

## Exclusion of Minority Mother Tongues from the Classroom Context

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### Abstract

*This paper examines language related constraints faced by the linguistic minority children in the early grades of schooling. It also attempts to explore the factors contributing for exclusion of minority mother tongues from the classroom context through an ethnographic study carried out in Chitwan district of Nepal. The methodology includes in-depth interviews, life history interviews, language diaries, focus group discussions and participant observation in school and at families. The field data reveal that linguistic minority children enter into early childhood development/pre-primary class annexed to the primary school at the age of three without much exposure to Nepali, a dominant language to be used for education and official purposes. They are compelled to face hostile and unwelcoming learning environment due to imposition of non-home language in the classroom transactions. This situation has exacerbated unwillingness among children for attending classes and consequently led to high absenteeism. Interestingly, despite provision of mother tongue as the medium of instruction or subject in the first step of basic education in the National Curriculum Framework of Nepal, School Management Committees are increasingly replacing mother tongue or local subject by English as an additional subject at the local level. The major factors contributing for exclusion of minority languages include parental demand for English despite their love and affinity to home language, lesser number of students from the linguistic minorities in the classrooms, and lack of Nepal specific evidences on impact of mother tongue education based on research.*

**Keywords:** Linguistic minority, mother tongue, exclusion

### 1. Introduction

Social exclusion is a “multidimensional phenomenon” (Silver 2006) as it embraces various dimensions such as “economic, social, political, neighbourhood, individual, spatial and group” (Percy-Smith 2000). Social dimension includes not only gender, race, caste and ethnicity but also culture and language. However, the terrain of linguistic exclusion has not been well-articulated and brought to the fore yet. Neito (1992) also argues in the global context that “part of the reason for the exclusion of language issues is related to the lack of relevant terms in use... Until recently, no such term existed for language discrimination, although this does not mean that language discrimination as such did not exist” (Neito 1992: 153). Based on their experience of piloting of the multilingual education (MLE) programme in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa in India, Mohanty et al argue that “exclusion of languages from education... has direct negative consequences for educational performance, socio-economic well-being and sense of identity and empowerment of the speakers of minority and indigenous languages” (Mohanty et al 2009: 280).

In the context of Nepal, a number of education policy related documents have made provision for “ensuring children’s rights to learn in their own mother tongue” (MoE 2009). It means that teaching-learning process in the classroom is supposed to take place in children’s own mother tongue in the early years of schooling. National Curriculum Framework 2006 for school education of Nepal has provided mandate to School Management Committees (SMCs) not only for selecting medium of instruction but also for inclusion of one local subject or mother tongue in the school curriculum as per

the local needs and demand. Notwithstanding the policy provisions, SMCs are increasingly replacing mother tongue or local subject by additional English as an optional subject at the local level. Thus, this paper examines exclusion of minority mother tongues from the classroom context and attempts to explore the factors contributing for such exclusion. It also explores linguistic barriers faced by the linguistic minority children in multilingual classrooms in the early grades of primary education. It also examines how is medium of instruction negotiated in multilingual classrooms and how and to what extent does the linguistic transaction in the early childhood development/pre-primary class (ECD/PPC) and primary classrooms address learning needs of linguistic minority children.

## 2. Methodology

The paper is largely based on an ethnographic study<sup>1</sup> using both participant and non-participant observations in the classrooms (from grade ECD/PPC to five) in a primary school and at families in Khairahani village, Chitwan district of Nepal. The information collected from classroom and out-door observation in school was further triangulated through observation, interviews and interactions at family level. The study also included in-depth interviews with 153 respondents from three generations, namely, grandparents (first generation), parents (second generation) and children (third generation) from 51 families representing three ethnic groups (17 Tharu, 17 Tamang and 17 Chepang). In addition, life history of 12 key informants from the three generations was collected at the family level, and views of the concerned stakeholders were also captured through informal interviews at village, district and national level. The language diary format developed in Nepali language was given to 12 individuals from three generations to record<sup>2</sup> their use of language in different activities for a week. However, diaries of illiterate respondents from the first generation were written by the researcher through informal interviews on alternate days as per their suggestion. Focus group discussions were conducted at school and village level. Moreover, information on caste/ethnicity wise number of students was also collected from all 27 schools of Khairahani village.

