

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION: LESSONS FOR SRI LANKA

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Bilingual Education Programme (BEP) is being implemented in Sri Lankan schools for nearly two decades and still faces challenges because of the absence of an explicit policy. Three cabinet decisions and 12 circulars are the only elements of an uncompleted policy framework of BEP. Hence, this paper compares Sri Lankan BEP with three other countries namely USA, Canada and Malaysia which differ from each other by purposes, perspectives and contexts in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the local programme which will be helpful in shaping up an explicit BE policy. In this document survey, both printed and electronic documents such as international research papers, reports, cabinet decisions, circulars, journal articles etc. were reviewed. Data was gathered through skimming, reading and re – reading. Content and thematic analysis were used to analyze data and categorized under four dimensions; purpose, type, policies and strategies and expected outcome of the program. Comparison was done in developing a rubric. According to the analysis, USA absorbs children of migrants into the mainstream with assimilation purpose to minimize issues like dropouts and aggressive behavior as English is the only medium of instruction in the mainstream. Hence, types of BEP in the USA mostly transitional though maintenance and two way bilingual programmes can also be seen. Despite being different types, these programmes always promote subtractive bilingualism where the ultimate result is to replace first the language (L1) of the minority child by the second language (L2). Canada introduced the French immersion model evolved in a context of inequalities of social and language factors between French and English speaking people. Thus, social and economic factors caused the Canadian BEP with two languages similarly powerful at the international level. In such a situation in which one language supports the other language, the outcome is additive bilingualism. Malaysia and Sri Lanka having developmental models also possess additive bilingualism but with different perspectives: both countries use English as an international language in order to promote biliteracy. Hence, lessons learnt are twofold: policy and implementation based. BE model and related policies of a country are mainly decided by the purpose together with socio economic and cultural factors entwined with power play between L2 and English as a lingua franca. It is also learnt that strong foundation of L1 supports additive bilingualism and biliteracy. At the implementation level, system readiness like materials, competent teachers and training are the success factors. However, political will stands as the uppermost factor for the sustainability of the programme.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Biliteracy, Developmental Model