



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Mother tongue education and indigenous inclusion: Barriers, policy gaps and learning outcomes

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### Abstract

This review examines the critical role of mother tongue education in advancing inclusive education for Indigenous peoples worldwide. Despite international legal frameworks mandating Indigenous language instruction, significant barriers persist, including cultural stigmatisation, inadequate teacher training, and resource scarcity. Drawing on international scholarship and policy analysis, this review synthesises evidence on mother tongue education in Indigenous contexts, situating these within relevant legal and policy frameworks, and analyses systemic obstacles that impede implementation alongside their effects on learning outcomes. The analysis reveals that while progress has been made in Indigenous education, substantial gaps remain in funding, pedagogical capacity, and culturally responsive curriculum development. Based on a thematic synthesis of international literature, the findings underscore that effective mother tongue education requires not only policy commitment but also sustained community collaboration, leadership transformation, and resource investment. This review offers practical implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to strengthen Indigenous language education as a pathway to educational equity and cultural preservation.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education; Mother Tongue; Indigenous Education

### 1. Introduction

The use of mother tongue for Indigenous peoples in primary education represents a foundational approach in inclusive education, where language is recognised as an integral part of a student's cultural identity [1]. This recognition extends beyond mere linguistic accommodation; it acknowledges that language embodies worldviews, knowledge systems, and cultural practices essential to Indigenous children's cognitive and social development. Yet, Indigenous peoples worldwide have frequently faced neglect and suppression of their languages and cultures in schools, which in turn impacts the quality of learning [2]. The systematic marginalisation of Indigenous languages in educational settings reflects broader patterns of colonial legacy and ongoing structural inequities that continue to disadvantage Indigenous communities. This review explores policy frameworks supporting mother tongue education, examines the multifaceted barriers that impede its implementation, and analyses the documented effects on learning outcomes. By synthesising international evidence, this review aims to inform more effective, culturally responsive approaches to Indigenous education that honour linguistic rights while advancing educational equity.

### 2. Method

This review employed a thematic synthesis to analyse international scholarship on Indigenous mother tongue education. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, ERIC, and university's research finder, targeting peer-reviewed journal articles, book

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chapters, policy documents, and reports published primarily between 2009 and 2024. Search terms included combinations of "Indigenous education," "mother tongue instruction," "native language," "multilingual education," "language policy," "inclusive education," and "learning outcomes." The initial search yielded over 100 sources, which were screened for relevance based on their focus on Indigenous peoples' educational experiences, language-of-instruction policies, implementation barriers, and documented learning outcomes. Priority was given to empirical studies, policy analyses, and theoretical frameworks from diverse geographical contexts. The final corpus comprised 40 sources that provided robust evidence on legal frameworks, systemic barriers (stigmatisation, teacher training, resources), and effects on learning outcomes. The synthesis adopted a thematic synthesis, organising findings into coherent categories that shed light on both challenges and promising practices in Indigenous mother tongue education globally.

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### 3. Legal Framework for Indigenous Mother Tongue Education

Key international instruments include the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 (ILO 169), which emphasise that children in Indigenous groups should be taught to read and write in their own language [3,4]. These frameworks establish mother tongue education not merely as a pedagogical preference but as a fundamental human right grounded in principles of self-determination, cultural preservation, and educational equity. Several national legal frameworks highlighted in many studies have mandated local languages in different countries as the medium of instruction in primary school and as a prerequisite to studying the official language of the country. For instance, countries such as Papua New Guinea, Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, and Sweden), and the Philippines have decreed the use of mother tongue in primary schools [5-7]. However, Nakata [8] argues that despite efforts from international agencies, governments still impose many limits on Indigenous peoples trying to revive and use their languages, and that one major issue is the failure to provide sufficient sustained funding. This gap between policy rhetoric and implementation reality reflects deeper tensions in how nation-states balance linguistic diversity with standardisation pressures, which reveals that legal frameworks alone are insufficient without corresponding political will and resource allocation.

