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Multilingual education, social transformation and development in Nepal

Prem Phyak

Introduction
The discourse of ‘development’ in late capitalism is largely dominated by the economic perspective (Harvey 2005, Sklair 2002). Invoking the neoliberal ideology of development-as-an-accumulation-of-wealth through a free market economy, which legitimises corporate power (not the people’s power), nation states often develop their educational and economic policies to address the needs of the global neoliberal market, rather than focusing on the everyday local needs of people. However, the ideology of development-as-economic-growth disregards social justice and equity (Luke, Luke, & Graham 2007, Steger, Goodman & Wilson 2012). Educational policies guided by such ideologies tend to be top-down and largely exclude the participation of people at the grassroots in the multiple layers of the policy-making process. Embracing the neoliberal ideology of development, Nepal has focused on poverty reduction in all of its national plans and policies since 1990. In line with this goal, Nepal’s educational policies, which are largely driven by donors, also embrace the global neoliberal ideology that buttresses privatisation and the commodification of education and defines students’ success in terms of their achievement scores in local and national exams (Carney 2003).

However, such policies do not ensure participation, voice and agency of multiple stakeholders at the grassroots level. This chapter is an attempt to analyse how multilingual education has filled this gap by providing space for indigenous people’s participation in school-related activities and by legitimising local language, culture and epistemology in educational transformation. I argue that multilingual education (MLE) policy is transformative and has the potential to contribute to social development: it bridges the gap between community and school and recognises the identity, epistemology and voices of local communities. I begin this chapter with a brief introduction to Nepal’s political economy followed by the history of its language policy and social
stratification to provide a backdrop for understanding how MLE is transformative in the present context of Nepal. Then I analyse how both ideological and implementational spaces for multilingual education (Hornberger 2005) are provided by the recent policy followed by some recommendations for future research and policy revisions.

**Political economy of Nepal**

Nepal, situated between China and India, is a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural country. The 2011 Census reported 125 caste/ethnic groups, among whom the Chhetris and the Hill Brahmans made up 29 per cent of the population. The ten most numerous caste/ethnic groups made up 69 per cent of the population in total. The remaining 31 per cent of the population is made up of 115 caste and ethnic groups.

The Census also reported that 123 languages are spoken by the various ethnic and caste groups. It revealed that Nepali and Maithili are the mother tongues of more than 56 per cent of the population of the country, while just ten languages are the mother tongues of 88 per cent of the population (Table 1). The remaining twelve per cent of the population share 113 mother tongues between them.

**Table 1: Caste/ethnic groups and mother tongues in Nepal***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/ethnic group</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>Mother tongue</th>
<th>% of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chhetri</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill Brahman</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>Maithili</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magar</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Bhojpuri</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tharu</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Tharu</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamang</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Tamang</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newar</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Newar</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kami</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Bajjika</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musalman</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Magar</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadava</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Doteli</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rai</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115 other groups</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>113 other languages</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 125 groups</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>Total: 123 mother tongues</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: CBS (2011)

Among the ten major religions, the Census showed that 81.3 per cent of the people follow Hinduism, followed by Buddhism (9.0 per cent), Islam (4.4 per cent), Kirat (3.1 per cent), Christianity (1.4 per cent) and Prakriti
(0.5 per cent). Other religions include Bon (13,006 people), Jainism (3,214), Bahai (1,283) and Sikhism (609) (CBS 2011).

Despite this diversity, the majority of languages other than Nepali are endangered, for various reasons (Turin 2007, Yadava 2007). On the one hand, these languages do not have their own orthographies and, on the other hand, there is an increasing trend for young people not to speak their mother tongues; this is caused by migration and the long domination of Nepali and English in education and other sectors. While the pre-1990 era was characterised as the era of linguistic nationalism – defined in terms of a monolingual ideology (Nepali only) – the post-1990 era is considered to be the age of modernity and globalisation. As the nation state adopted a liberal economic policy paving the way for the private sector and multinational companies to invest in various fields, a large number of foreign donor agencies began to play key roles in intervening in national policies.

