INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES
IJSRIS journal
ISSN: 2820-7157
Advancing Knowledge, Inspiring Innovation
www.ijsrisjournal.com
INDEXED JOURNAL
PEER REVIEWED Rigorous & Transparent
DOI: CROSSREF Member
OPEN ACCESS For Global Visibility
BI-MONTHLY Timely Publication
WIDE READERSHIP High Impact & Visibility
AUTHOR FRIENDLY Fast | Supportive | Reliable
RECEIVED 17 September
ACCEPTED 09 October
PUBLISHED 1 November 2026
September 2026
Volume 5
Number 6
Pages from 369 to 377

Bilingualism Among Congolese Children: An Advantage or a Disadvantage?

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Crossref doi
PREFIX : 10.63883
IJSRIS JOURNAL
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ABSTRACT

In most Congolese families, children grow up speaking several languages before entering school, where French becomes the language of instruction. This article examines the value of bilingualism by exploring its advantages and disadvantages. Drawing on the work of Lambert, Cummins, and Bialystok, the sociolinguistic context of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the legal framework for children's rights, it argues that bilingualism is neither an asset nor a burden in and of itself: it all depends on the conditions under which languages are acquired, taught, and valued. Finally, it proposes avenues for fostering additive bilingualism.

Keywords: bilingualism, multilingualism, children, school, national languages, French, Democratic Republic of Congo.

1. INTRODUCTION

In most Congolese families, children grow up exposed to several languages long before they start school. At home, they hear their parents' language, whether it is Kikongo, Lingala, Kiswahili, Tshiluba, or one of the country's many local languages. On the street, at the market, or at church, they encounter a lingua franca. Then, on the first day of school, they discover that the language of instruction, textbooks, and exams is French, the official language of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This situation, which seems ordinary to Congolese people, is in reality one of the country's most significant educational and social challenges.

The issue of how bilingualism is perceived is viewed differently by observers. For some, growing up with multiple languages is an asset: the child has additional communication tools, a broader cultural outlook, and, according to some studies, more flexible cognitive abilities. For others, Congolese bilingualism is seen as a burden: children, forced to learn in a language they do not master well, are said to fall behind, repeat grades, and drop out, while their mother tongue is devalued.

This article argues that there is no definitive answer. Bilingualism is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage in and of itself: it becomes one or the other depending on the conditions under which languages are acquired, taught, and valued. In other words, the problem is not the presence of two or more languages in a child's life, but rather the way in which schools, families, and society organize their coexistence.

To demonstrate this, we first clarify the concepts of bilingualism and multilingualism, as well as the main theoretical frameworks used to analyze them. We then describe the Congolese sociolinguistic context. We examine, in turn, the advantages and challenges observed in children, followed by the legal dimension of the issue, the role of the family and the media, and some comparable African experiences, before discussing the conditions for successful bilingualism and proposing courses of action.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Definitions of bilingualism vary widely among authors. For some, only those who have an equivalent command of two languages are considered bilingual, which is very rare. For others, including Grosjean (2010), anyone who uses two or more languages in their daily life is bilingual, regardless of their level of proficiency in each. This second, more realistic definition aligns with that of Hamers and Blanc (1983), who distinguish between bilinguality that is, the psychological state of an individual who possesses multiple linguistic codes and multilingualism, which refers to the state of a society where multiple languages are in contact.

In the case of Congo, it is often more accurate to speak of multilingualism rather than bilingualism. A child in Kinshasa might speak Lingala with friends, an ethnic language with grandparents, and French at school. A child from Lubumbashi will alternate between the local Kiswahili, French, and the language of their family of origin. The use of the term "bilingualism" in this article should therefore be understood in a broad sense: it covers the situation of a child who lives with at least two languages, one of which is most often French and the other a Congolese language.

2.2 Additive Bilingualism and Subtractive Bilingualism

Lambert (1974) introduced a now-classic distinction between additive bilingualism and subtractive bilingualism. In the first case, the acquisition of a second language is added to the mother tongue without threatening it: both languages are valued, and the child benefits from this. In the second case, the second language generally the more prestigious one tends to replace the first, which is perceived as less useful or even as an obstacle. The child then gradually loses their native language without fully mastering the new one.

This distinction is essential to our topic. It shows that the effect of bilingualism depends less on the number of languages than on the social status attributed to them. Where the child's language is respected by the school, bilingualism tends to be additive. Where it is suppressed or ignored, it becomes subtractive, with the negative effects that research has extensively documented.

