



SDG 4, Quality Education: Addressing Language Barriers in Education – Haiti and Niger

Background

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (The Global Goals n.d.). One of the most significant barriers to achieving this goal in multilingual countries is the language of instruction. In many cases, children speak local or indigenous languages at home, but formal education is delivered in national or colonial languages, creating a linguistic disconnect that hinders learning, lowers academic performance, and contributes to high dropout rates (Alidou et al. 2006).

Haiti and Niger are two countries where this challenge is particularly pronounced. Where Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) is spoken by nearly the entire population, French has historically dominated as the primary language of instruction. However, only a small percentage of Haitians are fluent in French, leaving the majority of students struggling to engage with their education effectively. Similarly, in Niger, children often speak one of several local languages such as Hausa or Zarma, while French is used as the medium of instruction. This mismatch between students’ home languages and the language used in schools perpetuates inequality and limits access to quality education for marginalised communities.

In response to these challenges, organisations like Concern Worldwide and UNESCO have worked with governments in both countries to implement mother-tongue-based education programs. These initiatives aim to bridge the gap between students’ home languages and the language of instruction, thereby improving learning outcomes and fostering inclusivity in line with SDG 4’s vision.

Implementation

The implementation of mother-tongue-based education programs in Haiti and Niger involved several key steps (c.f., GPE Secretariat 2017; DeGraff 2020). First, extensive teacher training programs were introduced to equip educators with the skills needed to teach in local languages. Teachers were trained not only in the linguistic aspects but also in culturally



responsive teaching methods that would resonate with their students' lived experiences. Second, new curricula were developed to include learning materials written in local languages. For example, textbooks in Haitian Creole were introduced in early grades in Haiti, while similar resources were created for local languages in Niger. These materials were designed to be culturally relevant, incorporating stories, examples, and illustrations that reflected students' everyday lives. Third, community engagement played a critical role in ensuring the success of these programs. Parents and community leaders were actively involved in discussions about the benefits of mother-tongue education. In many cases, parents were initially hesitant about this approach because they believed that teaching in French would offer their children better economic opportunities. To address these concerns, awareness campaigns highlighted how starting education in a familiar language could build a stronger foundation for later learning in French or other national languages. Finally, a gradual transition model was adopted. Students began their education entirely in their mother tongue and were slowly introduced to French as they progressed through higher grades. This bilingual approach ensured that students could develop literacy skills more effectively while still acquiring proficiency in the national language over time.

Outcomes

The introduction of mother-tongue-based education programs yielded significant positive outcomes in both Haiti and Niger. In Haiti, literacy rates among young children improved dramatically when they were taught to read and write in Haitian Creole before transitioning to French. Teachers reported that students were more engaged and confident when learning took place in their native language. Similarly, in Niger, schools that adopted local languages as the medium of instruction saw higher retention rates compared to those that continued teaching exclusively in French. Beyond academic performance, these programs also fostered a sense of cultural pride among students and their families. By validating local languages within the formal education system, these initiatives helped combat historical stigmas associated with speaking non-colonial languages. Moreover, students who received mother-tongue instruction demonstrated greater enthusiasm for learning overall, which had ripple effects on attendance rates and parental involvement.

Despite these successes, challenges remained. Limited resources for developing high-quality teaching materials and training sufficient numbers of teachers posed obstacles to scaling up these programs nationwide. Additionally, political resistance from those who viewed French



as a symbol of modernity and progress sometimes hindered broader adoption (GPE Secretariat 2017; DeGraff 2020).

Broader Implications

This case study highlights how addressing systemic barriers like language can significantly advance progress toward SDG 4's goals of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. By recognising the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity within classrooms, governments and organisations can create more effective learning environments that empower marginalised communities. The experiences of Haiti and Niger demonstrate that investing in mother-tongue-based education not only improves academic outcomes but also promotes social cohesion by validating local cultures and languages within national systems.

However, achieving widespread implementation requires sustained political will, adequate funding for teacher training and materials development, and ongoing community involvement. In the end, this case study underscores the transformative potential of inclusive educational practices when they are thoughtfully designed and contextually relevant – a lesson that holds valuable insights for policymakers worldwide striving to achieve SDG 4 by 2030.

Questions

1. Why is teaching children in their mother tongue during early education important for achieving SDG 4? Reflect on how this approach addresses issues of equity and inclusivity within the education system.
2. What are some potential challenges that governments might face when implementing mother-tongue-based education programs? Consider logistical issues (e.g., teacher training), cultural attitudes toward local languages, and political resistance.
3. How can lessons learned from Haiti's and Niger's experiences be applied to other multilingual countries? Identify specific strategies or adaptations that might work in different contexts.
4. Reflect on your own educational experience or that of someone you know who learned in a second or third language. How did language barriers affect their ability to succeed academically? What measures could have been taken to improve their experience?



5. What role does community engagement play in the success of educational reform initiatives? Discuss how involving parents and local decision-makers can help overcome resistance or scepticism toward new approaches

List of references

- Alidou, H., Boly, A., Brock-Utne, B., Diallo, Y. S., Heugh, K., and Wolff, H. E., 2006. *Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor A Stock-taking Research on Mother Tongue and Bilingual Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), viewed 02 February 2025, <https://biennale.adeanet.org/2006/doc/document/B3_1_MTBLE_en.pdf>.
- DeGraff, M., 2020. ‘The politics of education in post-colonies: Kreyòl in Haiti as a case study of language as technology for power and liberation’. *Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics* 3, 89–125.
- GPE Secretariat, 2017. *Piloting mother-tongue curriculum to improve literacy in Niger*, viewed 02 February 2025, <<https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/piloting-mother-tongue-curriculum-improve-literacy-niger>>.
- The Global Goals, n.d. 4 *Quality Education*, viewed 02 February 2025, <<https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/>>.

Author: Susanne Durst
susanned@ru.is