



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## IMPACT AND CHALLENGES OF LITERARY EDUCATION IN INDIAN SCHOOL EDUCATION: REVIEW OF RESEARCHES IN LAST TWO DECADES

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### Abstract

*The question of education in India cannot be properly discussed without referring to its socio-linguistic context. This paper provides the impact and challenges of literary education in schools of India. Systems delivering comprehensible input in multilingual, language-across-the-curriculum contexts could allow teachers to be learners, and learners to outpace teachers. Evaluation geared to language proficiency rather than curricular achievement would allow curricular freedom, certification of diverse attainment levels and provide alternate routes to success in language for those leaving school. A discussion of language policy in Indian education follows in which the recommendations of the different education commissions are analysed. This analysis of current literature is framed mandate and strong commitment to quality education for all and to cultural and linguistic diversity in education. This discussion is especially timely, given the slow and uneven progress in meeting international targets for universal education articulated in the Education for All Goals 1 (ECCE), Goal 2 (Primary Education), and Goal 6 (Quality of Education) (World Declaration on Education for All, 1990). The important issues covered include: the number of languages that are taught, the medium of instruction, and the educational policies regarding speakers of minority languages. The article also discusses different language movements and their impact on Indian education.*

**Keywords:** Literary Education, Language, Multilingual, Curriculum, Minority and Majority Language

### INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential part of our existence in society, as much as breathing is necessary for our survival. It ceaselessly marks its presence in every domain of our lives. Yet, two interrelated facts about language and its sustaining power evade us; and these have extremely crucial implications for society and for education. One, that languages are fundamentally porous, fluid and continuously evolving systems that human beings acquire and change to define themselves and the world

around them. Two, that multilinguality is a norm, not an exception. It is constitutive of being human. We have a “linguistic repertoire” that enables us to engage in multilingual languaging i.e., to move easily between language systems that have some common and some unique characteristics. Multilinguality and porousness, taken together, suggest that languages are constantly evolving and interacting in a dynamic process. Thus, no language can be “pure”. In fact, the pursuit of purity in a language is like marking it for certain death. However, the State, the market and the schools impose monolingual and monoglossic language ideologies, policies and practices in the name of multilingualism.

To recognize multilingualism is to recognize translanguaging—a natural way for multi-linguals to access different linguistic features of so-called autonomous languages in order to maximize communicative potential. In this paper, key challenges and possible strategies are identified for leveraging the inherent heteroglossic multilingualism in education in India and for promoting its understanding and value among the masses.

This literature review focuses on these mother tongue-based bilingual and multilingual education programmes. This review is intended to assist UNESCO, the lead international educational agency, to develop clear guidelines and principles for language policy in early education, particularly within the context of the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All (2000). Universal access to quality primary education for children and a 50 per cent increase in adult literacy by 2015 were among the goals set in this framework. In addition, UNESCO voiced support for the maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity and the promotion of children’s right to learn in their mother tongue. Many of the world’s language and cultures are endangered by historical incursions, mostly associated with colonialism, and a host of contemporary political, economic, and social processes. One way to counter this linguistic and cultural loss is to encourage and support parents to teach their infants and young children the local language in the home, and to deliver early childhood education programmes and formal education systems in the children’s mother tongue. Though not conclusive, current theory and a growing body of empirical research on language acquisition and bi/ multilingual learning provide a rationale for basing early education in children’s mother tongue before introducing a second language as a medium of instruction.

Decisions about which languages will serve as the medium of instruction and the treatment of children’s home languages in the education system exemplify the exercise of power, the manufacture of marginalization and minoritization, and the unfulfilled promise of children’s rights. Stroud (2002) maintains that “linguistic marginalization of minority language groups and their political and socio-economic marginalization go hand in hand” and that “one is the consequence of the other” (p. 48-49). Political, social, and technical considerations often collide in policy makers’ decisions on language medium, schooling, and curriculum. Considerations include, but go beyond, questions of resources, teacher training, and subjects to be studied. Other crucial factors range from the political will of local, regional, and national governments, the relationships between countries and their former colonizers, the understanding and patience of international donors, and parents’ hopes and anxieties about which languages their children will need to secure employment and participate with dignity in their social, legal, and economic worlds. While the broader political ramifications of language-in-education policies and practices are beyond the scope of this report,

Rampton (1995), Blommaert (1999), and Golding and Harris (1997) provide excellent analyses of these issues.

