomes. Available costing data and education data (e.g., enrolment and demographic data) were analyzed. A nine-member team of Indigenous Cambodians with proficiencies in the languages used in MLE were recruited to assist the authors with the evaluation. Indigenous research ethics call for Indigenous involvement in matters that affect Indigenous children and families (Ball 2005, Zavala 2013).

Procedures. This formative evaluation was focused on implementation rather than learning outcomes. Therefore, the goal was to elicit self-reported experiences and assessments by members of every stakeholder group to yield a multidimensional view of how well the five year plan for MLE was being implemented and early indications of whether it was likely to achieve the goal of greater inclusion of Indigenous children in quality education. Methods were chosen based on their suitability for each stakeholder group and feasibility in terms of participants' availability and time constraints during the evaluation team's visits to remote locations. Methods included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, pictorial mapping of change in experiences of schooling, and multi-stakeholder workshops using the Outcome Harvesting method of evaluation (Wilson-Grau 2019). The team also undertook a review of relevant government planning documents and reports about MLE in Cambodia by CARE and independent scholars. Evaluation questions and sub-questions revolved around criteria recommended by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, gender equity, and impact. As such, the data were assumed to have face validity and reliability was not relevant insofar as stakeholders were engaged at one point in time. Open-ended discussion with participants also generated valuable insights. The procedures generated detailed narratives by participants about how the MLE plan had been experienced in a range of community contexts.

Participants. Participants were 695 Cambodians (45% female; 40% children) (Table 1).

Table 1. 695 participants in qualitative data collection.

Child and family participants in education	Number of participants
Children enrolled in school	275
Mothers, fathers and other primary caregivers/guardians and/or school support committee members (School support committee members were 94)	178
TOTAL	454
Education personnel	Number of participants
MoEYS Special Education Department	4
MoEYS Primary Education Department	1
MoEYS Early Childhood Education Department	3
MoEYS Curriculum Development Department)	2
MoEYS Other	4
Provincial Education Officers in the four provinces (including directors and staff working with primary, teacher training, special education, preschool and	20

monitoring related to MLE)	
Provincial Teacher Training Colleges	4
Royal University of Phnom Penh	1
District Education Officers in areas where schools and preschools were sampled	24
Primary and Preschool teachers (MLE teachers using an Indigenous language and teachers using the national language)	115
School authorities (school directors)	18
Commune leaders	6
Village leaders	20
TOTAL	220
Development partners supporting the fulfilment of child rights to quality education	
CARE International	3
UNICEF Cambodia	10
PLAN International	1
TOTAL	14
Local non-government organizations and other stakeholders involved in Indigenous children's education	
Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association	2
Cambodian Indigenous Peoples Organization	2
International Cooperation Cambodia	2
Non-Timber Forest Products	1
We World	1
TOTAL	8

Two hour key informant interviews were held with 41 participants who represented Indigenous Peoples organization, development partners, and high-level offices of education. Parents, children, and other community members participated in focus groups and pictorial mapping of changes in schooling since the inception of the five year plan for MLE. 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). An informed consent protocol in the participant's first language was orally presented and explained, and participants were asked to confirm their understanding of their rights regarding participation by signing a form or giving verbal consent. Children participated with the verbal consent of their parent who brought them to the session. Outcome harvesting workshops brought together participants from all stakeholder groups except children (due to risks related to transportation).

School and community visits. The evaluation team visited schools and communities in the four provinces where MLE had been implemented. MLE primary schools were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy including peri-urban/rural/remote locales and high, average, and low-performing schools based on records of primary grade promotions for the overall school population

(which are not disaggregated by Indigenous identity). Most schools had one class per level and ranged from Primary 1 to 6.

Data analysis. Analysis of qualitative data focused on participant-reported perspectives on how well MLE was being implemented, contributions by various actors, barriers and enabling factors accounting for implementation, and how various stakeholders understood what was happening and why. Analyses of qualitative data involved an iterative process of identifying and elaborating frequently occurring themes in participants' perceptions of implementation achievements to date and factors thought to account for these achievements. Quantitative enrolment data were aggregated for each of the four provinces and year-to-year. Aggregated findings showed within and between province trends in Indigenous student enrolment over the four-year implementation period. Details about the analysis of the copious data collected and the use of outcome harvesting are reported elsewhere (Ball & Smith 2019).

Findings

A range of positive outcomes of the MLE initiative were found, including increased numbers of MLE teachers enabling increased numbers of government-funded classrooms 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 using one of the five Indigenous languages and the Indigenous specific curriculum created by CARE. Increased Indigenous parent involvement in their children's schooling was a salient finding confirmed by all stakeholders.