## 3. Multi-ethnic and multilingual contexts of village and school

Khairahani, the largest village of Chitwan district in terms of population<sup>3</sup> is a mosaic of various castes/ethnic groups. In early days, only two indigenous nationalities of Tarai, namely, Tharu and Darai used to inhabit in this village as permanent residents. When the government launched malaria eradication programme in 1956, Brahman, Chhetri, Tamang, Chepang, Gurung, Magar, Newar and other castes/ethnic groups started to migrate to Khairahani searching for better livelihood opportunities. Currently, people of Khairahani speak 14 different languages and the major mother tongues include Nepali (48.61 per cent), Tharu (41.61 per cent), Bhojpuri (3.43 per cent), Newar (1.52 per cent), Hindi (1.48 per cent), Tamang (1.28 per cent), Darai (0.52 per cent) and Maithili (0.32 per cent) (CBS 2002).

Multi-ethnic and multilingual characteristics of Nepali societies get reflected in the schools and classrooms as well where a number of children from both dominant group and linguistic minorities take part in the learning processes together. In fact, classrooms are becoming multilingual due to increasingly growing trend of internal migration and urbanisation process taking place in Khairahani village. Currently 12 community (*samudayik*) schools and 15 private (*sansthan/institutional*) schools are running in the village whereas there were only eight community schools and one private school before 1989. Attendance registers of all community schools reflect that most of the students in these schools belong to ethnic groups such as Tharu, Chepang, Tamang, Magar, Gurung and Majhi (see table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted for nine months from October 2010 to June 2011 in course of doctoral research.

<sup>2</sup> They were asked to write the time (morning, afternoon, evening and night), venue, people they met, topic of interaction, language they used for interaction and tentative time they used while speaking each language in the language diary daily.

<sup>3</sup> According to Census 2011, total population of Khairahani is 21,530 (11,375 female and 10,155 male).

**Table 1:** Number of students by castes/ethnic groups in 12 community schools in Khairahani, Chitwan

Caste/ethnic group	Number of Students (ECD/PPC to grade five)		Related mother tongue
	No.	%	
Tharu	725	52.00	Tharu
Brahman, Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi	198	14.00	Khas/Nepali
Dalits	116	8.00	Khas/Nepali, Bhojpuri
Chebang	107	8.00	Chebang
Muslim	60	4.00	Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri
Tamang	26	2.00	Tamang
Newar	24	2.00	Newar
Magar	21	1.51	Magar
Gurung	12	1.00	Gurung
Majhi	7	0.50	Majhi
Rai	6	0.43	Rai
Others	82	6.00	Thami, Darai, etc.
Total	1384	100	

**Source:** Attendance Registers (2010-011) of all 12 schools

Table 1 shows that majority of students (52 per cent) in community schools belong to Tharu ethnic group<sup>4</sup>. The percentage of students from Brahman, Chhetri, Thakuri and Sanyasi families is only 14. It is because most of these families send their children to private school. Moreover, enrollment of children from other ethnic groups such as Chebang, Tamang, Newar, Magar and Majhi appears to be lower in terms of number.

Magani school where participant observation was conducted offers learning opportunities to pre-school-age (three and four years) as well as primary school-age (five to nine years and above) children. According to attendance registers (2010-2011), each grade of this school has multi-ethnic and multilingual<sup>5</sup> character. For instance, 25 children were enrolled in ECD/PPC. They represent seven different castes and ethnic groups such as Chepangs (seven), Tharus (five), Dalits (four), Brahmans and Chhetris (three), Magars (three), Muslims (two) and Gurung (one), and speak six different mother tongues which include Nepali, Chebang, Tharu, Magar, Hindi and Gurung. Likewise, 29 children of different castes/ethnic groups<sup>6</sup> representing various speech communities were enrolled in grade one. More or less similar kind of ethno-linguistic scenario was observed in other grades as well.

#### 4. Linguistic constraints in learning among linguistic minorities

School admits children of three and four years of age in ECD/PPC and engages them in learning processes for one year. A trained female facilitator runs the class daily for three hours. As a participant observer, the researcher observed the activities conducted in ECD/PPC during the first day of the academic year and in subsequent days. Children from Tharu, Chebang, Magar, Gurung and Muslim families who use their own mother tongue for communication at home appeared to be facing difficulty

<sup>4</sup> The percentage of Tharu students out of total in each of six community schools is: (97% in Phasera Pharseni, 94% in Bairahani, 84% in Sultana, 72% in Baseuli, 67% in Majhui and 58% in Salauli school). Similarly, there is presence of Tharu students even in private schools. The percentage of Tharu students in each of six private schools is: (69% in International English Model, 69% in Sunshine Model English, 56% in Sunlight English, 41% in Rosemarry Kids Foundation, 37% in Lotus English, and 36% in Modern English Secondary school).