Nepal’s Human Development Index (0.463 in 2013) indicates that this is one of the poorest countries in the world, occupying 157th position from 186 countries (UNDP 2013). The Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) of 2004 showed that 31 per cent of Nepalis are below the poverty line (CBS 2004). The condition of indigenous nationalities (Janajatis), marginalised caste groups (Dalits) and religious minorities is even worse. The NLSS report indicates that only 19 per cent of Hill Brahmans and Chhetris (upper caste people) are below the poverty line, far less than that of the Janajatis (44 per cent), the Dalits (47 per cent) and the Muslims (41 per cent). Such a disparity in terms of caste and ethnicity also exists in literacy. For example, while the literacy rate of Brahmans is 72.4 per cent, only about 48 per cent of Janajatis are literate. Moreover, NLSS shows that 32 per cent of Brahmans and Chhetris have not been to school compared to 43 per cent, 62 per cent and 45 per cent of hill Dalits, Muslims and Janajatis respectively. Likewise, while 10 per cent of Brahmans and Chhetris complete their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination only 3 per cent and 1.7 per cent of Janajatis and Dalits respectively complete their SLC (CBS 2004).

These data clearly indicate that disparity in socio-economic and educational development still persists in Nepalese society. One of the fundamental reasons behind the low educational attainment of Janajatis is the unequal language-in-education policy that the country has adopted for more than two and a half centuries. Due to the one language policy (only Nepali), children from non-Nepali speaking communities (most of whom are Janajatis) could not attend school; although they attended school, they dropped out before they completing their education. One of the major reasons for this is that the national curricula and language education policy do not seem to be relevant to the indigenous communities. To address these issues the Ministry of Education (MOE) has made some policy level developments by introducing mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in Nepal. This policy provides space for indigenous languages to be used as the medium of instruction up to Grade 3, while English and Nepali are taught as compulsory subjects from Grade 1. Despite a number of implementational challenges, this
policy has already received positive responses from indigenous communities and helped students to learn effectively through their own mother tongue (Hough, Thapa-Magar & Yonjan-Tamang, 2009, Phyak, 2011).

Before I discuss the relevance and challenges of MLE, let me critically examine how the history of language-in-education policy has set up a strong foundation for linguistic discrimination against indigenous minority children.

**Language and social exclusion**

Although Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic country, it has a very long history of possessing a monolingual language policy. Since the unification of the country by a Shah King, Prithvi Narayan Shah, in 1768, only Nepali has been adopted as the official language of the country. The indigenous languages – for example, Newari in the Kathmandu Valley, Limbu and Rai in the eastern region, Magar and Gurung in the western region and Maithili and Bhojpuri in the southern region – were legally banned in schools and other public domains (Awasthi, 2008, Giri, 2010).

The root of social exclusion in Nepal is the *Muluki Ain* (Law of the Land) of 1854 which firmly developed a caste-based hierarchical Nepalese society (Gurung, 2006). According to the *Muluki Ain*, the High Caste people – Brahmans and Chhetris – occupy the highest position. Brahmans, who are traditionally known as Pundits, are allowed to read the Hindu religious texts used in the performance of Hindu rituals, whereas Chhetris are considered to be warriors; they occupy the largest proportion in the Nepalese army and other government positions (also see Gurung, 2006, Phyak, 2011). The second position in the hierarchy is occupied by the Matawalis (alcohol drinkers); these include the Gurung and Magar people, who are associated with the Gorkhali army. Another group of Matawalis – the Bhoti, Kumal, Bhujel, Tharu and Chepang (who were kept as slaves by high caste people) – occupy the third position in the hierarchy. Similarly, lower caste Newars and religious minorities (Christians and Muslims) were placed in the second last position in the hierarchy (see Lawoti, 2007). The untouchable castes such as the Damai and Kami are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

