Kutumbha vani, Volume 6, Issue 1, November, 2025 ISSN 2616- 0331

The Impact of Mother Tongue-Based Education on School Readiness and Retention among Indigenous Children in Nepal

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Received: June 11, 2025 Revised: September 28, 2025 Accepted: November 3, 2025

Abstract

A lot of indigenous kids in Nepal still don't get a real shot at early education. Sure, the country talks a big game there are strong policies like the School Sector Development Plan, and Nepal has signed big agreements, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. But what's on paper and what actually happens in classrooms? That's a whole different story. The real snag is language. Schools almost always teach in Nepali. So, kids who grow up speaking something else walk in already behind. They struggle, their confidence takes a hit, and way too many end up dropping out early.

This paper takes a hard look at how language, culture, and real educational fairness get all tangled together. It focuses on mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), pulling from research, policy, and some pilot projects. The evidence is pretty clear: kids do better, remember more, and feel proud of who they are when they learn in their own language. If Nepal actually wants to see change, it needs to expand MTB-MLE programs, make more local learning materials, hire and support indigenous teachers, and give more control to local governments—especially now that the federal system's in place.

But just having good policies isn't going to cut it. Nepal has to invest in real teacher training, build a curriculum that includes everyone, and bring communities into the process. When indigenous voices and languages finally have a genuine place in early childhood education, then Nepal can start offering an education that's fair—and that really fits its rich, diverse culture.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education; Indigenous Communities; Nepal; Language Policy; Multilingual Education; Educational Equity*

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education shapes so much about a kid the way they think, how they feel, how they connect with others, even how they get around in the world. It's the groundwork for everything that comes after. When kids have a strong start, they show up to school ready, eager, and way more likely to find their footing as they grow. And honestly, it's bigger than just helping one child at a time. ECE gives us a real shot at closing those stubborn education gaps, especially for kids who usually slip through the cracks.

Look at Nepal. The country's bursting with different cultures and stories. About 36% of people there are from indigenous communities Adivasi Janajati each with their own languages and traditions. But these groups have been pushed to the edges, both in politics and money. Their kids, especially the ones living far from the cities, start school already feeling like outsiders. Most ECED centers use Nepali or English, but at home, these kids speak something else entirely. That language

barrier? It's huge. It makes it tough to follow along, knocks down their confidence, and too often, pushes them right out of the classroom. So ECE isn't just about teaching letters and numbers it's about making sure everyone feels they belong, protecting culture, and giving every kid a real chance.

Nepal's constitution recognizes the right to use and learn in your own language, and the country has promised, at the international level, to support culturally responsive education. On paper, the policies sound good. The National Education Policy (2019), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP 2016–2023), and different Early Childhood Development strategies all talk about equity and access. But walk into most ECED classrooms, and a different reality. Too often, programs ignore local knowledge, skip over the child-rearing traditions of indigenous families, and miss the mark on teaching methods that actually make sense for these kids.

This study explores the relationship between Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) and indigenous rights in Nepal, first addressing the social and cultural realities of indigenous communities. Then, it breaks down the policies and laws shaping early childhood education. By drawing on experiences from Nepal and beyond, it shows why mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) really matters if we care about inclusion. The paper wraps up with practical ways to make ECED more local, more indigenous, and more in tune with Nepal's federal system and its promises to the world.

Literature review: Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) in Nepal tells a story of real progress, but honestly, some tough challenges still stick around. Let's break it down. This section dives into five big things: why mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and culturally responsive teaching matter; what the laws and policies say about inclusion; the hurdles indigenous kids still deal with; what new research and pilot projects reveal about what's actually happening in classrooms; and finally, what Nepal's shift to federal governance might open up for the future. By weaving together insights from both global and local studies, this section puts Nepal's experience right in the middle of the bigger push for multilingual and fair education.

Socio-cultural and linguistic context of indigenous communities in Nepal: Nepal officially lists 59 indigenous nationalities (the Adivasi Janajati, recognized by NEFIN), and together, these groups make up more than a third of the country's population (CBS, 2011). You'll find them everywhere from the mountains to the hills to the plains and their languages, traditions, and beliefs cover an enormous range. Groups like the Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Tharu, Rai, and Limbu keep oral traditions alive and raise their children in ways that emphasize community, cooperation, and respect for nature.

Still, all this cultural wealth hasn't shielded them from being left behind. Some groups, like the Chepang, Majhi, and Dhimal, struggle with extremely low literacy and health rates. Gender inequality also means girls often miss out on early education. Benson, C (2005) points out that a big reason for these gaps is education systems that ignore linguistic diversity and push a one-language-fits-all approach, leaving minority kids feeling disconnected. In most ECED centers, lessons happen in Nepali or English, barely touching local knowledge or ways of understanding the world. The result? Kids feel alienated, drop out more often, and families start to lose faith in formal schooling.