2.3 Linguistic Interdependence and Proficiency Thresholds

Cummins (1979, 2000) proposes two hypotheses that directly shed light on the Congolese situation. The first concerns the interdependence of languages: the skills acquired in the first language particularly comprehension, reasoning, and the ability to use abstract language are largely transferred to the second language. A child who has developed a solid foundation in their first language therefore learns to read, write, and reason more easily in a second language.

The second is the threshold hypothesis. According to Cummins, a child must reach a certain level of proficiency in at least one of their languages for bilingualism to have positive effects. If neither language reaches this threshold which happens when the mother tongue is abandoned too early and

the school language has not yet been mastered the child risks ending up in a state of "semi-lingualism," with lasting learning difficulties. This hypothesis which is debated but influential, calls for protecting the child's first language during the years when they are building their cognitive and linguistic foundations.

3. THE CONGOLESE SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

3.1 A Rich Linguistic Landscape

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is home to more than two hundred languages, divided among several major language families. Four of these have the status of national languages: Kikongo, Lingala, Kiswahili, and Tshiluba. They serve as lingua francas across vast regions: Kikongo in the west, Lingala in Kinshasa and the northwest, Kiswahili in the east and southeast, and Tshiluba in the Kasai region. Alongside these, French is the official language, according to Article 1 of the Constitution of February 18, 2006, which stipulates that: "It is the language of administration, the judiciary, higher education, and most written documents."

This arrangement is the result of a long history. Under Belgian colonial rule, missionary education used Congolese languages in the early years of schooling, while reserving French for higher levels of education and administrative positions. After independence, French established itself as the language of social advancement and national cohesion in a country with considerable ethnic diversity. Successive educational reforms have oscillated between the use of national languages in the early years and the widespread adoption of French, without the balance ever being clearly established or applied uniformly.

3.2 Languages in Children's Lives

The situation varies greatly from one environment to another. In cities, and particularly in Kinshasa, many children speak Lingala as their first language, sometimes alongside an ethnic language spoken by their parents. They hear French on television, at church, or at school, but use it little within the family. In educated families, French may be used at home, sometimes from early childhood, which creates an initial inequality among children. In villages, on the other hand, the local language dominates almost entirely, and French appears only at school, often without any support within the family environment.

Congolese speakers also commonly engage in code-switching that is, switching from one language to another within the same conversation, or even within the same sentence (Poplack, 1980). This phenomenon, sometimes viewed negatively by teachers and parents, actually demonstrates genuine linguistic competence: switching between codes requires mastery of both systems and an understanding of when and why to use them. This practice is now very common among young people, particularly in conversations on social media.

3.3 The Language of School

Officially, education policy recognizes the importance of national languages in the early years of elementary school, with French subsequently becoming the primary language of instruction. Framework Law No. 14/004 of February 11, 2014, on national education confirms the place of national languages and French in the education system. In practice, however, many schools particularly in urban areas and in the private sector use French starting in the first grade. Many parents see this as a guarantee of success, and some schools prohibit or discourage the use of Congolese languages on school grounds. Children are thus placed in a situation where the very language they are least proficient in is the tool for learning.

3.4 Language Development in Multilingual Children

To understand the effects of bilingualism, it is important to recall how children acquire language. During the first years of life, children develop their first language through interactions with their parents, siblings, and those around them. By the age of three or four, they have already mastered the essentials of that language's grammar and possess a vocabulary that grows richer every day. It is upon this foundation that academic learning particularly reading and writing is built.

When a child is exposed to multiple languages at a very early age, they develop proficiency in each language at a pace that depends on the quantity and quality of that exposure. A child who hears Lingala all day and French only at school will have a richer vocabulary in Lingala, which is normal. Therefore, their proficiency in French should not be judged solely by the standards of a child who has been a native French speaker from birth. Experts emphasize that a bilingual child's proficiency must be assessed holistically, taking into account all of their languages (Grosjean, 2010).

This clarification has practical implications for Congolese schools: a child who does not yet speak French well is not behind in language development. The child already possesses a complete linguistic system that can be drawn upon for learning. The teacher's role is to build on this system rather than ignore it.

3.5 Three Typical Situations

To illustrate the diversity of situations, we can broadly distinguish three profiles of children. The first is that of a child from an educated urban background, whose parents speak French at home in addition to a Congolese language. This child enters school with a solid foundation in French but runs the risk of gradually losing their grandparents' language if it is not maintained. Their bilingualism is more of the reverse subtractive type: it is the national or ethnic language that is at risk.