**Table 2: Categorisation of indigenous nationalities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous nationality</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kusunda, Bankariya, Raute, Surel, Hayu, Raji, Kisan, Lepcha, Meche, Kuswadiya</td>
<td>Endangered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majhi, Siyar, Lhomi (Shinsaba), Thudam, Dhanuk, Chepang, Santhal, Jhagad, Thami, Bote, Danuwar, Baram</td>
<td>Highly marginalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunuwar, Tharu, Tamang, Bhujel, Kumal, Rajbangshi, Gangaai, Dhimal, Bhoite, Darai, Tajpuriya, Pahari, Topkergola, Dolpo, Fri, Mugal, Larke, Lohpa, Dura, Walung</td>
<td>Marginalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhairorotan, Tanbe, Tingaunle Thakali, Baragaunle Thakali, Marphali Thakali, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, Yakhka, Chhantyal, Jirel, Byansi, Yolmo</td>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newar, Thakali</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: NEFIN 2008
As Table 2 shows, apart from the Newar and Thakali, all other Janajatis are disadvantaged in education, politics and other sectors. The high castes have a large proportion of highly qualified people who dominate in all decision making processes. Gurung (2006) reports that in 2000–2001 87 per cent of candidates passing gazetted level examinations conducted by the Public Service Commission were high caste people, followed by the Newars (8.7 per cent). The representation of indigenous people is only 0.5 per cent while Dalits have no representation at all. One of the fundamental reasons behind high caste people’s domination is the caste based hierarchical society developed by the Muluki Ain. This policy gives two explicit benefits – religious and linguistic – to Brahmans and Chhetris. As Nepal was constitutionally a Hindu religious country (Kingdom of Nepal 1990), Brahmans were the only people authorised to perform social rituals and allowed to read the Vedas, the most ancient Hindu scriptures. Due to this privilege, Brahmans learned to read and write at home informally with the help of pundits (Bista 1991). They also went to Banaras and other parts of India to learn how to read and write. These informal literacy practices, influenced by the Hindu religion, contributed a great deal to the high educational attainment of Brahmans, while other castes and ethnic groups remained illiterate. On the one hand, schools were not open to the public before 1950 and, on the other hand, ethnic minorities were not allowed even to touch the religious texts. Likewise, high caste people always excelled over the indigenous nationalities and other minorities in education and governance, because they could use Nepali (their mother tongue) in all domains, whereas the indigenous people faced difficulty in expressing their ideas in Nepali since it was not their mother tongue (Phyak 2013).

Indigenous communities have organised movements in opposition to this domination, despite attempts to repress them over the centuries. Lawoti (2007) has identified 25 such ethnic and caste mobilisations and rebellions before 1990, that is to say in the years before the restoration of democracy.¹ There were several major linguistic movements against the ‘Nepali only’ language policy. Some notable examples are the Limbu language movement in 1870 led by Sri Thebe (who was exiled), the Newar language movement in Calcutta, India, in 1926, the movement against making Nepali the only language of instruction in 1956 and the establishment of the Association of Newar Language Speakers in 1979.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine one language policy which has been adopted by the country and discuss how indigenous languages are given space in education. I also make use of data from one school which has implemented an MTB-MLE programme in order to analyse how effective that programme is.

Narrow nationalism and monolingual policy

A monolingual policy was adopted by the nation state from the time of the unification of modern Nepal. In the guise of nationalism, education policy permitted only Nepali as the medium of instruction and banned the
use of other languages in schools. The domination of the Nepali language was formalised and systematised by the first democratic government in the 1950s. The Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC 1956), the first commission on education in the history of Nepal, made some significant recommendations for the systematic expansion and development of education throughout the country. It was a historic commission for the Nepalese education system because it fixed the structure of education, curriculum and textbooks for different levels. However, the commission’s recommendations about the medium of instruction (MoI) were against the aspirations of the indigenous people and Nepal’s multilingual identity. The commission recommended that:

The medium of instruction should be the national language [Nepali] in primary, middle and higher educational institutions, because any language which cannot be made lingua franca and which does not serve legal proceedings in court should not find a place … The use of the national language can bring about equality among all classes of people, can be an anchor-sheet for Nepalese nationality and can be the main instrument for promoting literature. (NNEPC 1956, 95)

The commission further stated that:

No other languages [than Nepali] should be taught, even optionally in primary school, because [only] a few children will need them and they would hinder the use of Nepali … and those who wish [for] and need additional languages can learn them in the sixth grade. (NNEPC 1956, 95)

We see that the beginning of a language-in-education policy in Nepal is marked with narrow nationalism defined in terms only of the Nepali language. To identify oneself as a Nepali he/she has to understand and speak Nepali. This ‘one language’ policy in education was adopted with an assumption that it would foster equality among people from various classes and groups (Weinberg 2013). Therefore, languages other than Nepali were not allowed to be taught and used as the MoI (even optionally) in primary schools. In addition, the commission strongly recommended:

[…] it should be emphasised that if Nepali is to become the true national language, then we must insist that its use be enforced in the primary school … Local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished [banished] from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of the child. (NNEPC 1956, 97)

This indicates that the policy makers at that time were afraid of introducing local languages into schools. They thought that the use of children’s mother tongues in schools would weaken Nepalese national identity and thwart the development of the Nepali language (Giri 2010, Weinberg 2013). It is unfortunate that local languages were not allowed even in playgrounds. But the policy makers failed to realise that excluding local languages from primary schools meant excluding non-Nepali speaking children from schools. Due to this policy, the drop-out rate of non-Nepali speaking children (from various
indigenous communities) was very high and they were not able to perform as well as their Nepali-speaking friends (Awasthi 2004).

The domination of the Nepali language continued during the party-less Panchayat system\(^2\) (1960–1990). Although the caste based structure established by the Muluki Ain was abolished during the Panchayat period, indigenous communities were still severely marginalised as their linguistic, cultural and religious identities were not recognised (Gurung 2003, Lawoti 2007). As the country adopted an ideology of ‘one nation, one language, one religion and one dress’, languages other than Nepali were not permitted in schools. As a result, children from various linguistic communities could not perform as well as Nepali-speaking children – and so dropped out of school – but they also felt alienated even if they were enrolled in school (Phyak 2011).

**Recognising indigenous languages**

With the end of the Panchayat system in 1990 the issue of language in education came to the forefront. Various indigenous peoples’ organisations were established to put pressure on the government for a guarantee of their linguistic rights. As a result, the 1990 Constitution stated that Nepal was to be a ‘multilingual and multicultural’ kingdom (Kingdom of Nepal 1990). Although the constitution mentioned that mother tongues spoken in Nepal were ‘national’ languages (Article 6.2), maintaining the previous legacy, it recognised Nepali as the only ‘official’ language (Article 6.1). Article 18 of the Constitution enshrined the following linguistic and cultural rights:

1. Each community residing in the Kingdom of Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script and culture.

2. Each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children.

It also stated that all communities had the right to preserve their cultures, rights and languages (Article 26.2). Based on these constitutional provisions, the 1992 National Education Commission Report recommended to the Ministry of Education (MOE) that mother tongues should be used as the medium of instruction for non-Nepali speaking children at primary level. Following this recommendation, the MOE included the teaching of the mother tongue as an optional subject (but not as medium of instruction) at primary level.

So far, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC)\(^3\) has prepared textbooks in 22 different mother tongues. The MOE has given School Management Committees (SMC) the right to select one mother tongue to be taught in the school; the selection is made on the basis of which is the most widely spoken language in the local community.