## **INTERNATIONAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS**

UNESCO's commitments to inclusive education and quality learning environments and to cultural and linguistic diversity provide the framework for this report. UNESCO and other international agencies concerned with early education, children's rights, and linguistic diversity argue strongly for the pedagogical imperative of using a child's own language as the medium of instruction, at least in the early years of formal schooling (UNESCO, 1953; UNESCO, 2003a). Broad international agreement about the importance of the use of language(s) in education is reflected in a number of declarations, agreements, and recommendations.

A platform of international declarations and conventions support the learning of at least two languages in education: a mother tongue and a language of the larger community, as well as access to international languages. In its 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, UNESCO (2003a) espouses:

1. Mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building on the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers;
2. Bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies;
3. Language as an essential component of inter-cultural education to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

## **IMPACT OF LITERARY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS OF INDIA**

This review begins with an overview of theory and research on first and second language acquisition in childhood. Scholars in developmental psychology, linguistics, and early childhood education continue to put forward competing theories. However, there is broad agreement that young children's ability to learn languages and their emerging reading and writing skills are affected by their social environments, including the language(s) to which they are exposed, the language socialization practices of their caregivers (Heath, 1983; Pesco & Crago, 2008; Van Kleeck, 1994), and language instruction. Some children are born into home environments in which they are exposed to more than one language and they begin to acquire two primary languages simultaneously (e.g., McLaughlin, 1984). Some children start out as monolingual, and begin to acquire a second language sometime in early childhood, for example, in an early childhood programme or through other interactions outside the home, and thus can be said to be acquiring a second language.

Before reviewing understandings of language acquisition in childhood, it is important to clarify that both L1 and L2 acquisition by young children (up to about age 7) appear to differ significantly from language acquisition by older children (Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Cook, 2000, Hatch, 1978; Liu, 1991). The distinctive nature of *young* children's L2 acquisition calls for a distinctive approach to supporting L2 acquisition in the early years. Another distinction that Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) explain is that the pace of learning an additional language, and effective instruction or support for children to learn an additional language, will depend upon whether the child has developed literacy in L1. Literacy entails the development of meta-linguistic awareness, including the knowledge that the pronunciation of words is

related to the written form (for most languages), and that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to say things (August & Shanahan, 2006). Populations without first language literacy have been overlooked in second language acquisition research literature (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005) – this includes very young children, as well as illiterate older children and adults. These clarifications indicate the complexities of bi/multilingual learning and instruction in childhood, as well as the partial and evolving nature of our understandings of variables that affect learning outcomes for individuals at different ages and with different pre-existing skills. Investigators of multilingual acquisition have underscored the need to have more information on the development of each language when children are learning more than one language concurrently, and the need in the field as a whole of having bilingual developmental norms, especially with respect to different levels of language dominance (Yavas, 2007).

### **Language acquisition in School level**

Until recently, two explanatory approaches – *behaviourist and nativist* – dominated understandings about language acquisition. Following Skinner (1957), the behaviourists argued that infants continue to produce and to learn the properties of language (e.g., sounds, vocabulary, pragmatics, etc.) that are positively reinforced by the child’s caregivers and other members of the child’s social community. Critics of this account point to the speed of language acquisition in the early years and the stability of acquired meaning, neither of which can be explained by the behaviourist position. In stark contrast, nativists, following Chomsky (1965, 1975) argued that children have an innate grasp of how language works. Thus, while language input activates their inborn capacity for learning language, their learning is internally guided. Critics of this position point to empirical studies showing that the quality and quantity of a child’s exposure to language affects their learning (Hart & Risley, 1995).