<sup>5</sup> The major languages spoken by the students of this school are Nepali (40%), Tharu (28%), Chebang (8%), Hindi (8%), Magar (5%), Urdu (5%), Newar (2%) and Gurung (2%).

<sup>6</sup> The castes/ethnic groups include Tharus (nine), Brahmans/Chhetris (four), Dalits (three), Magars (three), Guptas (three), Tamangs (two), Muslims (two), and Chebang, Pahari, and Sah (three).

in grasping the instructions given by the facilitator in Nepali language especially in ECD/PPC and grade one. It was evident that use of mother tongues other than Nepali was very rare in the classroom. Surprisingly, the facilitator who represents Tharu ethnic group did not use a single word in Tharu language even in the first day of the academic year despite presence of Tharu children in the classroom. It was observed that some of the children from Tharu and Chepang ethnic groups could not follow facilitator's instruction. As a result they could not tell even their name in the class as asked by the facilitator. However, some children from the dominant groups such as Brahman and Chhetri who receive "cultural capital"<sup>7</sup> from their families were enjoying learning processes in Nepali which was their home language. This situation shows that school has been playing "important role in legitimizing and reproducing dominant cultural capital" (Aronowitz and Giroux 1986: 80).

It appears that school lacks smooth home-school transition strategy to facilitate the process of linguistic minority children's learning in early days of schooling without linguistic and cultural barriers. Some head teachers of community schools argued that they conduct "welcome to school campaign" each year from the first week of *Baishakh* (second/third week of April) in order to ensure enrollment of all pre-school- and primary school-age children in school. On the other hand, some parents shared that some private schools also carry out door-to-door campaign to increase enrollment in their schools on the day of *Saraswati Puja*<sup>8</sup>. These schools make efforts to convince parents for shifting their children from community school to private school offering attractive benefit package such as waving of admission fee and even monthly fee partially.

As far as use of minority mother tongue for classroom transaction is concerned, facilitator and teachers think that mother tongue medium has to be adopted only in a school where mother tongue education or MLE programme has been officially implemented. Facilitator and teachers shared that they have not received any orientation about use of mother tongue in the classrooms during the training courses<sup>9</sup> they attended in the past. Despite this fact, some teachers claimed that they have been using Tharu words informally while explaining the meaning of difficult words.

In Khairahani, 11 community schools have been adopting Nepali as medium of instruction and one school has started teaching in English from ECD/PPC despite presence of Tharu children to a greater extent and enrollment of other linguistic minority children to a considerable extent. As discussed earlier, it was observed that linguistic minority children especially from ECD/PPC to grade three have been facing linguistic constraints in learning. However, it was not possible to explore such constraints faced by these children through interviews. Therefore, some students from upper grades of primary and secondary level were consulted and asked to express their experiences during the early days, months and years of their schooling. Reena<sup>10</sup>, an 11-year-old girl who was studying at grade five shares:

*When I joined Shishu (ECD/PPC) six years ago, I could not understand Nepali language in the class because we speak Tharu as mother tongue at home all the time. So, I did not like to attend the class regularly. This kind of difficulty in learning remained up to grade three. From grade four onwards, I could speak and write in Nepali well. During the early days, one of our teachers was Chauddhari (Tharu). Sometimes, he used to explain using some Tharu words also. I used to feel happy hearing some words in our mother tongue in the class.*

Thus, it is clear that ECD/PPC indirectly discouraged some children excluding their home language from the classroom context which contributed to increase absenteeism of children. It shows that even the nominal use of mother tongue can play important role for children's motivation in early days of

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to "the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed on from one generation to another which represents ways of talking, acting, modes of style, moving, socialising, forms of knowledge, language practices and values" (McLaren 2003:93).

<sup>8</sup> It is a Hindu festival in which *Saraswati*, a goddess of knowledge is worshipped. There is belief among many of the Hindus that children can learn well if they get enrolled during the day of *Saraswati Puja* which is celebrated before the new academic year.

