Mother tongue and early childhood development: synergies and challenges

By Sheldon Shaeffer

Scientific evidence and practical experience increasingly demonstrate the importance of good quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the holistic development of young children. Research now shows that: (1) early childhood is the human lifespan’s most important developmental phase; (2) preventive early interventions yield higher returns compared to later ones and have long-term effects on both individual and socioeconomic development; and (3) the most disadvantaged children experience the most dramatic gains from ECCE programs. This includes children of linguistic minorities often raised in environments which neglect, deny, and even repress their cultural identity and the language which “carries” it – which is one reason for the fact that 43 percent of the languages of Southeast Asia are “in trouble” or actually “dying”.

Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) can enrich, revitalize, and save languages and cultures. It also enhances the effectiveness of ECCE services both for caregivers and for young children in preschool and the early grades of primary school. MTB-MLE must therefore be an important component of ECCE policies, plans, and programs. Likewise, the early cognitive and linguistic development of young children, especially those from ethnolinguistic minorities, must be a component of national language policies and plans.

Many challenges exist to promoting these synergies between MTB-MLE and ECCE, both the general neglect of early childhood and commonly raised obstacles to MTB-MLE – a lack of orthographies, teachers, and learning materials; high initial costs; and opposition from within minority communities themselves as well as from dominant political, economic, and cultural elites.