Theoretical foundations of mother tongue-based education: The ideas behind MTB-MLE are rooted in sociocultural learning theory and the fight for linguistic human rights. Vygotsky (1978)

saw language as the main tool for building meaning and shaping thought. Cummins (2001) argued that being strong in your first language actually helps you pick up a second one it's like building a bridge in your brain that makes learning easier down the road.

Heugh (2011) pushed this further, showing that when kids learn in their home languages, especially early on, they do better cognitively and academically. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) went so far as to call language deprivation in schools a violation of cultural and human rights. Malone (2007) looked at what this means for program design: to work, MTB-MLE programs need to start in the mother tongue and then slowly bring in national and international languages. All these ideas point to one thing: including kids' languages isn't just good teaching it's about fairness and justice.

UNESCO (2016) and Ball (2010) also say that teaching young kids in a language they know boosts understanding, critical thinking, and a sense of identity. For indigenous children in Nepal, language is a huge part of who they are, so MTB-MLE isn't just about learning it's about keeping culture alive.

Policy and legal frameworks for inclusive ECED: Nepal's Constitution promises everyone the right to basic education in their own language (Article 31) and recognizes all native languages as national languages (Article 6). Supporting this constitutional vision, several national education policies have been formulated. These include the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019), the School Sector Development Plan (Ministry of Education, 2016–2023), the Early Childhood Development Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2017), and the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019). Together, these policy instruments aim to promote an education system that is equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive.

Globally, Nepal has signed on to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ILO Convention No. 169 (1989), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) all of which say kids have the right to learn in their own languages. Taylor and Coetzee (2013) argue that making these rights real in classrooms takes local ownership, strong political will, and steady funding things Nepal still struggles with (Dhakal, 2021; Fillmore, 2019; Yadava, 2017). Even with legal promises, most ECED programs stick to one language, remain underfunded, and are designed from the top down. The gap between what's written on paper and what actually happens in schools is still wide.

Barriers to ECED access and implementation: A bunch of studies point to some pretty stubborn barriers standing in the way of indigenous children who want quality early childhood education. Geography is a big one some communities are just so remote that the basics, like roads or school buildings, are hard to come by. Poverty makes things worse, since families often can't afford to spend much on early education. But language, honestly, is the toughest hurdle. Most early education happens in Nepali or English, which leaves kids who speak something else at home feeling lost and disconnected. Benson (2005) and Heugh (2011) both demonstrate that when the language of instruction does not align with the language children speak at home, it often leads to higher dropout rates and lower academic performance.

The curriculum doesn't help much, either. Textbooks rarely mention indigenous festivals, stories, or local knowledge. Teachers, too usually outsiders with little or no training in multilingual teaching often miss the cultural cues. Hiring teachers from the community really helps, but it's rare because there aren't enough training programs and not much incentive to join (UNICEF

Nepal, 2019). Gender only makes things tougher. There are very few female educators in remote centers, which means girls are less likely to join in.

Parents' views matter, too. For a lot of indigenous families, early learning just happens naturally at home or in the community. The idea of formal early education, especially in a language that feels foreign, can seem irrelevant maybe even like a threat to their traditions. Ball (2010) points out that real progress means actually bringing families into the process and respecting the ways they already teach their kids.

Empirical studies and pilot program results: There's real promise in programs that use the mother tongue for early learning. Groups like World Education Nepal, Room to Read, and SIL International have tried out pilot projects with local materials and teachers from the community. In places like the Tharu and Tamang areas, starting out in the kids' own language boosted literacy, attendance, and kept kids in school longer (Dhakal, 2021; UNESCO, 2016).

Malone (2007) outlines the key elements that make mother tongue-based education programs successful: the use of locally developed learning materials, strong community involvement, and teachers who are skilled in managing multilingual classrooms. Similarly, Heugh (2011) found comparable results across Asia and Africa programs that include the mother tongue, even for a limited period, tend to achieve better learning results than those that rely exclusively on a single language of instruction. Still, in Nepal, these projects are scattered. They rely on outside funding and haven't really become part of the government system. Without steady money, support from the state, and enough trained people, these pilot successes risk fading away.

Federalism, decentralization, and emerging opportunities: When Nepal adopted federalism in 2015, it handed over more control of education to local governments. This shift means communities can shape early learning programs to fit their own languages and cultures. Some places especially in Tamang, Limbu, and Tharu regions have tried out mother tongue-based lessons and seen good results (UNICEF Nepal, 2024). Local leadership and community involvement are making space for new ideas that actually fit the kids' lives.