This policy has encouraged indigenous children to use their mother tongue in schools and it has also increased their participation in learning activities.
However, there are some notable challenges facing the teaching of the mother tongue as a subject while Nepali is still used as the medium of instruction. Due to a lack of trained and competent teachers and insufficient resources such as textbooks and other reference materials, the teaching and learning of the mother tongues is not very effective in practice. In addition, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education in Nepal (MOE 2007) identifies the following challenges facing mother tongue teaching:

- heterogeneous Nepalese communities with diverse linguistic and socio-cultural structures
- lack of development and management of teachers for bilingual education
- lack of community initiation in managing mother tongue teachers
- lack of script, grammar, dictionary and writing practice in most of the mother tongues
- lack of adequate preparation for multigrade teaching
- lack of clear policy regarding the mother tongues
- lack of involvement of concerned stakeholders at policy making and implementation levels.

We can see that, since only one local language is selected to be taught as a subject in schools, children who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds are not motivated and do not find it easy to learn through another language. In this sense, teaching the mother tongue as a subject according to the present policy does not necessarily help children to learn in their own language.

In order to address this challenge, the Ministry of Education has implemented mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for non-Nepali speaking children since 2007. According to this policy, non-Nepali speaking children are taught in their mother tongues from pre-primary early childhood education and development (ECED) and basic education levels. The legal foundation of the MTB-MLE policy lies in the Interim Constitution of Nepal (People of Nepal 2007) which not only recognises Nepal as a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural and multireligious country but also enshrines the following crucial language-related provisions:

The State shall not discriminate among citizens on grounds of religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, origin, language or ideological conviction or any of these. (Article 13.3)

Each community shall have the right to get basic education in their mother tongue as provided for in the law. (Article 17.1)

It further states that:

Each community residing in Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civility and heritage. (Article 17.3)

Other educational policies also mention the provisions for mother tongue as the MoI in schools. The Education for All (EFA) National Plan of Action (Ministry of Education and Sports 2003), the EFA Core Document for 2004–2009 (Ministry of Education and Sports 2004), the primary level curriculum (CDC 2008) and the School Sector Reform Plan for 2009–2015
Prem Phyak (MOE 2009) all clearly mention that primary education can be provided in children's mother tongues. Regarding the MoI, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education in Nepal (MOE 2007) states:

The medium of school level education can be in Nepali or English language or both of them. However, in the first stage of basic education (Grades 1–3), the medium of education will generally be in the mother tongue. In the case of non-Nepali citizens, there will be a special provision to choose any other language as a subject instead of Nepali. The medium of teaching of any language subject will be in the same language i.e. Nepali will be taught in Nepali (not in the children's mother tongue).

Table 3: Models of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in Nepal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model of MTB-MLE</th>
<th>District / Language(s) / School</th>
<th>Classroom features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model I monolingual mono-grade grade teaching</td>
<td>Dhankuta Athapahariya Rai (Grades 1–3) Shree Deurali Lower Secondary School</td>
<td>One teacher teaches all subjects (except Nepali and English) in Athapahariya Rai in one grade. Some teachers cannot speak Athapahariya Rai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model II monolingual mono-grade subject teaching</td>
<td>Kanchanpur Rana Tharu (Grades 1–3) Rastriya Primary School</td>
<td>Separate teachers teach different subjects in children's mother tongue in one grade. All teachers can speak children's mother tongue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Palpa Magar (Grades 1–3) Nava Jagriti Primary School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rasuwa Tamang in Grades 1–3 Saraswati Primary and Bhimsen Primary Schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model III monolingual multi-grade grade teaching</td>
<td>Jhapa Santhal (combined class of Grades 1 and 2) Rastriya Ekta Primary School</td>
<td>One teacher teaches all subjects (except Nepali and English) in Santhal. There is a lack of Santhal-speaking teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model IV monolingual multi-grade subject teaching</td>
<td>Sunsari Uraw (combined class of Grades 2 and 3) Sharada Primary School</td>
<td>Separate teachers teach different subjects in Uraw. All teachers can speak Uraw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model V multilingual mono-grade subject teaching</td>
<td>Sunsari Tharu/Maithili, Uraw and Nepali (Grade 1) Sharada Primary School</td>
<td>Separate teachers teach different subjects in three languages. All teachers are multilingual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model VI multilingual multi-grade grade teaching</td>
<td>Sunsari Tharu/Maithili and Nepali (combined class of Grades 2 and 3) Sharada Primary School</td>
<td>One teacher teaches all subjects of two grades (except Nepali and English) in both languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sunsari Rajbansi and Nepali (combined class of Grades 1 and 2) Rastriya Ekta Primary School</td>
<td>Half-day instruction in Rajbansi and half-day instruction in Nepali by one teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Sources: DOE 2009, Phyak 2011
In order to translate these provisions into practice, the Department of Education (DoE) piloted the MTB-MLE programme for non-Nepali speaking children in eight languages and in seven schools in six different districts between 2007 and 2009. As Table 3 shows, there are two types of MTB-MLE school in terms of the number of languages: monolingual and multilingual. In monolingual schools children come from only one linguistic community whereas in a multilingual school they come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In the multilingual schools children are separated according to their mother tongues. Similarly, there are two models of teaching according to whether a ‘grade teaching’ or a ‘subject teaching’ approach is employed (see DOE 2009). In the ‘grade teaching’ system one teacher teaches all subjects (except Nepali and English) in the children’s mother tongues. Meanwhile, in the ‘subject teaching’ approach separate teachers teach different subjects. Grade teaching has been implemented in the schools where not all teachers speak the children’s mother tongues (Phyak 2011). On the other hand, the subject teaching approach is relevant in schools where all teachers have a good command of children’s mother tongues. Likewise, in the multilingual schools (e.g. Jhapa and Sunsari) children from the same linguistic backgrounds from two grades are combined and taught in their mother tongue (multi-grade).

