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# **Inequalities of multilingualism: challenges to mother tongue-based multilingual education**

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## **Introduction**

For the past decade or so, the world has seen increasingly resolute and genuine interest in mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), a broad framework of educational provision which essentially means the use of learners' first languages or mother tongues as the primary media of instruction. MTB-MLE appears mainly in two broad political contexts of education: the first is in educating different linguistic minority groups found in a particular country which nonetheless deploys a foreign language or a national language as the main medium of instruction, and the second is in using the mother tongues in 'mainstream' education, supplanting erstwhile languages of education. Examples of the first are several Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao and Vietnam where Burmese, Thai, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese respectively are the undisputed national languages and languages of instruction; MTB-MLE is an educational provision provided for linguistic minority groups with a long history of marginalization because of the hegemony of the state languages. Examples of the second are also Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Singapore and East Timor where MTB-MLE or mother tongue use is institutionalized in both mainstream and non-mainstream education because of general beliefs about the usefulness of the mother tongues as educational and cultural resources. Unlike the Philippines and East Timor, where the educational systems have recently become mother tongue-based, Singapore is technically not MTB-MLE, but its

bilingual policy recognizes at least three local languages (Chinese or Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) and has courted state support for their maintenance as languages to be studied in schools.

The case of the mother tongues in education is definitely not a new concept, but recent political, ideological and socioeconomic changes and phenomena around the world have shepherded the mother tongues towards the center of national and international debate and policy-making. This means that the role of the mother tongues is not confined to education alone; the vast work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the publication of its highly influential treatise, *The use of vernacular language in education* (UNESCO, 1953), has reconceptualized mother tongues as tools of development in its broadest possible sense. Language, it argues, has a central role to play in the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are “a set of shared aspirations and efforts to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 1). In particular, it provides evidence of the critical and significant role mother tongues play in eradicating poverty, achieving primary education, promoting gender equality, empowering women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, combatting HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring sustainable development and fostering global partnerships for development.

Nevertheless, MTB-MLE continues to face structural and ideological challenges to its successful implementation. These challenges are ideological in nature because they appear as ideas, beliefs and attitudes among people which then shape their dismissive or dispirited actions against MTB-MLE. These challenges are also structural in nature because such ideas, beliefs and attitudes are embedded in how institutions work and think, and how social relations have been constructed by historical and socio-economic conditions. For example, MTB-MLE may be a viable and just educational initiative, but its prospects remain uncertain within the political

mechanisms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (or ASEAN) which has designated English as the only working language of the organization as it prepares for full regional economic integration in 2015. Such structural and ideological challenges explain why, despite evidence showing the positive or constructive role of the mother tongues in educational and social development, “facts are routinely ignored the world over” (Rao, 2013, p. 274).

The aim of this paper is to describe these challenges – *inequalities of multilingualism* – and argue that while they are seemingly insurmountable, they nonetheless must be confronted if the mother tongue project is to take root in the lives and minds of more people. The first section provides a brief background of significant phenomena which have led to the emergence of MTB-MLE as a viable form of education around the world. The second section describes some features of inequalities of multilingualism by situating the paper within the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical contexts in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, to be followed further in the third section with a more targeted discussion of such inequalities using a recent case of linguistic discrimination in the Philippines as an example. Southeast Asia is a hugely linguistically diverse region but decades of linguistic colonialism and nationalism have resulted not only in the marginalization of vernacular languages or mother tongues but, more importantly, in the cultural, political and socioeconomic oppression of their speakers (Sercombe & Tupas, 2014). In fact, Stroud (2002) explains that “linguistic marginalization of minority language groups and their political and socio-economic marginalization go hand in hand” (p. 48-49). The case of the mother tongues in the region is increasingly penetrating institutional and educational discourses (UNESCO, 2005; Kosonen, 2005a), but the impending full economic integration of the countries of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) makes the region an exciting place to examine the future place of the mother tongues in the ‘new’ regional polity, given that the

emphasis of the integration is on the teaching and learning of English, the only designated language of the association.