More recently, developmental psychologists have applied contemporary theories of learning to explain language acquisition. They argue that language is a uniquely human, biologically based capacity, and that the inherent potential to learn language depends on the language environment – effectively, a bio-cultural perspective.

### **Theories of second language acquisition**

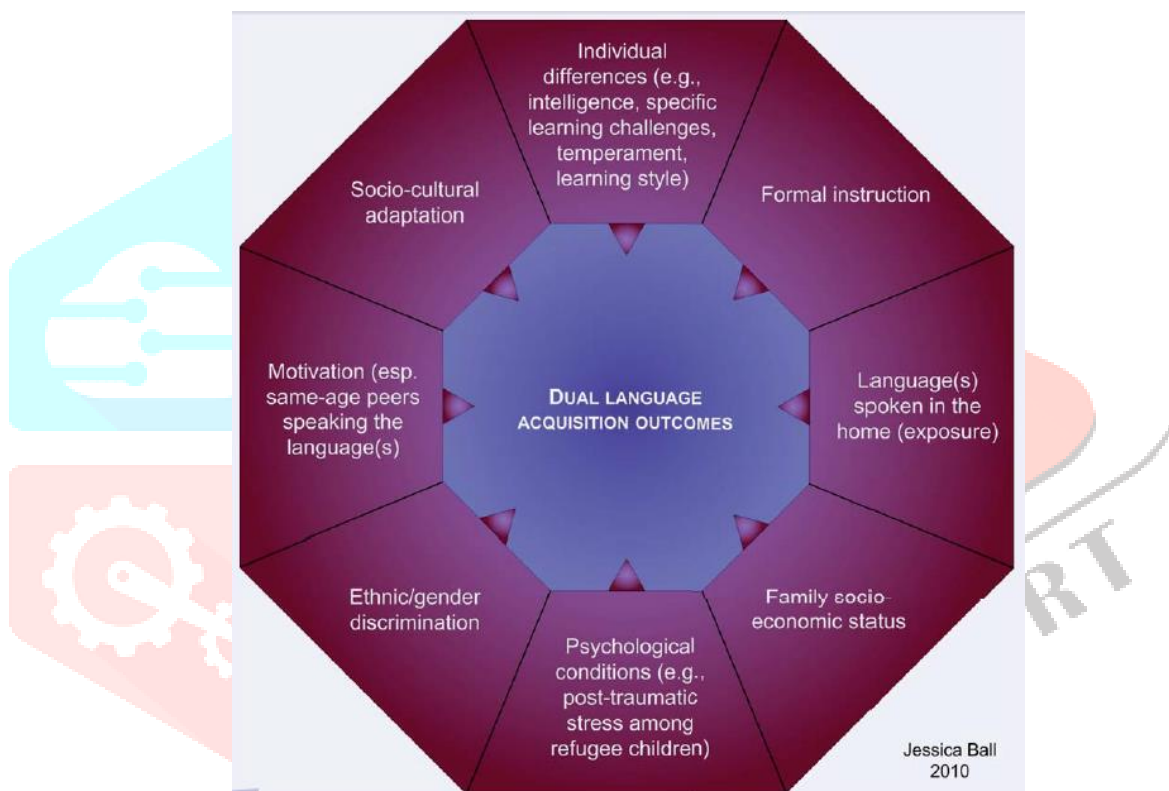
To date, studies of language acquisition have been based primarily on studies of monolingual acquisition, resulting in more theory than empirical evidence. However, scholars agree broadly that children, including most children with specific learning impairments or low general intelligence, have the capacity to learn more than one language (Genesee, 2002). Theories of second language acquisition are central to the current focus on mother tongue-based bi/ multilingual learning. The behaviourist approach, referred to as the ‘*contrastive hypothesis*’ (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957), assumes that the same processes of positive reinforcement that influence first language acquisition support the learning of second or additional languages.