**Multilingual education and social transformation: A case study**

Shree Deurali Lower Secondary School (SD), which is situated in Dhankuta-8, Santang, is one of schools in which the MLE programme was piloted for two years between 2007 and 2009. The school is situated in a monoethnic Athapahariya community with a population of 1,274. Consequently, all the children enrolled in the school are Athapahariyas. Athapahariyas are identified as one of the most highly marginalised groups in Nepal. Their socio-economic and education status is very low and their main source of economy is subsistence agriculture. Although these indigenous people live close to the town, they are not generally aware of what is happening outside their community (Dahal 1985, Rai 2007).

Before the implementation of the MLE programme in the school, the drop-out and class repetition rates were high. Rai (2007) shows that the net enrolment of the Athapahariya children in the school was only 72.1 per cent in 2007. Likewise, 27.4 per cent students repeated the class followed by 9.26 per cent who dropped out. Rai (2007) further argues that since Athapahariyas could not speak and understand Nepali very well, these children found it hard to learn in Nepali, the only medium of instruction in the school up to 2007. Due to this language problem, Athapahariya children were not motivated to go to school and instead they tended to help their parents in doing household activities.

The MOE implemented the MLE programme in SD in 2007 in collaboration with the Athapahariya indigenous people’s organisation, parents and teachers. The MLE adopted a bottom-up and indigenous approach to develop textbooks and other teaching materials (Hough et al. 2009, MOE 2010,
Nurmela, Awasthi & Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). The local elderly people, who possess indigenous knowledge, were placed at the centre of the programme. With the help of the experts from the MOE, local teachers, young people and indigenous activists were engaged in documenting and transcribing oral histories, stories and folktales from the Athapahariya parents. Athapahariya students and young people were engaged in drawing pictures to illustrate their family, school and community. One of the Athapahariya teachers, during an interview, said ‘I sit with the elderly people, ask them to tell stories and document them to use as teaching materials.’ He had already co-authored two books in Athapahariya.

Rather than focusing on borrowed technical knowledge as in mainstream education, the MLE programme is ‘grounded in indigenous epistemologies, metaphysics and values’ (Hough et al. 2009, 166). In this approach, indigenous knowledge about conflict resolution, maintaining social harmony and cooperation, generosity and collectivism – rather than individualism, testing, competition and diagnosis (neoliberal ideologies in education) are the guiding principles for providing education to the Athapahariya children. Focusing on the history of the Athapahariyas, their folk songs and folktales, ecology, food, cultural practices and local knowledge about medicine and healing, the MLE not only legitimised the Athapahariyas’ own knowledge as a principal component of education, but also provided space for their participation in the policy creation and implementation process.