But it's not all smooth sailing. Lots of municipalities just don't have the technical know-how, enough trained teachers, or enough money to roll out these programs for everyone. Yadava (2017) warns that without adequate institutional and financial support, decentralization may worsen educational disparities for communities that already face limited resources. To really make federalism work, local and national governments need to work together, keep training teachers, and make sure resources get to the places that need them most.

Synthesis and research gaps: The research is clear: when kids learn in their mother tongue, they understand more, stay in school longer, and hold onto their cultural identity. It's a key piece of fair early childhood education. But there's still a lot we don't know in Nepal:

- ✓ No one's tracked, long-term, how mother tongue-based education affects later school success.
- ✓ The connection between decentralizing education and actually creating local curriculums is weak.
- ✓ There's not much data on how language inclusion affects boys and girls differently.
- ✓ No big national studies have looked at how these programs are really working.

Looking forward, research needs to include the people who know best parents, teachers, and local leaders right from the start. Linking language policy, funding, and teacher training into a single system is the only way to build early education that's both culturally meaningful and built to last in Nepal.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based research methodology to examine the status, challenges, and opportunities related to Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) among indigenous communities in Nepal. The research is grounded in a policy analysis and literature review framework**,** utilizing both national and international sources to explore the intersection of educational equity, language policy, and indigenous rights.

Data sources; The primary data for this study were drawn from a range of secondary sources**,** including:

Government policy documents and legal frameworks: such as the *Constitution of Nepal (2015)*, the *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP 2016–2023)*, the *National Education Policy (2019)*, and the *Early Childhood Development Strategy (2017)*.

International conventions and human rights instruments: including the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ILO Convention No. 169*, and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*.

Academic literature and theoretical works: by scholars like Cummins (2001) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), which provide foundational insights on language rights, multilingual education, and indigenous pedagogies.

Empirical reports and evaluations: from organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF, which offer data on ECED access, implementation challenges, and pilot programs in indigenous areas of Nepal.

Analytical Approach: A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns across documents, particularly concerning language use in ECED, socio-economic disparities, and policy-practice gaps. Special attention was given to the role of federalism in decentralizing education governance and its implications for localized and culturally responsive ECED delivery.

Case studies and documented results from pilot MTB-MLE projects (e.g., in Tharu and Tamang communities) were also reviewed to assess best practices and their potential for scaling. These were analyzed for insights into curriculum adaptation, teacher recruitment, and community engagement in early learning.

Scope and limitations: The study focuses primarily on policy-level analysis and documented experiences rather than primary fieldwork. As such, while it draws from a broad array of validated sources, it does not include direct interviews or field observations. Future studies may complement this desk-based approach with participatory research involving indigenous families, educators, and local governments to gain deeper, community-level perspectives.

3. Results and discussion

When you look at policy frameworks, pilot programs, and what's already been written on this, it's clear: indigenous kids in Nepal still face big hurdles in getting a good education even though, on paper, the policies look supportive. The Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) system just doesn't do enough to reflect the rich mix of languages and cultures in these

communities. Here's what stands out and where Nepal needs to go next if it really wants to fix this these are changes that have to happen at every level.

Making mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) the norm: This study after study, along with several pilot programs, all point to the same thing: starting a child's education in their own language works. Many indigenous kids walk into ECED centers speaking a language other than Nepali. Right away, they run into trouble confused, disconnected, struggling to keep up because the classroom language is foreign. MTB-MLE flips this. It lets kids start learning in their mother tongue, then brings in Nepali and other languages gradually.

Groups like SIL International, World Education Nepal, and Room to Read have already shown this can work in places like the Terai and the mid-Hills. Where these projects ran, kids showed up to class more often, dropped out less, and actually got involved in lessons. The problem? These efforts are scattered and depend too much on outside funding. Nepal's education system needs to pick up the baton and run with it official policies, real budgets, and technical know-how straight from the federal government. What works:

- ✓ Take what's working in pilot programs and scale it up nationwide.
- ✓ Set down clear rules and steps for how to make this happen.
- ✓ Build systems to keep track of how languages are actually used in ECED classrooms.

Language mapping and resource development: Nepal's language diversity is huge over 123 spoken languages. Still, most classroom materials are only in Nepali or English. For ECED to work for everyone, kids need books and resources in their own languages, stuff that feels right for their age and culture. Getting there means figuring out which languages are used where language mapping at the local level so schools know what to teach in.

There's a lot of wisdom in these communities. Elders, local storytellers, and teachers know the songs, stories, and traditions that can make learning come alive. Bringing them into the process doesn't just make better materials; it shows that indigenous knowledge matters.