Skutnabb-Tangas and Toukomaa (1976) proposed the ‘*threshold level hypothesis*’, which posits that only when children have reached a threshold of competence in their first language can they successfully learn a second language without losing competence in both languages. Further, only when a child has crossed a second threshold of competence in *both* languages will the child’s bilingualism positively affect intellectual development, a state which they called ‘additive bilingualism.’



## Children's capacity to learn more than one language

Most children who arrive at school with some competence in more than one language have grown up bilingual or multilingual from their earliest days at home, and have not experienced successive acquisition of second or third languages. Many studies have shown that children can learn three or more languages starting in their early years. Moreover, with sufficient motivation, exposure, periods of formal study, and opportunities for practice, they can ultimately succeed in attaining proficiency in several languages. However, despite myths about young children being able to 'soak up languages like a sponge,' language proficiency does not spring forth in full bloom during the early years. Experience and research have shown that language acquisition takes a long time (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1991). The length of time and the eventual outcomes of second and additional language learning depend on a number of factors, some of which are illustrated in Figure 1 and discussed below.



**Figure-1: Factors affecting dual language acquisition outcomes**

There is a common misconception that young children can acquire a second or additional language faster than older children. As Lightbown (2008) has stressed, becoming completely fluent in a second language is not, as many have claimed, 'easy as pie', but rather, takes several years. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that providing day care or preschool programmes in a second language is sufficient to prepare children for academic success in that language.

### Minority and majority language learners

Students learn a second language in different ways depending upon various factors, including their culture, particularly the status of their culture, language, and community within their larger social setting. Most important to this discussion, it is critical to distinguish among children who are members of a minority ethno-linguistic group (minority language children) versus a majority ethno-linguistic group (majority language children); and among those within each group who are learning bilingually from infancy versus

those who have learned a single mother tongue and are learning a second or additional language later in childhood. Indigenous children and other groups who are not learning their 'heritage mother tongue' (McCarty, 2008) at home, but rather have learned the language of the dominant culture, are a unique population in discussions of mother tongue education. As defined earlier, these children have a heritage mother tongue that may or may not be spoken by anyone in their family or community, but which their family may wish them to learn through language 'nests,' (McIvor, 2006) and preschool or primary school programmes. These special circumstances involve *language recovery*, which poses a number of special challenges and needs.

### **Parental influences on mother tongue acquisition and maintenance**

Parents and other primary caregivers have the strongest influence on children's first language acquisition in the early years. These 'first teachers' attitudes, goals, and behaviours related to their child's initial language development influence children's developing language skills, language socialization, perceptions of the Value. Gardner and Lambert (1972) were among the first investigators to characterize parents' language attitudes as 'instrumental' and 'integrative.' *Instrumental language attitude* focuses on pragmatic, utilitarian goals, such as whether one or another language will contribute to personal success, security, or status. By contrast, an *integrative language attitude* focuses on social considerations, such as the desire to be accepted into the cultural group that uses a language or to elaborate an identity associated with the language.

Kemppainen, Ferrin, Ward, and Hite (2004) identified four types of parental language and culture orientation: mother tongue-centric, bicultural, multicultural, and majority language-centric. They describe a correspondence between these positions and parents' choice of language school for their children. Of course, in many situations, parents have no choice about the language of instruction. In these situations, De Houwer's (1999) conceptualization of 'impact belief' is helpful. 'Impact belief' refers to the extent to which parents believe they have direct control over their children's language use. Parents with strong impact beliefs make active efforts to provide particular language experiences and environments for their children, and to reward particular language behaviours. Parents with weak impact beliefs take a passive approach to their children's early language experiences, seeing the wider environment as determining whether children acquire one or another language.

In sum, this literature has brought forward several considerations when designing policies and programmes to support mother tongue bi/multilingualism in the very early years.

- Parents' perceived value of different language learning outcomes for their young children is a very important consideration for advocates of mother tongue preservation and early education.
- Possible differences between what parents say they want and their actual language behaviours with their infants and young children are important for advocates of the primacy of mother tongue acquisition in the early years.
- Children's individual differences in learning styles, capacities, interests, motivation, and temperament may significantly affect the speed and quality of their language acquisition.