The second profile is that of a child from a working-class neighborhood, such as those found on the outskirts of Kinshasa or Lubumbashi. Their everyday language is Lingala or Kiswahili; they hear French at church, on television, and at school, but use it very little. Their bilingualism is fragile: it depends heavily on the quality of the school and the guidance the child receives.

The third profile is that of the village child, for whom the local language is the only language spoken at home and often in the neighborhood. For this child, French is almost a foreign language on the first day of school. He or she depends entirely on school to acquire it, which makes teaching conditions crucial.

These three profiles show that there is not a single form of Congolese bilingualism, but rather different forms of bilingualism, each requiring tailored responses.

4. THE BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM FOR CONGOLESE CHILDREN

4.1 Cognitive Benefits: A Nuanced View

A significant body of international research links bilingualism to certain cognitive benefits. Bialystok (2001) and Bialystok, Craik, and Luk (2012) have shown that bilingual children, because they must constantly choose between two active languages, develop their attentional control and their ability to ignore irrelevant information. This ongoing training is thought to result in greater mental flexibility and better performance on certain attention and problem-solving tasks.

However, caution is warranted. Other researchers, such as Paap and Greenberg (2013), dispute the existence of a general executive function advantage and emphasize that results vary widely depending on the populations and methods used. It would therefore be an overstatement to claim that every bilingual child is more intelligent or performs better than a monolingual child. What we can reasonably conclude is that bilingualism does not hinder a child's cognitive development and that, under the right conditions, it can stimulate it.

4.2 A More Developed Metalinguistic Awareness

The most well-established benefit is of a metalinguistic nature. Children who grow up with two languages realize earlier that words are conventions and that the same idea can be expressed in multiple ways. They spontaneously compare structures, sounds, and vocabulary. This ability to reflect on language facilitates the learning of reading and writing, as well as the acquisition of additional languages. For a Congolese child who will use multiple languages throughout their life, this is a significant advantage.

4.3 An Academic Advantage When the Mother Tongue Is Used

Studies conducted in Africa on the language of instruction point to an important finding: children learn better and learn French itself better when the early years of schooling are based on a language they understand (Alidou et al., 2006; UNESCO, 1953, 2003). From this perspective, the mother tongue is not an obstacle to acquiring French: it serves as a springboard. Children who can read in their own language easily transfer this skill to French, in line with Cummins's interdependence hypothesis. Bilingualism thus becomes a real academic asset, provided it is organized methodically.

4.4 Identity and Cultural Benefits

Language is the vehicle for culture, values, proverbs, stories, and forms of wisdom passed down from generation to generation. A child who retains their native language maintains a living connection with their extended family, their village, and their history. They build a stronger identity, which has positive effects on self-confidence and academic success. At the same time, proficiency in French opens the door to literature, the sciences, national institutions, and the international Francophone community. Bilingual Congolese individuals can thus serve as a bridge between their community and the outside world, which constitutes a valuable cultural asset.

4.5 Social, Civic, and Economic Benefits

On a social level, speaking multiple languages enables communication with people from other provinces and communities. In a country as vast and diverse as Congo, this ability fosters dialogue, mobility, and national cohesion. Professionally, proficiency in French and one or more national languages is an asset in the job market, whether in government, business, education, healthcare, or international

organizations. Finally, from a civic perspective, understanding both the language of the law and the language of the people enables individuals to better understand their rights and assert them.

4.6 An Asset for Reading and Access to Knowledge

Knowing how to read is the key to all learning. Research on bilingual literacy shows that children who first learn to read in a language they speak fluently grasp the principle of reading more quickly: linking written symbols to sounds and meanings. They can then apply this principle to a second language. In Congo, where the national languages are written using relatively consistent orthographic systems, this transfer is facilitated.

Children who read in multiple languages also have access to a wider variety of texts: stories, newspapers, religious books, administrative documents, and digital content. This exposure fuels their curiosity and their ability to understand the world around them. In the digital age, where much of the information circulates in French but daily interactions often take place in national languages, bilingualism allows people to navigate between these two worlds.

5. THE CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

5.1 Learning in a Language Not Yet Fully Mastered

The main challenge stems from the gap between the language spoken at home and the language used at school. When a six-year-old child is expected to follow all lessons in French even though he or she barely understands it, the child devotes a great deal of energy to decoding the language before being able to grasp the content. The child learns to repeat rather than to reason. The risk is that they will pretend to understand, memorize without grasping the meaning, and quickly fall behind in reading, math, and writing.