The MLE programme has contributed immensely to bridging the gap between community and school. The school walls now have slogans in the Athapahariya language painted on them, including ‘Our school is a mother tongue school,’ ‘We have to preserve the Athapahariya language, culture and religion’ and ‘We learn our mother tongue.’ In addition, the number tables, pictures and names of various animals and the names of the months and days have also been painted on the classroom walls in Athapahariya. Out of fourteen teachers eight are Athapahariyas and the remaining six are Nepali speaking. There are two teachers who teach all subjects, except Nepali and English, in Athapahariya in Grades 1 and 2. Social Studies, Science and the Athapahariya language are taught through Athapahariya. The textbooks for Social Studies and Science have been developed by the teachers themselves. Regarding the relevance of the MLE programme one parent said:

Before introducing Athapahariya in the school, it was so hard for my children to understand what their teachers taught them. They could not freely express their feelings. By implementing MLE, a homely learning environment has been created in the school. The relationship between school and community has become closer.

Similarly, one of the Athapahariya teachers commented that ‘the MLE policy has helped us preserve the Athapahariya language, culture and identity. Now children can learn happily in the classroom.’ He further commented that ‘parents do not hesitate to come to the school as they are allowed to speak Athapahariya here.’ In the same vein, the head teacher, whose mother tongue is not Athapahariya, reiterated:
Implementation of Athapahariya in the school has created a friendly student–teacher relationship. Students come closer to their teachers and feel free to share their feelings. They have also started asking questions to the teachers in the classroom. They can easily interact with friends as well.

He also reported that the ‘drop-out rate of the students has decreased, their regularity in the school has increased and their performance has improved since we introduced Athapahariya in the school.’ This implies that MLE is not only helping Athapahariya children to achieve more in school, but also, most importantly, they experience a better learning environment as they can use their own language in the school. My own observations of classes show that students feel more comfortable expressing their ideas in Athapahariya rather than in Nepali.

Despite these advantages, some notable challenges have been reported by teachers, parents and members of the school management committee (SMC). Pointing out parents’ lack of awareness about the importance of the MLE programme, the headteacher contended that ‘Parents desire to send their children to private schools. They assume that learning English is important for their children.’ As private schools have been opened in the nearby town, some parents have already started to send their children to those schools. This has also created a dilemma among parents: whether or not the MLE programme is important for their children. For example, one parent strongly emphasised that ‘Our children should also be taught in English like in private schools.’ The Joint Evaluation of Nepal’s Education for All (NORAD 2009) has identified the same issues. It reveals that:

Some perceived that learning [in] mother tongues would hold their children back from learning Nepali [English] and thus disadvantage them further. By extension of the same argument, quite a few people consulted, wanted schools to [use English as MOI] from Grade 1 on the assumption that this would mean that children would learn English faster, regardless of practical consideration such as availability of English speaking teachers. (NORAD 2009, 20)

However, parents’ desire to have their children taught in English is an ideological issue rather than a pedagogical and academic one (Davies 2009). As the English language is the dominant language in the global economy, people around the globe, especially from developing countries, consider it as an important language to learn to help them to gain access to global opportunities. As English has symbolic capital built on its economic value, nation states often focus on teaching English from the early grades without considering local realities and availability of resources and teachers (see Coleman 2011, Nunan 2003). Similar to the Athapahariya parents, other parents around the country also want their children to be taught in English, not because their children need it but because they are heavily influenced by their peers who send their children to private schools (Phyak 2013).

