

Literacy and Cognitive Skills in Underprivileged Schoolchildren in India

Ianthi Maria Tsimpli

University of Cambridge

Children who learn through the medium of a language which is not the same as their home languages have different levels of learning outcomes than those children whose home and school languages are the same (Romaine, 2013). In a linguistically highly diverse country, like India, millions of children are at a disadvantage in this respect: there are only 22 ‘scheduled’ languages and a total of 463 languages spoken in the country (Eberhard et al. 2021). Although the draft National Education Policy (2020) document states the priority of mother-tongue education, in reality, several state governments (Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Punjab and West Bengal) have already implemented EMI instruction in government schools, most often without the necessary resources and investment in teacher potential. Furthermore, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not familiar with English suggesting that EMI creates more inequalities for children in government schools.

In our longitudinal study, we examined the development of literacy and narrative abilities of 660 children attending the fourth and the fifth grade of primary schools in Delhi and in Hyderabad. Almost half of the children attended English-medium of instruction schools while the rest attended regional language schools (Hindi and Telugu, respectively). Our results show that although most children improve in school skills in the fifth grade, English reading and narrative (oral) comprehension lag behind Hindi and Telugu in both school years. Oral language skills assessed in narrative production also reveal a significant gap between English and regional language skills, with only 90 children across the two school years choosing to retell a short story in English. Our findings suggest that educating primary school children coming from backgrounds with limited home literacy support in an unfamiliar medium of instruction hinders learning and creates further disadvantages in educational prospects.