These difficulties accumulate from one year to the next. Students are held back more often, motivation declines, and the likelihood of dropping out increases, particularly among children from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Failure is then mistakenly attributed to a lack of intelligence or effort, when in fact it is largely due to the language barrier.

5.2 Shortcomings in the Educational System

Teachers, who often have little training in teaching French as a second language, frequently use methods designed for children whose native language is French. Textbooks adapted to the Congolese context are rare, and there is not always sufficient teaching material available in the national languages, particularly for science subjects. Overcrowded classrooms also make it impossible to provide individualized support to struggling learners. Under these conditions, even a well-intentioned language policy is difficult to implement.

5.3 The Devaluation of Congolese Languages

Another risk is of a symbolic nature. When schools present French as the sole language of knowledge and progress, and Congolese languages as languages of the home, the street, or ignorance, they convey to children a message that devalues their origins. In some schools, speaking Lingala or another local language is punished, which can lead to shame and linguistic insecurity. The child may then abandon their first language which is the very definition of Lambert's subtractive bilingualism potentially severing ties with their grandparents and family culture.

5.4 Social Inequalities

Bilingualism is not experienced in the same way by all children. Those who grow up in educated families, hear French at home, and attend well-resourced schools are better able to achieve balanced bilingualism. Children from poor or rural backgrounds, who encounter French only at school and sometimes under poor conditions run the risk, on the contrary, of facing nothing but difficulties. The language of instruction thus becomes a factor in the reproduction of inequalities: it favors those who already possess the linguistic capital expected by the school.

5.5 The Risk of Semi-Bilingualism

Finally, when the mother tongue is abandoned too early and French has not been firmly acquired, the child may find themselves without full mastery of either language. Their vocabulary remains limited in each language, they have difficulty expressing complex ideas, and their learning is compromised. This is the situation that Cummins (1979) describes in terms of the threshold not reached. It is not due to bilingualism per se, but to the absence of conditions conducive to its development.

5.6 Code-switching in school: a flaw or a resource?

Congolese teachers often complain that students "mix languages." This practice is indeed perceived as a sign of poor proficiency in French. Research on bilingual education, however, suggests a more nuanced view (García, 2009). When used in a controlled manner, code-switching allows the teacher to explain a difficult concept in the national language before formulating it in French and enables the learner to

verify their understanding before responding in the language of instruction.

The problem lies not in code-switching itself, but in its unplanned use, which can leave the learner confused between the two codes. The solution, therefore, is not to ban it, but to organize it: to define when and for what purposes each language is used, so that students can make progress in both. Several studies on multilingual classrooms (Moore, 2006) show that approaches that recognize learners' languages as resources yield better results than those that exclude them.

5.7 Psychological and Social Consequences

Beyond academic performance, the way schools treat a child's languages affects their well-being. A child who is teased because of their accent, or who is punished for speaking in their own language, learns to remain silent. They participate less in class, lose confidence in their abilities, and may develop a sense of inferiority. Conversely, a child whose languages are welcomed and valued becomes more engaged and identifies more readily with the school.

We must also take into account the fact that Congolese children live in precarious circumstances where school is sometimes their only chance for social advancement. The pressure on them is therefore considerable: they must succeed in French, often without help at home, even though their parents do not always have a good command of the language. This situation can lead to stress and discouragement, which only a supportive teaching approach can alleviate.

6. THE LEGAL DIMENSION: CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE RIGHTS

The issue of children's bilingualism is not merely educational; it also has legal implications. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Democratic Republic of Congo, recognizes the right to education and specifies that education must promote respect for the child's cultural identity, language, and values (Article 29). Article 30 protects the right of children belonging to a minority or an indigenous population to use their own language in common with other members of their group. The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child takes a similar approach by linking education to the preservation of positive African cultural values.

Domestically, the 2006 Constitution establishes French as the official language and elevates the four languages Kiswahili, Kikongo, Lingala, and Ciluba to the status of national languages, which the State is required to promote. It also guarantees the right to education. The 2014 Framework Law on National Education regulates the use of these languages within the school system. As a result, Congolese children have the right to access a quality education that prepares them for life in the nation and internationally through proficiency in French, without, however, separating them from their own language and culture.

From this perspective, a school that penalizes the use of Congolese languages or imposes French without an appropriate transition risk disregarding the spirit of these laws. The challenge is not to choose between French and the national languages, but to reconcile the right to an effective education, the right to linguistic and cultural identity, and the best interests of the child, which must guide any decision concerning them.

7. THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY, THE COMMUNITY, AND THE MEDIA

7.1 The Family: The Primary Setting for Bilingualism

Regardless of school policy, the family remains the primary setting where a child's linguistic future is shaped. Parents decide often without thinking about it which languages will be spoken at home, which stories will be told, and which songs will be sung. When parents abandon their own language in favor of French in the hope of promoting their children's success, they may unintentionally impoverish the child's linguistic environment: French spoken hesitantly by adults who do not always have a firm grasp of it offers a less rich model than the mother tongue, in which they express themselves with ease.

It is therefore helpful to remind families that telling stories, sharing proverbs, and engaging in lengthy conversations in the mother tongue are activities that prepare children for school. A child who is spoken to frequently, in a rich and varied language, develops a vocabulary and ability to express themselves that will serve them well in all the languages they go on to learn. Families who can do so supplement this foundation with books, games, and interactions in French, without sacrificing the child's native language.

7.2 The Community and Cultural Transmission

Grandparents, churches, cultural associations, and youth groups also play a role in language transmission. In many Congolese communities, bedtime stories, proverbs, songs, and ceremonies are prime opportunities to learn the language in its richest forms. When these opportunities disappear—due to urbanization, family separation, or lack of time—the child loses valuable contact with the living language.

7.3 Media and Digital Technology

Today, the media are an important factor in linguistic socialization. Radio, television, and digital platforms broadcast content in Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Tshiluba, and French. When used in a guided manner, they can enrich a child's vocabulary and strengthen their familiarity with various registers. They also provide a space where Congolese languages are written and read, which contributes to their modernization. It is up to families and schools to guide these uses so that they support learning rather than compete with it.

8. INSIGHTS FROM OTHER AFRICAN EXPERIENCES

The issue of bilingual education is not unique to Congo. Several African countries have experimented with models that shed light on the debate. In Nigeria, the Ife Primary Education Project, conducted beginning in the 1970s under the direction of Fafunwa, compared instruction in the mother tongue (Yoruba) for six years of elementary school with traditional instruction in English; its results, reported by Fafunwa, Macauley, and Sokoya (1989), indicate better performance among learners educated in their native language, including in the second language.

In Tanzania, Kiswahili is the language of instruction throughout elementary school, with English taking over in secondary school. This policy has promoted widespread literacy and a strong sense of national unity, but it also presents the challenge of an abrupt transition to English upon entering secondary school. In Mali, "convergent pedagogy" which combines instruction in the local language with the gradual learning of French is often cited as an example of a phased approach. These experiences, which must be analyzed with caution due to differing contexts, converge on one point: success depends on the quality of preparation, continuity across grade levels, and the commitment of all stakeholders.

For Congo, the main lesson is that there is no single model that can simply be imported. Each approach must be adapted to local realities: the distribution of languages, available resources, families' expectations, and teachers' capabilities. However, international experience confirms that well-designed bilingual education in schools yields better results than sudden immersion in a language the child does not understand.

9. DISCUSSION: BUILDING BILINGUALISM

The preceding points lead to a nuanced response. Bilingualism is not, in and of itself, a disadvantage: research does not show that acquiring multiple languages delays a child's development. The difficulties observed in the Congo stem primarily from the conditions under which learning takes place: an overly abrupt transition from the language spoken at home to the language of the school, inadequately trained teachers, a lack of materials, and a hierarchy that disadvantages local languages. In other words, what is often perceived as a drawback of bilingualism is more often a shortcoming of the educational system.

Conversely, bilingualism is not an automatic advantage. The cognitive, academic, cultural, and professional benefits are realized only if the child can develop a solid foundation in both languages, to use them in varied contexts, and to see them recognized. Additive bilingualism requires clear political and pedagogical choices, resources, and family support.

One point deserves to be emphasized: the opposition between national languages and French is largely artificial. French is today one Congolese language among others, spoken, adapted, and transformed by millions of African speakers (Dumont, 1990), and it remains indispensable for social and professional integration. National languages, for their part, are the languages of everyday thought and emotion for the vast majority of children. To pit them against one another is to deprive oneself of the complementarity that is the strength of bilingualism. Research on language policies (Calvet, 1999) also reminds us that languages compete in a real market, where the social value of each depends on institutional choices.

There remains the issue of parents, who are often torn. Many want their children to speak French from a very young age, for fear that the local language will put them at a disadvantage. However, research suggests that maintaining the mother tongue does not slow down the learning of French, but rather supports it, provided that the child receives a quality education in both languages. Informing families about this is an important part of any educational policy.