<sup>9</sup> All the teachers have participated in various training courses.

<sup>10</sup> Each name used in the paper is pseudonym.

schooling. Another 12-year-old Tharu girl also shared her experience that she could not do well in the exam due to linguistic barrier because Nepali was medium of instruction and examination whereas she used to speak “only Tharu mother tongue at home”. Similarly, Chepang children have also the same kinds of experiences. Ranjana, a 16-year-old Chepang girl who was studying at grade 10 in one of the higher secondary schools of Khairahani says:

*I joined Antyodaya school from grade one. At home, I used to speak only Chepang language. The first day of my school life was terrible. Teacher started to teach in Nepali. I was puzzled because I could not understand at all. I had really difficult time at least for one month. Teachers did not understand and speak Chepang language and I could not understand Nepali. On the other hand, English subject was taught from grade one. We were facing difficulty to understand Nepali. English subject further made our life more complicated.*

What is interesting is that Antyodaya school was established for educating only Chepang children. So, there were only Chepang children in Ranjana’s class. Neither SMC members nor parents have realised that children might face language related difficulty at pre-primary and primary level. This situation has not changed yet.

The information provided by the third-generation children were verified by taking in-depth interviews with the parents and grandparents and asking them to share their own experiences of school life if they had exposure to school. One of the Tharu parents shares his experiences as well as his daughters’ problem related to language (see case study 1).

#### **Case study 1: Parental views on linguistic constraints in learning**

My name is Shreeram Mahato. I am 25 years old. I have passed SLC. I could not get job in Nepal. So, I went to Malaysia and spent two and half years there. I came back two years ago and now working as a tractor driver. My 70-year-old father became literate through adult literacy class; 60-year-old mother is illiterate. My wife was dropped out from school after grade four. My seven-year-old daughter Sunita is studying in grade three, and three-year-old daughter Rekha attends *shishu kaksha* (ECD/PPC).

Our children are compelled to face difficulty in understanding the lessons taught in Nepali in the early days of school life. I also experienced such difficulty when I was studying in grade two. One day, Maths teacher asked me a question and I tried to answer in Nepali but I also used Tharu words while answering. At that moment, teacher slapped me twice saying that “why don’t you speak Nepali language”? Then, I cried in the class. That was so sad moment. That was not my fault. Teacher should have allowed us to use Tharu language as well in the early days. During that time, I had no friendship with classmates who could speak Nepali and some of them used to tease me.

Likewise, I recall another incidence happened with my friend when we were in grade three. One day, science teacher had asked us to write names of different parts of a plant as homework. When he was checking homework in the class, he saw my friend’s copy in which he had written names of parts in Tharu language because he did not know name in Nepali. Teacher could not understand and slapped him in front of all students. My friend was also forced to cry in the class.

My daughters are also facing language related problems in school. Sunita can talk in Nepali. But Rekha cannot do like that. She can understand Nepali to a greater extent but cannot respond. She does not go to *shishu kaksha* regularly. When some visitors come to our home and ask questions in Nepali, small children cannot respond. Therefore, I teach them to speak Nepali at home. I think if we helped them to speak at home, they will be able to speak Nepali in school fluently. But now-a-days children learn Nepali from their friends as well.

Whenever I visited Shreeram’s home, Sunita and Rekha used to greet me with smiling face saying “*Namaste sir*”. After third visit, Rekha started to come very close to me. When, I asked simple questions during home visits, she used to just smile without any verbal response. She couldn’t understand and speak Nepali language so her grandfather had to interpret for her. Shreeram and other parents expressed during the home visits that their children do not attend ECD/PPC regularly. One of the

reasons for this situation is linguistic barrier at school. Teachers also expressed that irregularity of children has been appeared as a problem in school. The attendance registers also reflect the high rate of absenteeism in ECD/PPC and early grades. What the head teacher argued is that most of the teachers can do basic communication in Tharu language. Therefore, they can also explain in Tharu as and when necessary. However, systemic and official approach to address this issue appears to be lacking till date.