## **Mother tongue-based bi/multilingual School education**

While more evidence from large, carefully designed research is needed, existing studies provide a basis for developmental psychologists and linguists to draw some tentative conclusions of a general nature, as follows:

- a) Students is important for their overall language and cognitive development and their academic achievement;
- b) if children are growing up with one language, educational provisions need to support them in becoming *highly proficient* in that language before engaging in academic work and
- c) becoming highly proficient appears to take *six to eight years of schooling* (i.e., at least until the end of primary year six).

## **Language of instruction in early education contribute to children's psychosocial adjustment**

The comparative lack of academic success of minoritised and indigenous children stems in part from having to adjust to schooling in an unfamiliar language, compounded by the need to accept that their language and culture are not valued within formal education contexts. Many linguists, psychologists, and educators argue that respecting learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in educational settings is crucial in fostering their self-confidence as persons and community members, and in encouraging them to be active and competent learners.

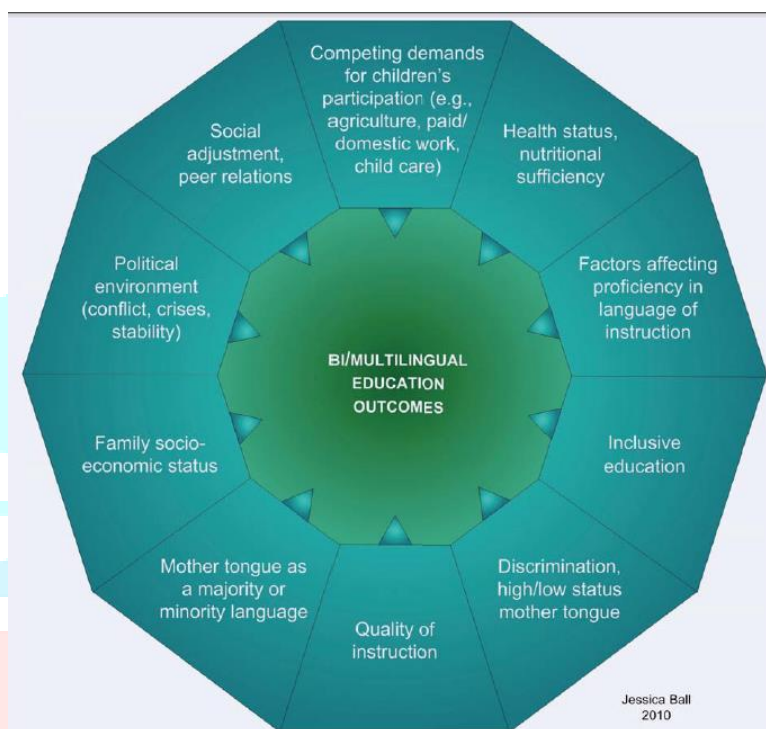
Many studies show that mother tongue-based instruction can improve a child's self-esteem (Appel, 1988; Cummins, 1989, 1990; Hernandez-Chavez, 1984). As Rubio (2007) points out, children perceive at an early age that languages are valued differently. When there is linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and school, minority language children may perceive that language and culture are not valued—a perception that lowers their self-confidence and self-esteem and interferes with their learning (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998; Covington, 1989). Educators in Africa have described many similar benefits of mother tongue-based bi/multilingual education, reporting that use of the learners' first language in school promotes a smooth transition between home and school, fostering an emotional stability that translates to cognitive stability. Such children learn better and faster, and retain knowledge longer (Kioko, Mutiga, Muthwii, Schroeder, Inyega, & Trudell, 2008).

It is often said that the mother tongue symbolizes a deep, abiding, even cord-like connection between speakers and their cultural identity (McCarty, 2008).

