

Learning in two languages: Lessons from francophone Africa on what works best

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Children living in multilingual communities often learn in a language at school that does not match the language they speak at home. This mismatch makes it challenging for them to participate in classroom

discussions and learn to read. In turn, this contributes to poor learning outcomes, grade repetition, and dropping out of school.

Bilingual education programs that include mother tongue languages have become increasingly popular for improving learning outcomes. Bilingual education is associated with better [language and literacy skills](#), reduced grade repetition and school dropout rates across the [globe](#). Including mother tongue languages in education also places value on children's cultural identities, improving confidence, [self-esteem](#) and [learning](#).

But simply providing [bilingual education](#) does not guarantee better learning results. This is the conclusion of a recent [paper](#) we published in which we reviewed bilingual programs in six francophone west African countries: Niger, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon.

We found mixed results, across and within countries and programs.

We identified two sets of factors that constrain or contribute to the quality of bilingual education. These were:

- implementation factors, such as [teacher training](#) and classroom resources
- socio-cultural factors, such as perceptions of mother tongue languages in education.

Our findings emphasize the need to consider the local context when applying bilingual education programs.

Bilingual education in francophone west Africa

Our research team conducted research in Côte d'Ivoire from 2016 to 2018. We measured children's language and reading skills in both their

mother tongue and in French, and compared outcomes between children attending French-only or bilingual Projet École Intégrée schools.

Children in French-only schools outperformed their peers from bilingual schools on the language and reading [assessments](#). Teachers revealed they had better teaching resources and felt better prepared in French-only schools.

We were interested in whether bilingual education programs in other francophone countries in the region had had similar experiences. In 2022, we searched academic databases for literature in English and French that discussed program implementation and measured learning and schooling outcomes within bilingual education programs. We reviewed nine programs from six countries: Niger, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon.

These countries are former French colonies or territories. French is the official or working language and often the language of instruction in school. However, these countries are highly multilingual. About 23 living [languages](#) are spoken in Niger, [39](#) in Senegal, [68](#) in Mali, [71](#) in Burkina Faso, [78](#) in Côte d'Ivoire and [277](#) in Cameroon.

Our review showed that children can benefit from learning in two languages. This is true whether they are two official languages like in Cameroon's [Dual Curriculum Bilingual Education](#) (French and English) schools, or in a mother tongue and French, like in Mali's [Community Schools](#). Children can also benefit regardless of whether they are gradually introduced to a language throughout [primary school](#) or whether both languages are introduced at the same time.

But a lack of resources, and a failure to take into account local conditions, affected the outcomes. The programs that resulted in positive schooling and learning outcomes recognized and targeted common

school-related and community-related challenges.

Teacher training and resources

One common school-related challenge was teachers not having teaching materials in all languages of instruction.

The [Pédagogie Convergente](#) program in Mali, for example, ensured teachers had materials in both French and the mother tongue. Children had better French and math scores.

But some teachers from the same program did not always have teaching [materials](#) in mother tongue languages. And some children struggled with literacy and writing skills.

Another common challenge was teachers not feeling prepared to teach in all languages, as teacher training often occurred in an official language, like French. The [Program d'éducation bilingue](#) in Burkina Faso, for example, made an effort to train teachers in the mother tongue language so they felt confident following the bilingual curriculum.

Children in bilingual Burkina Faso schools had higher than average [pass rates](#) on the primary certificate exam, [repeated grades less](#), and stayed in school more than children in traditional French schools.

Both examples are in contrast to the bilingual schools in Côte d'Ivoire, where teachers lacked materials and training in mother tongue languages. In turn, children demonstrated worse [language](#) and reading skills compared to their peers in French-only schools.

Socio-cultural factors

We identified common community-related challenges, particularly related to community buy-in and perceptions of mother tongue instruction.

For example, families with higher socioeconomic status were worried that Niger's [Ecole Experimentale](#) schools would hinder children's French proficiency and compromise their entry into secondary school.

Programs such as the [Support Program for Quality Education in Mother Tongues for Primary Schools in Senegal](#) worked to combat negative perceptions by educating families about the benefits of bilingual education. Children in the Senegalese program outperformed their peers in traditional French schools in all school subjects.

The same programs sometimes experienced different outcomes depending on the community. For example, although children in Burkina Faso's bilingual schooling showed favorable outcomes, [parents](#) felt that French programs were better suited for continuing to secondary school.

What does this mean for bilingual education?

Efforts to provide teachers with the resources they needed, and efforts to foster community support, were both consistently linked with positive schooling and learning outcomes in our review.

However, these efforts might work better in some communities compared to others, due to different resource constraints and socio-cultural differences. Studies that found poorer outcomes also found common challenges present. Therefore, bilingual education has the potential to facilitate positive learning outcomes if efforts are made to overcome common challenges based on communities' needs.

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