## 5. Exclusion of minority mother tongues and contributing factors

A large body of the evidences reveals that minority mother tongues, across the world, in multicultural and multilingual societies, are excluded from the educational context. For instance, Cummins (1986, 2000 as cited in Baker 2006) suggests that there are “four major characteristics of schools” which contribute children to get “empowered” or “disabled” in the Canadian context. The first characteristic is about inclusion of mother tongue of linguistic minority children into the school curriculum. Cummins further states:

*If a minority language child's home language and culture are excluded, minimised or quickly reduced in school, there is the likelihood that the child may become academically “disabled”. Where the school incorporates, encourages and gives status to the minority language, the chances of empowerment are increased (Cummins 1986, 2000 as cited in Baker 2006: 415).*

It indicates that if a school failed to incorporate the home language of the linguistic minority children into its curriculum, they will feel that they are excluded even if they are attending the school physically. The above situation corroborates with the context of all community schools in Khairahani where there is prevalence of linguistic exclusion despite the presence of rich and diverse linguistic resources. Nepali language is exercising “hegemony over the minority tongues” such as Tharu, Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Magar, etc. “which have lesser number of speakers and have been endowed with lesser power” (Rao 2008). It appears that schools do not pay adequate attention to ensure education for linguistic minority children in their own mother tongues. Kadel’s study (2009) in Sunsari district has also explored that:

*The welcome to school campaign organized by the school every year, during the first month of the academic year, has been instrumental in bringing linguistic minority children to the school. However, immediately after ending of such campaign, linguistic minority children begin to experience unwelcoming environment and behaviour in the school due to imposition of non-home language as a medium of instruction. Ridicule and embarrassment prevail in the classroom, which exacerbate hostile classroom environments for linguistic minority children (Kadel 2009: 121).*

It reveals that language-based discrimination and exclusion still remain there even after inclusion of all eligible children of linguistic minorities in school which really impinge on regularity and performance of children in the early grades of primary school.

The field data confirm that Khairahani is also the largest village of Chitwan district in terms of Tharu population. As mentioned earlier majority of students in 12 community schools belong to Tharu ethnic group. Seven SMC chairpersons and three head teachers in these schools represent the same ethnic group. One of the head teachers was also involved in developing textbooks in Tharu language but he never implemented mother tongue education in his own school. Some Tharu teachers from Khairahani have also received training on mother tongue education. Further, the member of dissolved Constituent Assembly was also a Tharu politician from Khairahani. *Tharu Kalyankari Sabha*<sup>11</sup> is also functional at the village level. Notwithstanding these facts, Khairahani Resource Centre<sup>12</sup> has decided to replace mother tongue or local subject by additional English as an optional subject in all community

<sup>11</sup> This is a welfare organisation of Tharus in Nepal.

<sup>12</sup> Khairahani Resource Centre is an educational body led by a Resource Person under District Education Office for carrying out periodic monitoring and supervision; provide technical support and feedback to teachers which include 30 community schools of three village development committees (12 schools in Khairahani, 11 schools in Birendranagar and seven schools in Kathar) in Chitwan district.

schools based on recommendations of all SMCs. This situation contradicts with the National Curriculum Framework 2006 for school education of Nepal which has made a provision of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the first step<sup>13</sup> of basic education, and also as a subject in the curriculum (CDC 2006). What is interesting is that Tharu language has been excluded from the educational context even in a primary school located at Phasera Pharseni of Khairahani where 97 per cent students speak Tharu as mother tongue. The head teacher states that “Tharu is the mother tongue of almost all children in this school. They face difficulty in understanding and responding in Nepali language especially in ECD/PPC and grade one. However, we have not noticed any demand from parents to teach their children in the mother tongue”.

According to Resource Person, the Resource Centre has been providing technical support to all community schools under its jurisdiction in order to enhance quality of education. Head teachers' monthly meeting is organised in the Resource Centre in which educational problems faced by different schools are discussed and attempt is made to explore the solutions jointly. However, language related difficulty faced by linguistic minority children has not been considered as an important agenda for the meeting. He attempts to justify the aforesaid decision:

*The number of students is decreasing in all community schools due to parental attraction towards private schools. One of the main reasons for this situation is English medium of instruction. As recommended by SMCs based on parental demand, we have decided at Resource Centre level to include English as an optional subject replacing mother tongue or local subject in all 30 community schools under this Resource Centre. Three schools have already started teaching in English from ECD/PPC. In Khairahani, many Tharu children have been performing well even in private English medium schools. So far, parents have not complained about linguistic difficulty in English. Why to be worried about difficulty in Nepali medium in the community schools?*

Head teachers or acting head teachers of all community schools in Khairahani defended this decision during informal interview as they were also involved in the decision making process initially as member secretary of SMC which recommended for abolition of mother tongue. On the other hand, National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities has strongly demanded with the Ministry of Education to stop teaching English as an optional subject replacing local mother tongue which is not only exclusion of minority mother tongue but also an “illegal act” (Kantipur, 13 December 2011). However, it appears that organisations of indigenous nationalities at the district level are not much aware of this fact.