The Philippines has recently institutionalized the use of the mother tongues in school as part of a new law in education, but recent controversies implicating language and education (one of which will be discussed in the paper) betray the precarious status of MTB-MLE even in contexts where it has received broad state and institutional support. It zeroes in on a recent controversy in the Philippines but extrapolates from this case general issues relevant to the Southeast Asian region to which the Philippines belongs. Thus, this section is important because by exposing deep-rooted ideologies and structural conditions that threaten the legitimacy and sustainability of MTB-MLE, it highlights the continuing vulnerabilities of mother tongues in education even if official discourse and policy seem to work for them.

### **MTB-MLE today**

Many social and political factors have contributed to the rise of MTB-MLE as a viable form of education. First, MTB-MLE is a discursive by-product of the recognition of minority language or linguistic human rights which have accompanied the broader political mobilization of cultural minorities in countries around the world. This basically means that education in the mother tongue “is a linguistic right” (Kosonen, 2005a, p. 96), notably among speakers of minority languages who need to find ways to redress deeply-rooted cultural and socio-economic inequalities between them and the more powerful cultural groups in their respective communities and societies. “The use of languages in education,” Mohanty (2010) contends, “is a major indicator of institutionalized linguistic discrimination” (p. 138), so MTB-MLE is one significant

way to fight such discrimination. Second, and overlapping with the first as can be seen from the quote from Mohanty, MTB-MLE has been deemed as an effective mechanism of language maintenance because the use of otherwise marginalized mother tongues in the classroom helps arrest the decline in their use in the broader social and public spaces of the community, elevate its status and prestige in the community and, in some cases, validate their viability as potential academic languages through the process of intellectualization (Prah, 2009).

Third, MTB-MLE is an ideological response to nation-building and linguistic nationalist agenda which have historically been the political province of the hegemonic ‘national language’ deployed as an anti-colonial tool against foreign languages and colonial education (Langman, 2002). In other words, MTB-MLE attempts to dismantle the ‘nation-destroying’ (Ehrentraut, 2004) hegemony of ‘the’ national language in education and society, arguing that this powerful language cannot serve as the de facto medium of instruction; it has suppressed the multilingual ecologies of nations and sidelined the contributions of speakers of other ‘local’ languages to nationalism and nation-building. And fourth, substantial amount of research from all over the world has overwhelmingly shown that effective learning is best achieved through learners’ mother tongues (UNESCO, 2012; Young, 2002). This has not only unsettled the continued dominance of colonial languages such as English and French in present-day educational systems, but has also put the spotlight on ‘national languages’ as media of instruction, demonstrating that despite being ‘local’ in relation to colonial languages, they are *not* the mother tongues of many school-going children and thus not the best and most efficient tools through which these children should be taught.

Therefore, MTB-MLE is good social policy and an ideal form of education. There is ample evidence of the positive impact of MTB-MLE on improved learning, increased political

participation and expanded life chances among marginalized cultural groups around the world (UNESCO, 2012). Based on the overlapping phenomena discussed above, MTB-MLE is politically inclusive, ideologically enlightened and pedagogically sound. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, despite its seemingly progressive or transformative agenda, MTB-MLE is set against overwhelming ideological and structural odds (Phyak, 2013; Rao, 2013; Graham, 2010), thus threatening its efficacy and relevance. For example, in the Philippines, schools implement MTB-MLE as directed by law but many teachers and students continue to devalue their own mother tongues vis-a-vis English and Filipino, the national language (Burton, 2013; Mahboob & Cruz, 2013). In East Timor, many associate national disunity and breakdown of cultural cohesion with MTB-MLE (Curaming & Kalidjernih, 2014; Taylor-Leech, 2013). In Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, reception to MTB-MLE (despite pockets of successful initiatives) has been lukewarm or halfhearted with many, including state officials, school administrators and teachers, also expressing similar apprehension over the perceived potential of MTB-MLE to engender national disunity and threaten the breakdown of state power through the delegitimization of the national language as an important political tool for cultural assimilation and control (Sercombe & Tupas, 2014; Guan & Suryadinata, 2007).

