



United Nations
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UNESCO Bangkok Office
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education



ASIA-PACIFIC
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION
WORKING GROUP

Ref. : 159.02/IQE/05/20

26 February 2020

**Subject: Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)
provisions in Republic Acts 10533 (2013)**

Dear Hon. Roman T. Romulo,

First, I would like to extend to you our warmest greetings on International Mother Language Day (IMLD). Celebrated by the United Nations since 1998, IMLD highlights the importance of all languages for education, development and social cohesion. In addition, UNESCO recently declared 2022-32 the “Decade of Indigenous Languages,” to further draw attention to the importance of all languages.

On behalf of the co-chairs of the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group, I am writing this letter to express support to the Mother Tongue-Based, Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) provisions in Republic Acts 10533 (2013). Simultaneously, we would like to express our concern that the bill to suspend MTB-MLE implementation scheduled for Congressional deliberation on February 27, 9:30 AM, could help worsen the educational situation for millions of Filipino children.

The MTB-MLE provisions of Republic Acts 10533 (2013) were based on extensive research and pilot programs, carried out by Filipino and international scholars, with strong support from local and international NGOs, as well as leaders of many of the Philippines’ diverse cultural communities. This research found that children whose early education was provided in the mother tongue actually learn a second language better, and have a better grasp of concepts in Math, Science and other content areas. In other words, mother tongue instruction does not detract from English language learning, but improves all learning.

Hon. Roman T. Romulo
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Similar research carried out in both “developed” countries such as the United States, Australia, and Finland, as well as “developing” countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, India, and Timor Leste, confirms the effectiveness of mother tongue-based education.

The bill states that the lack of materials is the main reason for suspending the program. We are aware that the Department of Education has developed a complete set of Teacher’s Guide and Learner’s materials in 19 major languages spoken by 90% of the population. Recent studies have also found a growing number of materials, especially teacher-made storybooks in schools.

Our understanding is that one reason for the reaction against MTB-MLE is due to the Philippines’ performance in the recent PISA test. However, there are additional factors that must be considered. Firstly, the Philippines chose to only use the English version of PISA, rather than giving the students the option to take the test in Filipino or another language in which they are fluent. This decision actually was not in line with the spirit of PISA, which seeks to test what children actually understand. Thus, Chinese children took PISA in Mandarin, Japanese children in Japanese, German children in German. In multilingual countries such as Belgium, children had the option to take PISA in German, French or Dutch. In Spain, PISA is administered in four languages. Thus, the decision to test Filipino children in English only, the second or third language for most students, could be one reason why they performed so poorly. A clear analysis of the PISA situation is needed before policy decisions should be made; we know that education reform is not something to be taking lightly or changed on the basis of limited information. Secondly, the PISA is administered to 15-year-old children in grade 9. That generation of children had their early education before the MTB-MLE provisions of Republic Acts 10533 (2013) were implemented. Thus, it is not convincing to blame the MTB-MLE policy for the performance of students who studied under the previous policy.

While there is universal agreement that English skill are very important for students worldwide, important questions remain as to the best way to teach English to non-native speakers. The consensus of international research is the English-only “submersion” is not an effective method. In 2016, British Council Research Head John Knapp decried “Asia’s suicidal rush into early English,” warning that language-in-education policies based on political expediency rather than research were hurting children. Several British Council technical articles and books support mother tongue-based education, including *Dreams and Realities: Developing Countries and the English Language* (2011) and *English Language and Medium of Instruction in Basic Education in Low- and Middle-income Countries* (2019).

On this day celebrating mother tongues, we would like to offer our encouragement to the Government of the Philippines to continue to implement the MTB-MLE provisions of Republic Acts 10533 (2013), and to exercise careful deliberation supported by detailed research before making decisions that could have damaging effects on generations of Filipino children. UNESCO Bangkok and

the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working group are here to humbly offer technical support and encouragement to the Philippines and countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region, as we work together to improve the learning outcomes of all students.

Yours sincerely,



Shigeru Aoyagi
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On behalf of the MLE WG

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