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 formulating and implementing the MLE plan; limitations of the early-exit transitional model in terms of the potential for bilingualism and biculturalism; 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, after costs of MLE teacher training and curriculum development. However, there were shortfalls in dedicated funding for language-specific teacher training, monitoring, and culturally relevant resources to promote literacy in Indigenous languages. The following 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 have critical implications for achieving *quality* and *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, bringing them to school more regularly, supervising homework, and serving on school support committees. They described how MLE teachers were treating their children kindly compared to non-MLE teachers, and how their children were bringing home books in their Indigenous language. Children attending MLE primary schools were the most vocal proponents of MLE, explaining that they could now engage with their teachers because they spoke the same language, and they were motivated and happy to go to school to see friends and learn to write their language as

well as begin learning 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. Older children described being able to use social media in their Indigenous language. School principals and district education officers, and earlier studies (e.g., Wong & Benson 2019), had found that children in MLE could write their own ideas whereas children not in MLE tended only to recite and copy from provided material. Many Indigenous parents described a growing desire to learn to read and write their language.

Demand for MLE by Indigenous communities exceeded the supply of qualified Indigenous teachers and teacher trainers. However, education officers explained that they set demographic criteria for introducing MLE (in some communities as high as 90 percent Indigenous children in a catchment area), due to limited teacher capacity. 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. However, some education officers favored Khmer medium of instruction, not only because of limited teaching capacity but also because they thought it was better for the country to assimilate Indigenous children through a Khmer curriculum.

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 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 than teachers (sometimes the same individuals) who did not have MLE training.

Positive impacts beyond the classroom

A cross-section of stakeholders who participated in provincial outcome harvesting workshops agreed that MLE had revitalized community use of the Indigenous language use, which was threatened due to in-migration of Khmer-speaking families. There was agreement that MLE had eased tensions between Indigenous and Khmer community members and had bolstered the self-confidence of Indigenous people when they traveled outside their community. Parents explained that they were less fearful of discrimination by Khmer people because their Indigenous language had been legitimized by the government in the form of MLE classrooms. Many stakeholders had observed that children in MLE could switch between their Indigenous language and Khmer as social situations required, suggesting emergent bilingualism.

Out-of-school children

While MLE had a demonstrable impact on participation by Indigenous children in school, village 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.*” Parents explained that, 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 as young adults they 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 of the elderly. Out-migration has also opened historically Indigenous villages and land to in-migration and

takeover by other ethnic groups, providing an opportunity for government to issue tenders for harvesting traditionally Indigenous community forests. Indigenous participants saw MLE as a possible intervention to halt these unwanted trends.

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 and ultimately reproduce Khmer culture, which is represented in textbooks, posters, and school practices and by non-Indigenous teachers, and presented as the “right” and only way of knowing, doing and being. Indigenous histories, people, and cultural practices are not visible in mainstream education. 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 histories and keep their cultures evolving; they struggle to see how non-MLE school supports these goals. They want to transmit knowledge about non-timber forest products and multicropping in 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 first two five-year plans. 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, local plants and animals, 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.

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

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)

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 they devoted to teaching local cultural content. Many reported a lack of resources for creating culturally-based teaching and learning materials or lack of confidence that the government approved of local innovations.

Demand for expansion of Indigenous cultural content. At district, community, and school levels, over 80 percent of participants expressed a 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 enjoyed less surveillance and more freedom to expand the use of Indigenous language and cultural content beyond the provided MLE curriculum. There was also demand for updating the MLE curriculum to reflect more accurate and more contemporary, place-specific 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 MLE plans. 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 MLE curriculum, recounted extensive consultation with Indigenous people when creating the curriculum before the government took ownership of it in 2014. The government's first five-year MLE action plan did not articulate any policy, plan, objective, strategy, activity, actors, or financial resources 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 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 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.

As noted, 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.

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)

Human resource development for MLE

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 likely success of the MLE plan in terms of producing multilingual, multicultural learners. There were no Indigenous members and no Indigenous language speakers in national education offices charged with leading the MLE action plan and ensuring the authenticity and currency of cultural curriculum. Instead of acknowledging this barrier and the complexity of the situation, most national education officers expressed the view that an MLE-specific curriculum was probably not really necessary or at least not for long. They suggested instead that teachers could translate the national curriculum or use a curriculum more similar to the national curriculum. Rather than investing financial and technical resources to improve and expand 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. This counter-productive 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).

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 bilingual and biculturally competent. They were beginning to see that formal education could play a role in attaining this goal through MLE, with the culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogical approach developed by CARE. Our evaluation found increased demand for education if it offered meaning and relevance in what children learning through MLE. This finding was consistent with those of Wong and Benson (2019) who, using similar methods to assess progress on implementation of MLE in two provinces of Cambodia, found that MLE opened the gates to meaningful education for Indigenous children by providing access to learning through their own languages. Yet Indigenous participants in our study perceived a need for quality improvement of MLE to include an expanded, more accurate and holistic approach to culturally sustaining pedagogy. They also demanded continuation to Primary 6 or beyond. They sought an approach to MLE that supported literacy in the Indigenous language as well as the national language (Khmer), noting that it seemed that children were transitioning too soon to learning in Khmer in Primary 4, before they had developed a reading and writing competencies in their Indigenous language. This is consistent with previous findings that learners need support to become literate in their first language before being expected to read to learn in an additional language (Cummins, 2009; Thomas & Collier 2002). Indigenous Cambodians sought, through MLE, to ensure intergenerational transmission of contemporary, culturally based, place-specific knowledge about how to protect land-based resources and earn livelihoods through sustainable forestry and farming practices. They embraced the multilingual, 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, school cluster leaders), 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, these local educators were concerned that, in part because of an under-supply of MLE classrooms, significant numbers of Indigenous children remained out of school and instead were reportedly learning culturally relevant knowledge and skills by participating in family sustenance activities in forests, farms, villages, and homes. This perspective resonates with a UNESCO

global review, which found that children whose only option is low-quality schooling learn less than children who are not in school (UIS 2019).