In other words, successful implementation of MTB-MLE is mitigated by ideological and structural constraints which need to be unpacked and overcome. There are immediate implementation or executionary problems with MTB-MLE – for example, inadequate teacher training and preparation, absence of teaching materials in the mother tongues, and lack of funding – but there are also subtle and insidious discourses, as well as structural conditions, that not only make the implementation of MTB-MLE difficult to achieve, but most especially also threaten to destroy its legitimacy (Phyak, 2013; Rao, 2013; Graham, 2010). These – inequalities

of multilingualism – are difficult to overcome but must nevertheless be confronted vigorously and seriously if MTB-MLE is to have far-reaching impact on the learning achievements of minority children or speakers of non-dominant languages. MTB-MLE is a positive and genuine step towards openness to linguistic diversity or multilingualism as a cultural and pedagogical resource, but it must be critically mindful of the fact that multilingualism is essentially not characterized by the presence of many languages deemed of equal value or importance. MTB-MLE is deeply situated within this political economy of multilingualism, where some languages are invested with much more symbolic and cultural capital than others, and where particular linguistic ideologies accrue to some but not others, perpetuating the privilege of some social groups and affirming the marginalized status of others.

### **Inequalities of multilingualism: Focus on Southeast Asia**

In this section, we will continue to discuss the issues raised above in relation to MTB-MLE but contextualize them within the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical realities of Southeast Asia. The region is composed of 11 countries -- Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam -- and is collectively and individually hugely linguistically diverse. Such diversity extends to the region's economies, religions, cultures and histories. For example, Singapore is the most economically developed in the region and, in fact, is Asia's top performer and second in the world in the recent *Global Competitiveness Index*, while other countries like Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and East Timor are some of the poorest in the world (Sala-i-Martin et al., 2013). In fact, "No other regional integration initiative has deeper disparities among participating members" than member-

countries of Southeast Asia (p. 30). Most have also been directly colonized but by different imperial nations, thus the politics of language in the region is complex and hugely contentious.

### *Nation-building without the mother tongues*

However, all countries are perpetually haunted by the mother tongue issue mainly because the mother tongues have been marginalized in nation-building projects in favor of colonial and dominant local languages. Their educational landscapes have been shaped hugely by nationalisms propagated during colonial times (Giordano, 2014, p. 340), ideologically aligned with the Western notion of one language, one nation, and one culture. Thus, “single societies were able to become more ethnically, culturally and linguistically homogeneous to the advantage of dominant majorities and at the expense of minorities” (Giordano, 2014, p. 340). In this sense, anti-colonial rhetoric was bound to be associated with imposing a national language upon a multilingual landscape: “The result is that the linguistic heritage of the nation is undervalued and marginalized” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 41). Consequently, MTB-MLE would be seen not only as resistance to colonial/foreign languages as media of instruction, but also resistance to the hegemony of ‘the’ national language.

### *Mother tongues in linguistically-tiered environments*

Thus, similar to South Asia’s unequal linguistic topographies, all countries in Southeast Asia are multilingual societies which can be characterized in terms of what Mohanty (2010) refers to as “hierarchical multilingualism” (p. 140) or more poignantly, ‘multilingualism of the