## **Relationship between the language of instruction in School education and children's academic outcomes**

The relationship between the language(s) used for instruction in school and children's ultimate academic achievement is complex. Education outcomes - such as regular school attendance, school completion, and academic achievement - are determined by multiple factors, shown in Figure 2. Improving school success includes but goes beyond the language of instruction and supports for language acquisition. Other factors, such as poverty, with its attendant risk factors such as poor nutrition, high stress, and high stigma/discrimination, must also be addressed. Children who begin school in an unfamiliar language face the dual challenges of acquiring the new language while learning the curriculum in that new language. For some

populations—for example, low status minorities, refugees, and the children of illiterate parents—other risks and stresses further exacerbate these challenges. Several studies note that minority language children often live in families of low socio-economic status, who have a higher risk of school failure on that basis alone. Further, Benson (2009) points out that gender considerations cut across these situations of educational risk: in most traditional societies, girls and women tend to be monolingual, since they receive less exposure to the national language through schooling, salaried labour, or migration, than boys and men. Longitudinal research with large samples and diverse, relevant demographic characteristics is needed to yield differentiated answers about the effects of language policies and programmes under varying circumstances.



**Figure-2: Contributors to bi/multilingual education outcomes**

## CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES OF LITERARY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

It is generally believed that this approach is too costly to implement, that it prevents children from learning other languages, and that it impedes children's academic success. Promoting minority languages is also thought to foster social and political division (Robinson, 2005). However, multilingual education can promote greater social tolerance among linguistic groups (Benson, 2002). The foregoing literature review highlights specific challenges often faced in minority and indigenous language-based bi/multilingual education initiatives. Key challenges include:

- Students, parents, and teachers may resist schooling.
- A multiplicity of languages in the community may exacerbate the challenge of providing mother tongue schooling for all children.
- People may disagree about which one of several different trade languages should be taught as the 'majority' language.
- The minority language community may have low status and be subject to discrimination and prejudice, making acceptance of mother tongue instruction difficult to win and creating reluctance among mother tongue learners to use and demonstrate proficiency in the language.



- Appropriately trained teachers may be in short supply, and there may be few speakers of the language who are proficient for academic instruction who can be recruited to teach.
- Lack of incentives for teachers.
- Educational resources in the language may be lacking.
- New terminology for modern academic discourse may need to be developed.
- Transforming the existing monoglossic school culture presents an enormous but not insurmountable challenge. The situation could be analyzed at four interdependent levels.

### **Market Demands and the Politics of Power**

A language wields tremendous power due to its ability to contain within itself the identity, attitudes, culture and aspirations of its people. Thus, these socio-political factors make some languages more prestigious than others, which then become accepted as “standard”. The demand for languages of power then drives State policies and the market, even though linguistically, all languages are equal. Today, English is definitely the language of power globally. It is a symbol of people’s aspirations, a gateway to opportunities.

Similarly, at the State level, numerous languages are spoken but only the standard form of select languages gain favour as the instructional medium in schools. The hierarchy of languages therefore comes to signify the hegemony of power amongst its speakers. In such a scenario, parents naturally choose to educate their children in the languages of power in their most “standard” forms. There is a huge gap in public awareness of the empirically proven correlations between multilingualism and higher scholastic achievement. Since the educational system as a whole does not offer feasible options that consider multilingualism a resource, the parents have no choice but to succumb to the one-medium, one-school policy.

### **Systemic Drivers for Language Decisions are not Educational**

Historically, a few significant but strategic drivers at the national and state levels have formulated the way school education navigates the issue of language today. One, in 1949, the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, titled *Languages*, declared Hindi and English as official languages (and not national languages) and recognized 14 major Indian languages. Two, in 1961, a strategic consensual decision was taken by the States to implement the Three-language Formula. This was later modified by the Kothari Commission to accommodate the interests of group identity (mother tongues and regional languages), national pride and unity (Hindi), and administrative efficiency and technological progress (English). The Commission described these changes as “impelling considerations that were more political and social, than educational”. Three, the higher education system blocks multilingualism, thereby triggering a high demand for English, Hindi and a few select languages at lower levels too.

