Panel session: Gender equality as a core component for MLE and social cohesion

Policies that support and encourage mother tongue-based education (MTBE) at all levels, especially in the early years of development, can enhance inclusive development for all children. Mother tongue-based education is an important factor in empowering students through education because it ensures that students have access to information without the pretense of secondary language skills. Data shows that the most marginalized children, the ones left behind the education system, are often girls of ethnolinguistic communities. This is due to social norms and socioeconomic barriers that negatively impact their chances of education. MTBE is therefore also vital for empowering women and girls through education, beginning at the earliest stages of education. Research has shown that increasing the power that women have to make decisions drastically improves overall advancement toward global goals. A core component of such empowerment starts with inclusive quality education for all.

Language can be found at the center of culture and it plays a significant role in the construct of belief systems, gender roles, and traditions. Many times these systems and traditions can disempower women, however, if given an opportunity to learn and develop in a mother tongue classroom, girls can redefine their roles and norms within their own culture.

UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4.5 aims to eliminate gender disparities within education, thereby ensuring inclusive quality education for all, however a large percentage of the world’s women are still illiterate, and a disproportionate number of those that are illiterate are from ethnolinguistic minorities. Research has shown that girls who learn in their mother tongue in early education tend to achieve more and remain in school longer than those without such an opportunity.

The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) panel will explore the complex intersectionality of gender, early childhood education, and multilingual education (MLE), as well as the opportunities for action or collaboration along the path to SDGs 4 and 5. Panelists will do this by presenting global, regional, or country-specific evidence and examples of how strengthening gender analyses can be particularly useful for advancing the work of MLE within an early childhood education setting and social cohesion.
Global perspectives on the intersectionality of gender: early childhood care and education and multilingual education

By Carol Benson

This talk will explore the intersectionality of gender, early childhood, and language of instruction and will suggest ways to strengthen analyses using gender and language as more visible factors.

Use of the child’s own language (L1) is essential for developing preliteracy skills and identity, and linking new knowledge to prior knowledge and experience (Ball 2011). Of course, additional languages can be taught and learned, but the basis for learning should be the language(s) children understand and speak. This principle holds for primary, youth, and adult learners as well (Cummins 2009).

When a socially dominant (second or foreign) language is used as the medium of instruction, poor and marginalized learners are prevented from accessing quality education. This includes ethnolinguistic minorities and even majority speakers of non-dominant languages, rural dwellers, and girls from non-elite backgrounds—all of whom have difficulty getting to school, much less staying in school long enough to gain the literacy, skills, and knowledge needed to fully participate in society. Here is where the intersectionalities come in, as rural children have to travel long and sometimes dangerous distances to school, poor children are plagued by illness and disease, and girl children are disproportionately charged with home-based chores like wood carrying, water drawing, and childcare (Benson 2005). Working in the informal sector, their families rely mainly on non-dominant languages and have little use for a socially dominant language (Bruthiaux 2002). Where is little to no exposure to the dominant language outside school, this language will have little meaning to them in educational situations. Absenteeism, grade repetition, and school failure are symptoms of all of these issues, but use of learners’ own languages can relieve some of the burden.

Use of learners’ own languages (L1) as a basis for literacy and learning allows children to express themselves, and teachers can diagnose what has been learned, what remains to be taught, and which students need further assistance. This appears to be particularly beneficial for girls because any negative preconceptions on the part of teachers are challenged (Benson 20005). If additional languages are taught systematically through a multilingual education (MLE) approach, learners will eventually become multilingual and multiliterate, giving them more options for future employment and more opportunities for integration into their national contexts. Using language proficiency as an indicator will facilitate educational decision-making at the regional, national, and cross-national levels (Benson 2016).
Gender mainstreaming, language education, and social cohesion

By Camilla Woeldike

When aiming to ensure quality education for all children, the intersection between language and social cohesion becomes an important focus area due to its embeddedness in country-specific societal, economic, and political stratification. In the same way, addressing gender differences in education links to broader societal structures that go beyond education but which at the same time are manifested and replicated within the cosmos of education systems. This is among other ways expressed in the learning environment as inequality among peers, discriminatory practices, or simply exclusion from a learning environment.

The recently published strategy from the Language Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative outlines six focus areas to address the intrinsic linkage between language education and social cohesion. To ensure the impact and sustainability of such strategies it is important to account for gender differences and apply a consistent approach sensitive to detecting gender differences.

Such approach calls for sound gender analysis as an essential first step of collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated information in order to understand gender differences and how these are expressed and enhanced through a multitude of factors, such as lack of access to dominant language and MTBE.

This talk will explore how gender mainstreaming can be applied as a quality assurance component to the strategy from the LESC Initiative and will suggest ways to strengthen these through gender-sensitive recommendations.
How do gender and language interact? Over the last couple of decades, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and feminist thinkers have examined various aspects of this question. However, the topics are scattered, showing that there has been no theoretical coherence in the study of language and gender over the years.

It has long been known as “public secret” that women and men use different forms of language, relying on the style rather than on the variety of language. The difference is more visible when we look at it from the community’s nature and culture. Most communities around the world are patriarchal and language is one of the things that suffers from discrimination. The reason is obvious in the sense that language would be used by people who dominate to suppress the weaker, creating gender inequality linguistically.

Linguistic gender inequality is also influenced by morphological processes that create inflected forms describing gender which then lead to the emergence of gender bias. An example of gender bias in language are marked masculine words that could be used of both men and women, but such marking is not available in the feminine forms.

Gender bias in language is influenced by values that exist in the society, social roles, and culture. It can be prevented by setting restrictions on the use of markers that show specific gender alignment. There is an urgency to educate people from an early age about linguistic elements that have neutral meanings.

Parents and teachers can contribute in this effort by teaching, guiding, and providing knowledge about gender concepts to children. Once parents or teachers introduce gender issues, children will continue to remember until adulthood. In accordance with this, it is important to note that the effects of long-term gender bias become most apparent in adolescence.

This presentation attempts to explain how language and gender have a strong impact in preventing gender disparities, and how these two fields should be introduced to children in their early years. Furthermore, the presentation will provide an introduction to responsive gender language, and a variety of practical ideas, suggestions, and explanations of activities for parents and teachers to use at home or in the classroom. In addition, the presentation will include some practical guides to select and analyze gender responsive learning and teaching materials.