unequals' (Mohanty, 2006). Typically, the terms 'multilingualism' and 'multilingual' simply mean the presence of and interaction between many languages in society or in an individual's repertoire, subtly assuming that these languages are of equal value and status. But sociolinguistic realities on the ground show otherwise. For example, while Singapore (the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia) is clearly 'multilingual', most certainly it is also linguistically-tiered, with English being the most preferred language in public life and, in fact, also fast encroaching on the home domain as the language with the steadiest increase of use among Singaporeans (Tupas, 2011; Zhao & Liu, 2007). The official 'mother tongues' – Chinese, Malay and Tamil – have resulted in the marginalization of all other dialects and languages, for example with the Chinese 'dialects' banned from public domains until recently, resulting in turn to impassioned language self-policing among Chinese Singaporeans upon whose shoulders the government places the sole burden to speak Mandarin and discard their own 'dialects' for pragmatic or instrumentalist reasons, and even due to linguistic chauvinist beliefs (Teo, 2005).

Like Singapore, English is the most highly valued in the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, having taken root in these societies as a former colonial language, but its relationship with the local or indigenous languages is mediated by singular national languages (Malay for Malaysia and Brunei, and Filipino for the Philippines) which challenge the dominance of English but which nevertheless also contribute to the marginalization of the rest of the local languages (Sercombe & Tupas, 2013; Guan & Suryadinata, 2007). In other parts of Asia, India is also characterized by a three-tiered system: the elitist language, English, collides with major regional languages while the latter, including Hindi, also help sustain the much lower status of the rest of the (dominated) languages and their speakers (Mohanty, 2010; 2006). In the case of Indonesia, "the most linguistically diverse country in all of Asia" (Kosonen, 2005b, p. 4), the official

language and the sole medium of instruction are the same – Indonesian – but this is the mother tongue of only around ten percent of the country’s people, while the rest of the mother tongues are used only in highly limited adult literacy classes (ibid.).

### *Mother tongues against cultural assimilation*

The countries in Indochina – Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand – are also linguistically diverse. However, under the specter of their respective colonial pasts (except for Thailand but which nevertheless currently grapples with the power of English), theirs are clearly also stories of cultural assimilation and political suppression. Ethnolinguistic minority groups are deprived of their own languages and identities because of large-scale state-sponsored campaigns to institutionalize, brutally in many cases, the ideology of one language, one culture and one nation. This is called Khmerization (Ehrentraut, 2004, p. 56) in the case of Cambodia, as well as Vietnamisation (Choi, 2003), Lao-isation (Cincotta-Segi, 2014), and Thaization (Kosonen & Person, 2014). The agenda essentially is to impose the language and culture of the dominant cultural group upon the rest of the country in practically all domains of daily life and through various nation-building tools such as language policy, educational curricula, and mass relocation projects. As in one clear example, it formed the ideological matrix of Pol Pot’s destruction of Cambodia: “In Kampuchea there is one nation and one language – the Khmer language. From now on the various nationalities do not exist any longer in Kampuchea” (Pol Pot, quoted in Edwards, 1996, p. 55). The consequences are cultural annihilation, political oppression, and economic marginalization and, in even worse cases, ethnic destruction “due to executions as well as famines” (Ehrentraut, 2004, p. 57).

Thus, multilingualism as it is embodied and experienced by speakers and as they relate to each other in daily life is constituted by languages with differentiated value and power. What this means is that any educational initiative such as MTB-MLE driven by a genuine desire to redress various forms of inequalities in society is nevertheless still embedded in the inequalities of multilingualism which extend beyond the confines of the four walls of the classroom. MTB-MLE, therefore, is not just a matter of reconfiguring languages in education in order to make teaching and learning more effective, but also a matter of contending with prevalent ideologies and structures which vilify linguistic diversity and perpetuate unequal social relations between speakers based on the languages they speak. Much work in the area usually takes pains in delineating the concerns of research by focusing strictly on the effectiveness of MTB-MLE and other immediate implementation problems surrounding it (UNESCO, 2012; 2005), thus avoiding highly politicized engagement with relevant issues. However, this paper argues that particular ideologies and structures embed any MTB-MLE initiative, so if it is to succeed in helping transform unequal power structures shaped by language use, it must confront these ideological and structural inequalities head-on.