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### 4. Barriers to Mother Tongue Education

#### 4.1. Stigmatisation and Cultural Bias

In schools, home languages are largely excluded from the curriculum in various countries and that while there are policies and efforts to acknowledge Indigenous languages and cultures, their integration into the core curriculum is limited and often superficial [9]. The dominant language is given higher status and privilege, while Indigenous languages and cultures are viewed as outdated and fading, a bias that is reinforced through school events, holidays, and the implicit messages in the curriculum [10]. The pursuit of equal opportunities in language education often leads to standardised, culturally dominant national language instruction, neglecting individual learning needs and overlooking the social disparities faced by Indigenous communities [11]. This linguistic hierarchy not only devalues Indigenous knowledge systems but also creates psychological barriers for Indigenous students, who may internalise negative attitudes toward their own languages and cultures. Critical scholarship on language-of-instruction choices demonstrates that these decisions are never politically neutral but rather reflect and reproduce power relations that systematically disadvantage Indigenous learners [12].

Hollie [13] argued that for educators to be culturally and linguistically responsive, they must adjust their beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge to see students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets rather than deficits. For instance, Cavalieri et al. [14] emphasised that educators can establish a "working alliance" with students through pedagogical approaches that help students understand and accept that learning about racial and Indigenous justice is an integral part of their education. Notably, Jacob et al. [11] stressed the importance of pedagogical methods and school leadership that adapt to cultural contexts. In Japan, there is an inclusive education project called 'Urespa,' or mutual nurturing; its mission is to promote co-living and harmony by educating both the Ainu people and the majority of Japanese students to accept their differences [15]. These examples illustrate that overcoming stigmatisation requires not only policy change but also fundamental shifts in pedagogical practice and institutional culture that position Indigenous languages and knowledge as central to educational excellence.

#### 4.2. Teacher Training

Khanyile and Awung [16] revealed insufficient training in using the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction, with Kwazulu-Natal teachers only receiving it as a subject during university. This is also evident in parts of Southeast Asia where teachers are not specifically trained to use the mother tongue in education [17,18]. Similarly, Sámi

teacher training, especially in using and creating instructional materials in the native language, has been a challenge in Scandinavian countries [19]. Sajat et al. [20] argued that in addition to cultural knowledge and enhanced teacher training, teachers need strong interpersonal skills and proficiency in the students' native language to encourage Indigenous students to continue their education. Notably, through the initiatives of partnerships in the Philippines, teachers have been equipped to design curricula and create educational materials [21]. Further, they have established 'Sagu-ilaw', a school focused on training education assistants who can teach children in their communities [22]. These capacity-building efforts demonstrate that effective teacher preparation for Indigenous language education requires more than linguistic competence; it demands deep cultural knowledge, community embeddedness, and ongoing professional development that honours Indigenous pedagogies.

### 4.3. Resources

Mother-tongue instruction often lacks instructional and learning materials in Indigenous languages, and such materials may include books and digital resources [23-25]. Also, the lack of teachers who speak the native language and high turnover rates present significant obstacles to Indigenous education [26-28]. Moreover, national curricula often lack relevance to Indigenous peoples, posing a challenge in curriculum development [11]. Fan and Liu [29] explored leadership in Indigenous education, providing a foundation for future research to address various challenges, including resource shortages. To transform schools for Indigenous students, academics and practitioners must reflect on how leadership is conceptualised and practiced in schools and communities nationwide [30]. Remarkably, progress has been made in parts of Latin America that involves curriculum development and training teachers to strengthen Indigenous languages [31]. These resource challenges are not merely technical problems but reflect deeper issues of political prioritisation and investment. Addressing them requires sustained commitment to Indigenous self-determination in education and recognition that Indigenous language education is not a marginal concern but a core pillar in achieving education equity and inclusion.

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## 5. Learning Outcomes

Language socialisation theory emphasises that effective learning is shaped by a community's cultural beliefs about raising children, including ideas about identity, social interactions, emotions, knowledge, and development, which are conveyed through communication in everyday life [32]. It is therefore essential for the language and communication practices of teachers and students to be aligned. Research on language in Indigenous schools shows that differences in language significantly impact learning outcomes and contribute to communication problems for both teachers and students [33]. For instance, in Southern Thailand, Premsrirat and Burarungrot [34] found the lack of official recognition for the language of Indigenous people and the requirement to study in the national language led to the lowest academic achievement in the country. Research indicates that mother-tongue education is crucial for inclusion and high-quality learning, as it enhances learning outcomes, academic performance, and motivation to continue studies [35-37]. In line with this perspective, Maeda and Okano [15] found positive learning outcomes in the use of mother tongue in schools, which include improvement of self-image of students and development of students' leadership skills.