What works:

- ✓ Run community-based language mapping down to the ward level.
- ✓ Set up a national fund to support the making and sharing of ECED materials in indigenous languages.
- ✓ Train local artists, writers, and teachers to create great content for young kids.

Boosting indigenous teacher recruitment and training: Teachers really set the tone in the classroom, and when they share the students' language and culture, the impact is huge. Right now, too many ECED facilitators can't speak the local language or haven't been trained to teach in multilingual settings. The answer is simple: hire from within indigenous communities and give these teachers the skills for child-centered, inclusive teaching.

It's not just about language, though. Teachers need to understand and respect local ways of thinking, raising children, and living. Training should focus on multicultural education, hands-on teaching, and being sensitive to what matters locally.

How to get there:

- ✓ Offer scholarships to encourage more indigenous youth to get ECED training.

- ✓ Provide culturally relevant teacher training at the provincial level.
- ✓ Create clear pathways for professional development, and give extra support to those teaching in tough or remote areas.

Curriculum localization and community participation: Right now, the national ECED curriculum doesn't leave much room for local flavor. Indigenous children end up learning from a one-size-fits-all program that barely connects to what they know or experience every day. To really engage kids and make learning matter, the curriculum needs to pick up on what's happening around them local festivals, seasonal routines, stories, traditional games, and the kind of environmental wisdom passed down in their families.

Some municipalities in Nepal have started trying out more community-driven approaches. They're bringing in local songs, games, and storytelling, and you can feel the difference. Kids see their lives reflected in what they do at school, and families start feeling like school is part of the neighborhood, not some distant institution. The problem? These good ideas haven't caught on everywhere. Local governments are stretched thin too few people, too little training, not enough resources.

Real progress begins when local governments have the freedom to shape what children learn, and when parents, elders, and community leaders help bring local stories and traditions into the classroom. And back up these efforts by creating digital libraries of indigenous knowledge, so future generations can access and use them in their classrooms.

Building institutional and financial capacity of local governments: Nepal's federal system puts local governments in charge of ECED services. But here's the catch: lots of municipalities, especially in remote indigenous regions, just don't have the staff, skills, or money to run inclusive programs. Multilingual teaching sounds great on paper, but without training, it's tough to pull off. Budgets are tight. Planning can be shaky.

What's needed is real investment in people. Local education officers and elected leaders need hands-on training how to plan, gather data, manage money, and involve the community in ECED. They need to be able to deliver services that match what their communities actually need.

Here's what would help: a national training push focused on local governments, grants set aside specifically for indigenous-focused ECED programs, and better coordination between federal, provincial, and local agencies so everyone's pulling in the same direction.

Advocacy and public awareness: There's another big obstacle most people don't talk about it much, but it's real. In many marginalized communities, parents just don't see the point of formal ECED, especially when it's in a language or style that feels totally foreign. If you want real change, you have to meet people where they are. Show them why early learning matters, especially when it's in their own language and reflects their world.

This is where creative advocacy comes in. Think radio programs, local theater, posters and stories in indigenous languages the kind of things that actually get people's attention and build trust. When communities see themselves in the system, they're much more likely to get on board.

So, what works? Run outreach campaigns in the languages people speak at home. Use community radio and storytelling these formats already have deep roots. And don't go it alone. Partner up with indigenous groups and civil society organizations that already have the community's trust, and keep the conversation going for the long haul.

4. Conclusion

Early Childhood Education (ECE) can really change the game when it comes to equity, identity, and social justice especially in places where people speak many languages and come from different backgrounds. For Nepal's indigenous communities, though, getting real, inclusive ECE is still a tough road. Sure, the country's constitution and policies talk a big game about supporting multilingual and culturally relevant early learning, but when you look at what's actually happening, the gaps are obvious. There just aren't enough resources, and a lot of the time, people in power overlook these communities.

This paper dug into how indigenous children in Nepal get pushed to the margins, both culturally and linguistically. There's a real disconnect between what the policies promise and what actually goes on in classrooms. Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) isn't just a nice idea it actually helps kids learn better and feel proud of who they are. Plus, Nepal's new federal system could open doors. It gives local communities a chance to shape their own curriculum, hire indigenous teachers, and build ECED programs that fit their needs.

But let's be real: if we want early education to work for indigenous kids, it takes more than just good intentions. We need policies that respect language differences, curriculum that fits local realities, teachers and local governments who know what they're doing, and most importantly indigenous communities leading the way. If we don't get serious about this, Nepal will just keep repeating old patterns of inequality, and the country's incredible diversity will keep slipping away.

In the end, inclusive education in Nepal isn't just about what's being taught. It's about how it's taught, where it happens, and whose language and culture are at the center. If we're serious about democracy, then putting indigenous voices at the heart of early childhood education isn't optional it's essential.

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