### **Inequalities of multilingualism: An example from the Philippines**

What we have done so far is to provide a broad contextualization of the challenges to MTB-MLE through a brief discussion of inequalities of multilingualism in Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia. This section proceeds from this broad discussion and focuses on a recent example of linguistic discrimination in the Philippines as a way to highlight the everyday enactments of inequalities of multilingualism which embed MTB-MLE. This is necessary

because any reasonable and credible talk about medium of instruction “cannot be decontextualized from its social, geographical and historical context” (Obaidul Hamid, Hoa & Bauldauf, 2013, p. 3). Sometime in August 2013, three 13-year old high school students attending a private school in northern Philippines were asked to transfer to another school for speaking Ilocano on campus, the mother tongue of most students there (Geronimo, 2013) and one of the major languages of the Philippines. For a few weeks, this became an issue of national import because of the symbolic representations created by this discriminatory action by the school. Academics, non-government and government institutions, including several politicians from the Senate and House of Representatives, weighed in on the issue, calling for an investigation of the incident, with some asserting that the school violated the children’s right to speak and use their own language, and others lamenting the school’s devaluing of the students’ cultural identity (Adriano, 2013; Pimentel, 2013).

### *Structures of linguistic imperialism*

On the surface, one can argue that this is plainly unsurprising. A high ranking educational official said, “I am not surprised at all. I can see that we had it coming and that it is still bound to happen” (Imperial, 2013, n.d.). Moreover, the world has seen much worse incidents of linguistic discrimination (in school and in other social contexts such as the workplace), with speakers of minority or non-dominant languages experiencing more punitive and brutal punishments than expulsion from school (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). But this is precisely the point of this article: this ‘simple’ case of linguistic discrimination implicates far broader and more encompassing issues of power and inequality in the world today.

For example, contrary to claims that linguistic imperialist structures no longer exist or are now irrelevant in today's world (Bisong, 1995; Davies, 1996), this case is one concrete example of how English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) comes alive on the ground. Structures of linguistic dominance and discrimination are enacted in everyday life – thus highlighting “colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces *in the present*” (Shohat, 1992, p. 105, italics supplied), albeit “persist[ing] in forms other than overt colonial rule” (ibid). Lorente (2013) is right: long after direct British and American colonial rule, the world continues to be in the ‘grip of English’, perhaps even much tighter now with expanding circle countries like China, Korea and Japan exuberantly embracing English as an economic asset (Obaidul Hamid, Hoa & Bauldauf, 2013; Park, 2011).

#### *Globalization's English-only ideology*

What this means to the school's anti-mother tongue stance is that it is in fact fueled by an English-only ideology in education precisely because of the same pragmatist reason – to give its students greater access to society's material and symbolic goods through English. However, while English-only policies link back to similar colonial policies (Pennycook, 1998; Skuttnab-Kangas, 2000), it is important to highlight the fact that such policies also respond to recent demands of globalization which can help explain why many traditionally non-English-using countries around the world are now pursuing English as a medium of instruction “in an increasingly aggressive manner to take advantage of what they see as the benefits of globalization through national human capital development and/or internalization of education” (Obaidul Hamid, M., Hoa & Baldauf, 2013, p. 2). In the case of the Philippines, English-only

policies in schools have mushroomed again in recent years because of the country's perennial role as the maker of 'workers of the world' (Lorente, 2012) or 'servants of globalization' (Parreñas, 2001b) – in other words, as producers of cheap labor to serve the demands of global capital through multinational corporations and other globally-oriented economic institutions (Tupas, 2008). In particular, the Philippine offshore call center industry has been heralded as the country's 'sunshine industry' (Uy, 2004) because of its substantial contribution to the economy, and it is precisely this industry that has compelled many schools in the country to specifically accommodate call center needs, thus contributing to a view of education that is focused mainly on the teaching of market-driven and practical language 'skills'. A CEO of a call center company exemplifies this vision of education: "The formal educational system is hard-pressed to train young Filipinos in proper grammatical English, so the private sector has taken the lead" (Holz, in Marcelo, 2010, n.p.). Thus, some economists strongly suggest: "Individuals need to be sure that skills learned at school will be useful in the workplace. For example, computer and ICT skills need to be taught as well as English as a foreign language" (Lazaro & Medalla, 2004, p. 286).