Several objections warrant consideration. The first is that instruction in national languages wastes time and delays access to French, the language of exams and higher education. Experience in many African countries shows the opposite: learners who receive early education in their own language generally achieve better results including in French than those who are immersed in the official language from the outset (Alidou et al., 2006). Time spent on the mother tongue is not time wasted, but an investment.

The second objection relates to the diversity of languages. With more than two hundred languages, it is said, it would be impossible to teach in each one. It is true that immediate

implementation across the board is not feasible. But the four national languages already cover very large territories, and using them as languages of initial instruction would make it possible to reach a large proportion of children. For the others, gradual solutions can be explored, for example by starting with areas where a local language is dominant.

The third objection is financial: training teachers, producing textbooks, and reforming curricula are costly. This challenge is real, but it must be weighed against the considerable cost of academic failure, which results in repeated grade retention, dropouts, and a waste of human resources. A coherent language policy is an investment whose benefits are measured over the long term.

One final point must be made regarding the measurement of results. To determine whether a language model is effective, students must be assessed not only in French but also in their native language, in mathematics, and in reading comprehension, and their progress must be tracked over several years. An assessment limited to proficiency in French risks wrongly concluding that a bilingual approach has failed, even though its beneficial effects often become apparent in the medium term. Having reliable data, collected across the various provinces, is therefore essential for ensuring that the debate on bilingualism among Congolese children is based on facts rather than impressions.

9.1 What Bilingualism Requires of Schools

Recognizing that bilingualism can be an asset is not enough: schools must also equip themselves with the means to foster it. This first involves viewing each of the child's languages as a resource rather than a problem. A teacher who welcomes a student by telling them that their language is an asset sends a message that changes the student's relationship with school. This raises the question of explicitly planning the role of each language: which subjects in which language, at what time, with what objectives, and how the student transitions from one to the other.

And this approach requires continuity. A child who learns to read in the national language for two or three years, then suddenly switches to French without a transition, risks losing some of what they have learned. The transition from one language to another must therefore be prepared for, with specific instruction in spoken French starting in the early years, followed by a gradual introduction to reading and writing in that language. This continuity is one of the conditions for additive bilingualism.

9.2 What Bilingualism Requires of Society

Bilingualism is not built in schools alone. It requires Congolese society to reevaluate the prestige attached to languages. As long as French is perceived as the sole language of success and the national languages as second-class languages, parents will continue to invest exclusively in French, sometimes at the expense of the mother tongue. Conversely, if national languages are used more widely in the media, local government, local courts, and written communication, their social value will increase, and families will be more inclined to pass them on.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of this analysis, several strategies can be proposed to ensure that Congolese children's bilingualism becomes an asset: s

- Ensure early education in a language the child understands, using national languages in the early years of elementary school, with a gradual and planned introduction of French as a second language, and later as the language of instruction (Alidou et al., 2006);

- Train teachers in the pedagogy of bilingualism and French as a second language, and prioritize teachers capable of working with both languages;

- Produce high-quality textbooks and teaching materials in national languages and in French that are adapted to the Congolese context, including in science subjects;

- End practices that penalize the use of Congolese languages in school, and recognize code-switching as an educational resource rather than a mistake;

- Raise awareness among parents and communities about the benefits of the mother tongue and the role they can play, particularly through reading, storytelling, and daily interactions at home;

- Reduce inequalities between urban and rural areas, and between the public and private sectors, by providing special support to schools that serve children with limited exposure to French;

- Conduct field research on student performance based on the language models adopted, in order to base policies on local data;

CONCLUSION

Is bilingualism among Congolese children an advantage or a disadvantage? The analyses presented in this article suggest rejecting this overly simplistic dichotomy. The languages a child carries within them represent a potential asset: they nurture their identity, enrich their thinking, facilitate future learning, and broaden their social and professional horizons. However, this richness is realized only if the treatment of languages is balanced. When one language is prioritized at the expense of the other, when schools impose a language without preparing children to receive it and without giving them the means to master it, bilingualism becomes a source of failure and inequality.

The challenge, therefore, is to move from imposed bilingualism to actively cultivated bilingualism. This requires a strong and committed political will, investments in teacher training and instructional materials, careful consideration of the respective roles of the national languages and French, and a shift in perspective regarding the Congolese languages recognizing them as languages of knowledge and not merely of family communication which must be placed high on the agenda. Only then will Congolese children be able to make the most of their bilingualism, and only then will the country be able to turn its linguistic diversity into a driver of development and national cohesion.

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