What is true about the MLE programme is that the Ministry has given less attention to its sustainability since the pilot phase came to an end in 2009.
Prem Phyak (See Phyak 2012 for a critical analysis of MLE in Nepal.) The SMC members, headteacher and teachers said that the MOE must provide regular training for teachers and training on materials preparation if teaching in the mother tongue is to be effective. In this regard, the chairperson of the SMC pointed out that:

The sustainability of the MLE programme depends on the commitment of the MOE as well. There is no proper budgeting and advocacy after the completion of the Finnish Government funded pilot project. There is also lack of a mechanism to establish a proper coordination among the stakeholders. … We do not have textbooks and other relevant materials as well.

This view indicates that strong political will power and commitment from the MOE is necessary to keep this programme functioning. As argued by the SMC chair, the MOE must provide both technical and financial support to the community and the school. This further implies that while the MLE programme itself is relevant to the community, parents’ awareness about its importance should be repeatedly emphasised through regular discussions and interaction programmes with community members (NORAD 2009). This will help parents resist the sweeping influence of private schools and the ideology of English-as-education.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that Nepal has shown a significant transformation from a monolingual to a multilingual education policy. There are some significant lessons we can learn from Nepal’s MLE policy and practices. First, MLE is not only about helping indigenous children to learn effectively in school, but, more importantly, it is about upholding a larger mission of social transformation and development. By providing the indigenous people, whose voices are often unrecognised in mainstream educational policies, with a space to interact and participate in the creation and implementation of policy, MLE has ensured their inclusion in school-related activities (Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty 2009). This has encouraged the indigenous people to take greater responsibility and ownership for the overall development of education in Nepal. By recognising the agency of parents, teachers, students and the local community, MLE has redefined mainstream education policy from the local and on-the-ground perspective.

Second, the MLE programme has provided an alternative perspective on education; the perspective places local knowledge, values and beliefs at the centre. Unlike the neoliberal ideology of education, MLE considers local and indigenous people as the key source of knowledge. MLE has not only helped to document profound indigenous knowledge, but it has also legitimised their role in providing education for their own children. By focusing on multiliteracies (knowledge about local environment, language, culture and history) of indigenous children and parents (Street 2002), MLE has addressed Nepal’s multilingual and multicultural realities.
Third, there are some critical issues that emerge from the present MLE policy. Although the MOE (2010) considered MLE as an integral part of Nepalese education, it rather loosely stated that it is applicable only to ‘the schools that are willing to introduce the mother tongue’ as medium of instruction. This implies that MLE is not an integral part of education. Most often, due to the influence of the private schools, public schools are facing pressures to introduce English as the medium of instruction. The MOE has not mentioned whether or not the MLE policy is to be implemented in private schools, which are virtually all English medium. Due to the growing popularity of English medium schools throughout the country, parents are not only sending their children to expensive private schools, but also putting pressure on public schools to adopt an English medium policy. With this pressure, District Education Offices are now giving approval to public schools to switch from Nepali to English as the medium of instruction (Phyak 2012).

This development implies that without strong political will power, advocacy and awareness-raising of parents and other stakeholders about the importance of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, the MLE policy might not be as effective as it could be. However, the case discussed here shows that by helping indigenous children to join school and perform better, by promoting the participation of indigenous parents in education, by legalising the importance of local and indigenous knowledge and by recognising the agency of local teachers and parents in the creation and implementation of policy, MLE has contributed to social transformation and the development of Nepal. This policy is not only concerned with mother tongue teaching and learning but also with addressing the cultural, ethnic and historical identities and epistemology of the indigenous people. Ultimately, this policy fosters Nepal’s multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic identity and certainly contributes to the development of a cohesive and just society.

Notes
1 Nepal had a democratic government between 1950 and 1960.
2 The Panchayat system was introduced by the former King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah. In this system, the political parties were banned and power was taken over by the King. The people did not have fundamental rights such as the right to speech and the right to press freedom.
3 The CDC is an institute under the Ministry of Education which is responsible for preparing and implementing school level curricula.
4 Although the MOE does not define ‘bilingual education’, in the context of Nepal it refers to teaching the mother tongue and Nepali.

References


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