MTB-MLB is set against this powerful ideology of English as the only viable and marketable language in today's globalized world which thus requires a massive overhaul in educational systems around the world for English to be (re)introduced with more vigor in the classroom. This also explains why MTB-MLE in the country is limited to kindergarten and the first three years of primary education despite data showing that for it to be comprehensively successful, it has been implemented in at least the first six years of elementary education (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Opening up the educational system to the mother tongues to the first three years of formal education is pretty much a political concession to those who are vehemently

opposed to the mother tongues in favor of English-only schooling (Manila Standard Today, 2013).

*The unequal structures of learning English*

This view of education, and language education in particular, does not only associate learning with learning of discrete workplace ‘skills’ in order to “efficiently provide future workers for the economy” (Loh & Hu 2014, p. 14), as opposed to learning of critical thinking skills and dispositions which students need to confront the many ‘real’ problems and challenges of the world (Nussbaum, 1997). It is also important to emphasize that this view of education perpetuates both “the current overwhelming power of English worldwide” (Shin & Kubota, 2008, p. 206) and the various forms of inequalities that it engenders. For example, the undisputed symbolic power of English in the Philippines has not led to the evening out of educational opportunities among Filipinos; in fact, evidence shows that English in education has played the role of a social stratifier (Tollefson, 1986). Those who can afford it go to schools with a high quality of English language teaching and learning; those who cannot afford it also go to English-medium schools (because of the belief that English is the way out of poverty) but end up being taught English deemed undesirable by society (Bernardo, 2004; Tollefson, 1986; Tupas, 2008). This is the case with the recent push for English-only policies in schools in order to prepare students for good-paying jobs in call centers across the country (e.g. Lazaro & Medalla, 2004). This is also the case with recent demands for more English in schools in order to train young Filipino students as future export products of the country (e.g., Marcelo, 2010).

With the former point about schools and call centers, it is must be noted that only three to four out of one hundred Filipino applicants make it as call center agents, and the main reason given is the lack of English language proficiency among them (e.g., Forey & Lockwood, 2007). What this means is that the symbolic power of English pushes many people – rich and poor – to demand for more English in school, but precisely because good schools are expensive and thus inaccessible to most Filipinos, only a small group of people leave school with a high command of the English language (Tollefson, 1986; Tupas, 2008; Lorente, 2013). It is a similar point in the case of training Filipinos for export, except that this time highly tiered English language proficiencies are associated with types of work abroad, with domestic work and low-skilled work obviously requiring basic level English and, thus, constituting the basest form of paid labour available to Filipinos abroad (Lorente, 2012; Tupas, 2008). Overseas Filipino Workers are highly priced in many countries in the world, but what is less known is that their schooling back home has created different pathways out of the country, essentially recreating and transporting different overlapping social inequalities (e.g., class-based, gender-based, urban/rural distinction) beyond the country (Parreñas, 2005; Tacoli, 1999; Parreñas, 2001a). MTB-MLE is up against powerful and seductive ideologies which perpetuate the idea of English as the language of jobs and socioeconomic mobility but which hide the fact that these ideologies are true only for a select few because opportunities of learning good and desirable English are not available or open to all.