In this context, an attempt has been made to explore the major factors contributing for exclusion of minority languages from the classroom context. Firstly, it was found reveals that increasingly growing parental demand for English as medium of instruction has been appeared as one of the main contributing factors for exclusion of minority mother tongue despite the fact that all the classrooms are linguistically diverse. The same kind of diversity is reflected in school staff, SMC, Parents-Teachers Association and ECD Centre Sub-committee as well. However, issue of mother tongue education has not been raised during the meetings. A chairperson of SMC who represents Tharu ethnic group argues that SMC takes decision based on parental choices and demand. He says:

*We have not noticed any demand from parents for educating their children in mother tongue despite densely populated settlements of Tharus nearby school. In recent years, parents have demanded for English medium education in government school as well. That's why we decided to include English as an optional subject instead of mother tongue. We cannot go beyond parental preferences.*

Likewise, a head teacher who is also a member-secretary of SMC confirms that there is very little likelihood of parental demand for education in mother tongue due to growing influence of English medium private school in the same village. He argued that “some of parents have started to give pressure to SMC for English medium in our school like in some neighbouring schools<sup>14</sup>.” Considering

<sup>13</sup> The first step of basic education refers to grades 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> Khairahani Higher Secondary School, Adarsha Higher Secondary School, Birendranagar and a primary school in Gothsor, Chainpur have already started English medium from ECD/PPC.

the local context, head teacher pointed out that there is possibility of adopting English medium in future rather than mother tongue. Some other teachers also reiterated that if they did not start teaching in English, they won't be able to retain the children enrolled in their schools. Moreover, District Education Officer of Chitwan also argued that parental interests on mother tongue education are gradually decreasing due to craze of private boarding schools which adopt English medium of instruction. He added:

*provided financial support and grade one text books to some schools to run classes in Tharu and Tamang languages three years ago. However, those schools did not request for grade two text books. We came to know informally that parents did not want to continue the classes. It shows that parents are more interested in educating their children in English rather than in mother tongue. During the academic year 2068 Bikram Sambat (2011/2012), we have not received any demand for mother tongue education in Chitwan district.*

Responses of parents show that they are willing to send their children to English medium private school as many well-educated and rich people send their children to such school. However, they cannot afford that due to miserable economic condition of the family. Hence, they want English medium of instruction in community school so that their children will get "better education" and will be able to compete with children from educated and rich families for job in future.

Secondly, lesser number of students in each language category has created complexities for taking new initiatives to address the issue of language barrier among linguistic minority children. For instance, nine children out of 25 enrolled in ECD/PPC speak Nepali and all of them are enjoying Nepali medium of instruction in the class. But other 16 children are facing difficulty because they speak different languages which include Tharu (five), Chepang<sup>15</sup> (five), Magar (three), Hindi (two) and Gurung (one). If Tharu or Chepang is adopted as medium of instruction for all, non-Tharu speaking children will not understand. Then, they will have to face the same kind of problem again. It is not possible to split the class into more sections based on caste/ethnicity as number of children is very low. On the other hand, teachers may not teach adopting Nepali, Tharu and Chepang mother tongues as medium of instruction simultaneously in the same class while teaching various subjects. Even if one could do it, some pedagogical issues like inadequate time for teaching, and difficulty in completion of the course without compromising the quality aspect may arise. Because, in this kind of arrangement, Tharu language speakers will receive only 15 minutes time out of 45 minutes per period to learn the subject like mathematics, science and social studies. It also requires more human resources. Hence, it appears that addressing language difficulties for all linguistic minority children at a time is a complex issue which calls for more inputs from the MLE experts. A head teacher further explains about the complexities:

*We have not received any demand from parents to educate their children in mother tongue till date. If parents requested for mother tongue education in Tharu, Tamang, Chepang or any other languages, SMC will have to discuss on that agenda. Even if they demanded, it would be really difficult to educate children in those languages because number of linguistic minority children except Tharu is low and some Tamang and Chepang children cannot speak their own language. A teacher cannot handle the class in three or more languages at a time.*

