

**‘Children do not fail in school. School fails the children’.
Triggering educational change in Mauritius?**

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An International Hearing on the Harm Done in Schools by the Suppression of the Mother Tongue took place in Mauritius, 20-24 October 2009. It was organized by a local association, Ledikasyon pu Travayer, that has worked successfully with adult literacy in Kreol for people whom the education system has failed. Mauritius was uninhabited until Europeans established colonies: first the Dutch, then the French, finally the British. It has been independent since 1968.

French settlers brought in slave labour from mainly Africa and Madagascar for the sugar plantations. After the abolition of slavery, the British imported indentured labour from India. Political power is shared across several constituencies. The economy is strongly dependent on the sugar and tourist industries and banking. There are significant differences of income in a population of 1.3 million.

Over 70% of the population of Mauritius have Kreol as their mother tongue, and over 90% understand and speak Kreol.

English is the sole medium of education. The results in school are disastrous for a substantial proportion of the population who either absent themselves or fail to learn. The Hearing was opened by an ex-president speaking Kreol! Though the language supposedly has ‘low status’, it is in fact used informally by most people, which definitely includes MPs, alongside English as the official language and French in the media.

The Hearing had a jury consisting of seven ‘judges’. Four were Mauritians, a former Minister of Justice and three eminent people from different sections of the education world. Three were outsiders, a university professor from bilingual Cameroun who is on the board of the African Academy of Languages, which has a mandate from the African Union to promote mother-tongue based multilingual education, and RP and TSK.

We heard evidence from 47 witnesses. They included children, youngsters, parents, teachers, business people, politicians (several ex-Ministers), the Ombudsperson for Children, a policeman, trade union representatives, Deaf teachers, representatives of two Indian language communities (Bhojpuri and Tamil) and Catholic vocational schools that function multilingually, authors of materials and dictionaries for Kreol, and researchers. Relevant written documentation, laws, curricula, and international covenants that Mauritius has signed, were also submitted. Simultaneous interpretation between Kreol and English was provided (but not from French, which some spoke) so that all could use their language of choice. It was a very personal, intense experience. We heard many accounts of the trauma of children whose language is banished from school. Teachers too are forced to function in ways that they know are pedagogically inappropriate, leading to the brutal filter of examinations set and administered not by Mauritius but

the University of Cambridge.

We judges listened, asked questions, and made notes. By day 5 (by cutting back on sleep!) we had reached agreement on a 15-page document that analyses the evidence, lists findings, relates these to principles of multilingual education and human rights law, and makes recommendations. On the final afternoon the report, available both in English and Kreol, was presented and discussed. There has been major media coverage. The report has been sent to ministers, the president, the witnesses, the press, and many others. The organisers believe that it will have a major impact. There will also be a 200-page book.

Here is the key summing-up of the Findings:

The present educational system in Mauritius often violates children's right to education. It often prevents access to education. It discriminates against children on the basis of language, and it does not grant children equal protection of the law. It can cause and often causes serious harm to children; this harm can have consequences for them during the rest of their lives. It also has negative implications for the country as a whole, in terms of lack of development and use of the full potential of its people in terms of cognitive, emotional and educational capabilities and creativity, and in terms of both democratic participation and economic development.

On the other hand, in comparison with many other countries, Mauritius is in a very good position to change, because there have been many positive experiments (e.g. the Playgroups, Prevok) and most teachers are bilingual or multilingual. Timely implementation of the right decisions can lead to Mauritius becoming a regional hub for linguistic and educational research and development excellence in MLE, mother-tongue-based multilingual education. This should be a priority goal for the Education Strategic Plan 2008-2020.

The African Academy of Languages will consider initiating similar Hearings in other African countries where schools also fail the children because they use a wrong medium of education. People in some Asian countries have also already been inspired and are planning Hearings. Organizing a Hearing of this kind was an inspiring way of attempting to force those in power to move towards greater social justice in education.

The full Executive Summary of Findings and Recommendations can be accessed on www.lalitmauritius.org (Documents, 27 October 2009).