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, expressed ambivalence about the need for longer and more culturally enriched MLE. In fact, those most responsible for implementing the MLE plan opined that the national curriculum was preferable to a culturally specific curriculum.

Meaningful collaboration with speakers of the languages included in MLE is critical to effective planning, human resource development, implementation, and evaluation. Yet, the plan for MLE in Cambodia made no provision for collaboration with Indigenous language speakers, community language groups, Indigenous peoples' organizations, or representatives of Indigenous community forest associations. Why would the most valuable contributors to MLE be excluded from its implementation? One explanation in Cambodia was 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 people through a one-way transmission approach. Notwithstanding that many theories of change in education and other sectors 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 the purported goal of MLE to promote equal opportunity to quality education and other rights.

Another explanation offered by government leaders for not including Indigenous people in developing MLE plans was that when Indigenous leaders are invited to meetings in the capital they fail to respond. Yet, during our evaluation, Indigenous leaders were keen to participate but reported they had never received invitations to meetings about MLE in the national or provincial capitals. They also explained 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 and seeks to reduce power imbalances and resource inequities while creating conditions for authentic engagement and cultural safety. Indigenous leaders also acknowledged the competing time commitments involved with political action to protect their lands, which support 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. 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.

Further, as Wong and Benson (2019) note, in projects and policies affecting Indigenous peoples, government actors often have implicit motives involving nationalism, assimilation, and finances that may supersede participation by non-dominant language communities. For example, justifying the choice of an early-exit transitional model of MLE, several senior government officers stated that MLE was intended to attract more Indigenous children to primary school and speed their assimilation into mainstream, monolingual (Khmer) education and society. The sense that MLE was seen as a short-term investment towards assimilationist outcomes would account for the government's lack of investment in updating culturally specific curricula and in training enough Indigenous language teachers and teacher trainers to meet burgeoning demand for MLE by Indigenous stakeholders. Education that casts doubt on

the value of culturally relevant curriculum and quickly replaces non-dominant languages of instruction with a dominant language and dominant cultural curriculum must be understood as subtractive education akin to what Ryan, author of *Blaming the Victim* (1971) famously referred to as culturally depriving education. Our evaluation findings point to Indigenous children's experience of culturally depriving, subtractive education as a likely contributor to the persisting large number of children who never enroll or never transition from primary to secondary school in Cambodia. MLE in Cambodia will only succeed if government can be convinced that a fully multilingual, 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 while also accessing quality education and participating in mainstream society.

Conclusion

The traditional understanding of language policy change as a top-down/bottom-up process (e.g., Kaplan & 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, with rare exception, in MLE globally, influential roles for members of nondominant language communities in education policy decision making and strategic planning are disturbingly missing.

Strengthening knowledge of and commitment to MLE among planners and educators requires a major shift in perspective about the role of language in education. Put 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 barriers to children being school ready and able to succeed. Using the transitional bilingual model, children can feel welcomed in school because Primary 1 is offered in the Indigenous language and then their "language problem" is overcome by quickly initiating reading and writing in the dominant language. In contrast, from a language-as-resource perspective, non-dominant language proficiency, multilingualism and multiculturalism are construed as resources, not only for members of non-dominant language communities but for the whole country. With this positive view of multiple languages in education as resources, decisionmakers and curriculum writers are more likely to invest in long-term collaboration with nondominant language speakers and organizations.

Across the globe, dominant languages and a curriculum formed around dominant cultural values, practices, and interests 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 ethnolinguistic minority children, and particularly 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. An authentic effort to address the exclusion of children who speak a non-dominant language must also support the learning goals of non-dominant language communities that often 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 as well as low-income countries (Ball 2004, Ball & Mclvor 2013, Battiste 2013, Coulter & Jimenez-Silva 2017, Mclvor & Ball 2019).

Culture must be thoroughly theorized and integrated in a more-than-language approach to MLE. A plethora of education frameworks center students' language and culture as pivotal to quality 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). 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. 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, reading 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 supports 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 curriculum 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 nonprofit organizations offered nonformal bilingual literacy classes that used songwriting, weaving, and the making of farm implements 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 were meaningful to their communities and generated a wealth of ideas for deepening and extending 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 governments and 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 innovation targets and strategies (Ball 2005; Smith 2017). Through the delivery of education, teachers communicate a depiction of history, the present, and possible futures which shape young people as citizens. Education decision makers, 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 knowledge, transmitted through Indigenous language and pedagogy as part of integrated multilingual, 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.

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