As per the 7th All India School Education Survey, Hindi, English and Sanskrit were adopted as first, second and third languages respectively in the largest number of schools. Approximately 80-90 per cent of the schools had only one medium of instruction. Out of this, approximately 60 per cent used Hindi or English, with the former having a higher proportion. Hence, multilingual education policies such as the three-language formula are just additive monolingualism that end up denying the complex translanguaging practices of much of the world.

## School Organizational Constraints

The overall structure of “school” is such that there is age-wise grouping of 25 to 45 students in a classroom, with clearly demarcated boundaries between subjects slotted into periods of 30 to 45 minutes in a fixed schedule. Children are officially expected to use the school’s single medium of instruction in all periods / subjects, except in second / third language time-slots, where “other” languages are “allowed”. Typically, strict policy measures control the language children speak inside and outside the classes, with consequences for non-adherence. Teacher recruitment and training is based on the ability to use the medium of instruction. Thus, the school positions a single medium of instruction as central to its overall working, in keeping with the market demands and policy measures discussed earlier.

Without doubt, operationally, this is an easier proposition due to a uniform medium of communication; but the implicit message is: this is the “preferred” language in its “correct” form. Usually, schools fail to clarify that the languages students personally identify with are not unworthy of recognition, are not inferior and do hold educational value. Overall, the school structure is unable to appreciate the multilinguality of its students.

## Teacher Ethos on the Issue of “Purity” of Language

We spoke to six primary and middle school teachers about the maintenance of purity of language, their teaching strategies and their students’ language abilities. The following response sums up their views and concerns: The (English) language ability of students is not very great. They think in their mother tongue and then translate ... if they can’t get a word they use from Kutchi, Gujarati, Hindi, etc. Mixing is natural. But it is fine only when children slip into another language and get back to English easily. For others, it’s a big no-no as it hampers the development of (the weak) language. When English, only English. If speaking Hindi, only Hindi. Only then I can say that a child is good in a language!

The above comment represents the myths of language learning, while also exposing the practical constraints within which teachers are expected to function to facilitate and assess their students’ language learning. The practitioners’ view that use of home languages provides a “crutch” seems legitimate and realistic since the teachers work under the pressure of delivering to demanding parents and school managements, unaware of the possibilities of using multilingual pedagogic methods. Questions of identity loss due to nonrecognition of home language are not considered significant. Thus, the rich heteroglossic multilinguality of the classroom does not earn a legitimate place in the process of language acquisition.

## Key Changes Required in System and School Ethos

Leveraging the strengths of multilingualism in the classroom would not only give voice and legitimacy to the identities of children, but has also been empirically proven to have a positive correlation with scholastic achievement, divergent thinking, cognitive flexibility and social tolerance. With such immense advantages, it is only natural that a market shift is necessary to increase the demand for education that values multilingualism to bring it into day-to-day practice. Since the school actually functions in response to market demands and government policy measures, a “bottom-up only” approach is bound to fail and needs to have strong top-down momentum. Top Down: Building Mass Momentum in the Long Term for a Mind-set Shift

What is required is a consensual language policy by all States, that is a significant shift from a formulaic approach to a more principled approach (multilingual, acceptance of porousness) with strict implementation and stringent consequences for flouting it. This is definitely an uphill task, given that education is a State subject, language is a political one and many vested interests are involved, besides pragmatic issues such as providing high-quality training for all teachers. Widespread multimedia-based awareness campaigns and lobbying to develop a mass mind-set that links multilinguality with scholastic achievement, supported by empirical data, are needed. Focused efforts by interest groups from politics, industry, academics, media and civil society could build such a movement. Once awareness changes, so would the nature of the market demand.

## CONCLUSION

In an increasingly globalized and technologically advancing world, language boundaries are fuzzy and fluid. There is a multiplicity of language practices and neo-cultural identity formations. However education leadership in India needs to move beyond the definition of multilingualism as additive / subtractive monolingualism and take a hard look at the socioeconomic political drivers, state controls and schools that are its implementing agents. Multilingual heteroglossic education programs must be developed to support multiple languages and literacies, allowing for their functional interrelationships and complementarities to thrive.

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