Beyond academic metrics, Indigenous-language education contributes to sustainable self-determination by strengthening cultural identity, community cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission [38]. This broader conception of educational success recognises that learning outcomes encompass not only literacy and numeracy but also cultural competence, linguistic vitality, and the capacity for Indigenous communities to maintain and transmit their knowledge systems. A holistic, more-than-language approach to Indigenous education acknowledges that language instruction must be embedded within broader efforts to support Indigenous children's well-being, cultural connection, and sense of belonging [39]. These multidimensional outcomes underscore that mother tongue education serves not only individual learners but also the collective interests of Indigenous communities in cultural continuity and self-determination.

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## 6. Implications for Practice

The evidence reviewed in this article yields several critical implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders committed to advancing Indigenous mother tongue education:

- *For Educators and School Leaders:* Implementing effective mother tongue education requires more than linguistic accommodation. It demands reorientation of pedagogical practice toward culturally responsive teaching. Educators must actively work to dismantle linguistic hierarchies within their classrooms and schools. For instance, positioning Indigenous languages as languages of academic instruction and inquiry rather than merely subjects of study. This includes developing culturally grounded assessment practices that honour

Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. School leaders must prioritise the recruitment and retention of Indigenous educators and create professional learning communities (PLC) that support ongoing development of culturally responsive pedagogies. Establishing partnerships with Indigenous communities is essential, which ensures that educational approaches are co-designed and reflect community priorities and values [40].

- *For Teacher Education Programs:* Pre-service and in-service teacher education must incorporate substantial preparation in Indigenous language pedagogy, cultural competence, and community engagement. Teacher education programs should partner with Indigenous communities to develop practicum experiences that immerse teacher candidates in Indigenous educational contexts and provide mentorship from experienced Indigenous educators. Specialised training in developing and adapting curriculum materials for Indigenous language instruction is essential, alongside preparation in bilingual and multilingual pedagogical approaches.
- *For Policymakers:* Legal frameworks supporting Indigenous language education must be accompanied by adequate, sustained funding mechanisms that support teacher preparation, curriculum development, materials production, and infrastructure development. Policies should recognise Indigenous communities as primary stakeholders in educational decision-making and establish governance structures that ensure Indigenous self-determination in education. Education language policies should be flexible enough to reflect diverse Indigenous contexts, while keeping mother tongue education as a core principle.
- *For Indigenous Communities:* Community leadership in Indigenous language education is essential for ensuring cultural authenticity and sustainability. Communities should be supported in developing their own educational visions, curricula, and assessment frameworks that reflect their values and priorities. Intergenerational language transmission initiatives that connect elders, parents, and children can reinforce school-based language education. Communities may benefit from networking with other Indigenous communities engaged in language revitalisation to share strategies, resources, and mutual support.
- *For Researchers:* Future research should employ methodologies that honour Indigenous research paradigms and position Indigenous communities as partners and knowledge holders rather than merely research subjects. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of mother tongue education on academic achievement, cultural identity, and community well-being are needed. Comparative studies can examine successful practices across contexts to find shared principles, while recognising each context's uniqueness.

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## 7. Conclusion

Although progress has been made globally, there is still a long way to go before ensuring every learner's right to education in their mother tongue [35]. Through inclusive practices, school leaders and educators can overcome these barriers by adopting appropriate pedagogical methods that strengthen Indigenous identities. However, this requires effective leadership that promotes collaboration with the community and secures adequate funding. High-quality education to improve learning outcomes, similar to those in non-Indigenous schools, is also crucial. The evidence synthesised in this review demonstrates that mother tongue education is not merely a matter of linguistic preference but a fundamental component of educational equity, cultural preservation, and Indigenous self-determination. Effective implementation requires coordinated action across multiple levels: international and national policy frameworks that recognise and protect linguistic rights; adequate and sustained resource investment; comprehensive teacher preparation; culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy; and meaningful community partnership and leadership. Without sustained support, mother tongue education may remain symbolic rather than truly transformative.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest. This work was conducted as one of the requirements for my Master's degree.

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