Thirdly, Nepal specific and research-based evidences on effectiveness and impact of mother tongue education or MLE appear to be lacking. Department of Education as part of the MLE project has generated some of the process and outputs-oriented reports and documents. Some of the MLE strategy related documents discuss about the impact of mother tongue education or MLE citing the examples of other countries. However, Ministry of Education has not been able to produce research-based evidences on impact of MLE project in the context of Nepal yet. One of the high ranking officials from the Ministry of Education also agreed the fact that they "have not been able to demonstrate the proven evidences of the mother tongue-based multilingual education which may convince parents". In fact,

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<sup>15</sup> Total number of Chepang children is seven. But two children do not speak Chepang language because they have already shifted from their own mother tongue to Nepali language at family.



concerned institutions and stakeholders have not been able to come up with the research-based concrete and successful examples on impact of MLE in the context of Nepal till date. Hence, most of the minority parents appear to be reluctant to accept the evidences on impact of mother tongue education or MLE generated in other countries.

Lastly, most of the second generation-parents from Tharu, Tamang and Chepang ethnic groups who had exposure to school expressed that they experienced harassment and ridicule against use of their mother tongue in the classrooms and outside, and also faced linguistic constraints. Hence, they think that school system is reproducing the same kind of discriminatory behaviour through monolingual teaching approach even today in spite of the political change in the country. To address this issue, they are helping their younger children to practise Nepali conversation at home so that their children will be able to cope with the difficulty that may arise at school. The second-generation parents think that arguments made by the activists from the organisations of indigenous nationalities in favour of mother tongue education are “not convincing”. It is because “most of such activists are sending their own children to private English medium schools” rather than community schools which adopt minority mother tongue or Nepali as medium of instruction.

## **6. Conclusion**

Children from linguistic minorities such as Tharu and Chepang who enter into ECD/PPC annexed to a primary school at the age of three without much exposure to dominant Nepali language begin to feel discriminated from the first day of schooling due to exclusion of their home language from the classroom context. School system does not pay much attention to bridge-in the gap between home language and school language through a smooth home-school transition strategy in spite of its focus on “welcome to school campaign” which ends after children’s enrollment in the school. In fact, children welcomed by the school during enrollment process are compelled to face hostile and unfriendly learning environment in the classroom due to imposition of non-home language as medium of instruction. They face difficulty in understanding the teachers’ instructions and questions, and also in responding to the questions. This kind of linguistic barrier creates a situation in which ridicule and harassment prevail. As a result, children in ECD/PPC and early grades of primary school do not feel motivated to attend the classes regularly. Hence, high absenteeism has been emerged as a problem in school.

Interestingly, considering the linguistic constraints at school, parents have started to prepare their children for schooling by helping them to speak Nepali at home whereas school does not have any strategy to welcome new comers in ECD/PPC using their home languages. Despite pronouncement of policy for mother tongue education at the national level, SMCs, the responsible bodies for taking decision on language choices, are increasingly replacing mother tongue or local subject by additional English as a subject at the local level. SMCs agree with the fact that their decision has excluded minority mother tongues from the educational context. However, they claim that the decision is primarily guided by the aspirations and demand of parents for their children’s “better future”. The major factors contributing for exclusion of minority languages are: firstly, well-educated and rich families both from the dominant group and linguistic minorities of the same village have been sending their children to private English medium school. This has influenced the perceptions of poor families from the various ethnic groups that such schools are “better schools” for educating their children as well. However, they cannot afford that. Thus, they strongly demand for English medium of instruction in the community schools keeping in mind that their children will be able to compete with their counterparts of private schools while fighting for job in future. Secondly, each classroom appears to be multilingual but number of speakers in each language is low, which has created complexities in initiating classes in various mother tongues with limited human resources. Thirdly, Nepal specific and research-based evidences on effectiveness and impact of mother tongue education are almost non-existent and parents appear to be reluctant in accepting the evidences generated in the outside world. Lastly, second-generation parents seem to be hesitant to agree with the arguments of the activists from the organisations of indigenous nationalities in favour of mother tongue education or MLE as “most of such

activists are sending their own children to English medium private schools” rather than community schools which adopt minority mother tongue or Nepali as medium of instruction.

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### Notes

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