*Colonially-induced hatred towards the mother tongues*

In the process, reverence for English not only as medium of instruction but as the language of school in general also breeds contempt for the mother tongues or vernacular languages. In the case of the three students expelled from their school because they spoke their mother tongue (note: not during class, but during break time), it should not simply be seen as a mere defiance of the school's official English-only policy; this view seems to simply say that the students and their parents enlisted themselves to be part of the school so it was just important for them to follow school policies. After all, what is wrong with requiring students to speak English only in school anyway (see Lazaro & Medalla 2004)? More importantly, however, the expulsion should be seen as a result of deep-rooted hatred towards the mother tongues, another colonially-induced ideology propagated through an English-only medium of education (Skuttnab-Kangas, 2000); English represented modernity and enlightenment and the vernacular languages represented barbarism, cultural backwardness and uncouthness (Pennycook, 2008). In the case of the school in question, its *Student's Handbook* betrays similar ideological posturing: while speaking English at all times inside the school premises goes hand-in-hand with the charge to 'respect' authority and exercise 'appropriate' behavior, speaking in the vernacular inside the campus is listed alongside four other types of 'misconduct', namely 'littering', 'using chain accessories for males', 'wearing of earrings for mails', and 'speaking bad words inside the campus' (see Geronimo, 2013). As mentioned earlier, it is clear here that the expulsion is not merely either a case of students not following school rules or a school implementing an English-only policy because it believes that this is the best way to educate its students. Rather, the expulsion is implicated in deep hatred towards mother tongues or vernacular languages which, in turn, sustains and affirms the power of English in everyone's lives. This explains the statement of Napoleon Imperial (2013), Deputy Executive Director of the Commission on Higher

Education, who complained that “in spite of recent MLE initiatives”, the department tasked to oversee basic education in the Philippines, “is slow to scuttle archaic English-only school policies” (n.d.). From this paper’s perspective, the scuttling of English-only policies is just one side of the coin. The other side is the more subtle, darker side: our internalized, but certainly colonially-induced, hatred towards the mother tongues even if we (sometimes) profess explicit support for them in school.

## **Conclusion**

It is ironic that the school is actually implementing MTB-MLE in their kindergarten to grade 3 classes. Nevertheless, in the end such irony affirms the key argument of this paper – that MTB-MLE is up against immense challenges which are ideological and structural in nature. It is not automatic that teaching the mother tongues or using them as languages of instruction reflects positive attitudes towards them; MTB-MLE in this sense is ultimately about transforming social and educational infrastructures which tolerate and breed harmful language attitudes and ideologies.

The point is this: if we teach with and through the mother tongues with the belief that our pupils or students learn best through them, but nevertheless underestimate or disregard the realities of inequalities of multilingualism which embed our own teaching and learning, then MTB-MLE will not go too far. While MTB-MLE is meant for the classroom, the real battleground is bigger than the classroom where speakers of languages are distributed across unequal social spaces and relations through which they espouse ideologies which either help them wield power over others, or keep them firmly entrenched in conditions of unfreedom.

Thus, what is the way forward for MTB-MLE? This paper is essentially about describing the contours of unequal multilingualism against which MTB-MLE works, but one clear implication for the paper – difficult but possible – is a reconceptualization of teacher education, one that is centered around *teacher ideology*, and not only teaching methodology. The focus of much of teacher education is on classroom teaching pedagogies, but following Trueba & Bartolomé (2000), this paper contends that “the need for clarity of political beliefs, practices, and commitments is as important as the actual pedagogical strategies used in instruction” (p. 278). Sensitizing ourselves into the nature of inequalities of multilingualism which embed teaching and learning in our respective contexts would at the very least ensure that we could act as true advocates of the use of the mother tongues in our classrooms and schools, and thus unhook ourselves from the subtle dangers of embodied or internalized hatred towards them. There are ideologies about English, the ‘national’ language(s), and the mother tongues, but typically they are not called as such. They are *truths* about English and other languages which influence policy-making and enactments of policies in daily classroom work. Therefore, the first step forward for all those involved in MTB-MLE, and in education for that matter, is to follow the call of Trueba & Bartolomé (2000): “‘name’ ideology for what it is” (p. 280).

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