Multilingual Classrooms: Paving the way for Inclusive Education

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Abstract: In 21st century, English serves as a main language for trade, education and employment. It is also an essential skill that helps in achieving success at global level. However, knowledge of only one language is not enough in this diverse world. India being a diverse country consist a variety of languages spoken on daily basis. Therefore, it is important to teach students by using these regional languages. The present paper explores the importance of multilingual education in fostering inclusive classroom. An overview of multilingual education and its role in addressing the needs of diverse students have been discussed in the paper. A detailed review is also given in the paper discussing the impact of multilingualism on cognitive skills, academic achievement and cultural appreciation. Different approaches of multilingualism in India, challenges and role of stakeholders are also discussed in the present paper.

Keywords: *Multilingualism, Inclusive Education, Multilingual Classrooms.*

Introduction

Quality and accessibility of education depends on several factors such as motivation, resources, trained staff, teaching material, location etc. One of these factors is language which significantly impacts the quality of education. Language also has an important part in creating effective communication and understanding in the classroom. In India, there are 22 official languages and many regional languages. The classrooms of our country are full of diverse students and their educational needs are also diverse. It is not appropriate to teach every child by using a single language as more than half of the world's population is bilingual. It is believed that if the classroom instruction is done in the regional or mother language then the output will also be great. By keeping this in mind, 3 language formula was introduced. This formula stated that children should be taught in their regional language and other languages should be taught in

order to make students linguistically competent. Later on, it was noted that in the era of globalization new teaching approaches should be introduced in order to achieve the goal of quality education for all.

Therefore, the concept of multilingual education was introduced to bring inclusivity in classrooms. This concept involves using various languages as tools of teaching and learning within educational environments. Multilingualism also enhances inclusive education by offering a chance to learn in children's mother tongue and by allowing them to voice their perception. Inclusive education is important as it refers to the regular accommodation and education for children with different needs. The basic premise of inclusive education is that all students learn and participate in schools and community life. It helps in keeping all the diverse learners in mainstream education by providing instruction according to their needs. Certain minority communities in India prefer to study in their mother tongue or regional language. In addition to this, increased mobility has also resulted into diverse classrooms. Hence, multilingual classrooms are becoming more prominent in India. Multilingualism can bring inclusion by preserving the spoken languages of children with and without diverse needs. It helps in promoting development, communication skills, national unity and cultural appreciation. Dash (2018) stated that multilingualism can be implemented by teaching elementary children through bilingual context. It also diminishes the discrimination against special individuals. The Right to Education Act (2009) and NEP(2020) also prioritizes the use of mother language in classrooms to create an inclusive classroom.

Review of Related Literature

In order to achieve the goal of inclusive education, it is important to introduce various teaching techniques. One of these techniques that is relevant in today's era is multilingual classrooms. It is a fundamental element that has the power to make education inclusive for all (Reeves, 2006). It is possible for the teachers to achieve inclusivity by addressing the individual needs of the students. The implementation of Multilingual pedagogy has the potential to increase inclusivity and quality of education (Pulinx et al., 2015). Kiramba (2016) reported that educators should include the various resources of teaching (multilingualism) in order to enhance the cognitive

development of students with diverse needs. Another study stated that the knowledge of mother tongue helps in making learning easier and relatable to the students who belongs to different categories. Teaching in mother language helps the student in becoming more confident and expressive. Students with knowledge of different languages have broad perspective about world (Dash, 2018). Furthermore, incorporating this approach in existing curriculum may enhance the teaching experience and also act as an assessment tool to examine the views of students. (Schissel, et al., 2019). Alisaari et al., (2019) stated that in order to make the most out of this resource (multilingualism), the teacher must have a deep knowledge about student's language ability.

Bisai and Singh (2020) reported that it is important to adapt multilevel pedagogy in classrooms as it helps in the better accommodation of students who belongs to different language backgrounds. Furthermore, it also promotes inclusiveness and accessibility to education. In their study, Christion et al., (2021) stated that Multilingual Approach to Diversity in Education (MADE) has many key points that can help in promoting the inclusive classrooms. These points are creating multilingual spaces in classrooms, increasing interaction in different languages and focusing on languages. This approach also urges students to embrace different culture and linguistic diversity. It fosters positive attitude towards other people's beliefs and cultures (Ciges, et al., 2021). It was further noted that multilingual approaches also play a significant role in achieving the goal of multilingual teaching and is a key component in achieving quality inclusive education. It also plays a significant role in developing multilingual behaviours and attitude among students (Aguirre at al., 2021; Failasofah, et al., 2022; Reily et al, 2022). To summarize, multilingualism in classroom helps the teachers in advancing education by harnessing the linguistic diversity present among students.

Multilingual Classrooms in India

India is an economically growing country with a variety of cultures, traditions and languages. Keeping the globalization in mind, many Indian schools have started to offer their courses in English at elementary level. However, this approach was not beneficial for students learning in government schools. They failed to comprehend the subjects as they could not understand the

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mode of instruction (MOI). The majority of elementary classroom are multilingual because of the high level of migration between Indian states. It is the basic human right of every citizen of a country to get equal and qualitative education. Factoring this, our country's government has taken several steps to ensure the educational welfare of every citizen. Several policies, reservations, budget reservations and schemes for special needs citizens have been formed by the Government of India. Due to this linguistic diversity, policy makers have introduced many policies:

1. **Three Language Formula:** The Indian Education System follows a three-language formula. It involves the use of regional language, dominant language (Hindi or English) and a third language. This formula aims at improving the linguistic abilities and competence of students. It also reduces the discrimination, provides a sense of belongingness, creates trust, promotes self-confidence, and inculcate strong identity. Dash (2018) reported that multilingualism (use of mother tongue) creates awareness among students regarding their community, culture, country and lays a strong foundation of being a good human being. Learning various subjects in different languages also allows them to be competent enough to meet the global requirements in higher education.

2. **Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE):** In recent years, using mother tongue as an instruction medium has gained recognition. Through this approach, instruction is provided by using mother tongue in early years of education. It allows the students to be curious and encourages their need to explore, discover and develop understanding about themselves. The core group that benefits from multilingualism and inclusive classrooms are disabled children, girls, women, and minority language groups.

3. **The MultiLila Project**

   The MultiLila Project was introduced in India in 2020. This project was run in Delhi, Patna and Hyderabad on students of IV and V standards. The aim of the project was to report the importance of multilingualism for inclusive schools at primary level. It was focused on capturing the inequalities created for students in government schools because of single language delivery system, socioeconomic disadvantage and gender differences. In every region, different language is spoken and children are most comfortable in using their regional language for the early education. This project focused on assessing the skills and knowledge

of students in different areas and improve them by applying multilingual techniques. A classroom observation tool was developed to assess the various skills of the students. The assessment was done on basic literacy, numerical skills, reading comprehension and reasoning skills. **The findings of this project are discussed below:**

a. **Importance of Regional Language**: It was revealed that children were more comfortable in learning through their mother or regional language. It was also reported that students from low socio-economic background faced problems in understating the subjects when taught through English.

b. **Use of Different Language for Development of Students:** Language mixing should be normalized to ensure the good reading comprehension and concept understanding for students.

c. **Teacher's Training:** It is crucial to provide training to teachers on how to successfully use multilingual approach in lecture preparation. Lessons should be developed so that different languages can be used in a single lecture according to need of the topic. This can lead to better monitoring of the amount of language input in less familiar languages and improving comprehension levels.

d. **Proper Support of Schools:** can result in equal opportunities for students even from low socio-economic backgrounds.

e. **Introduction of Global Languages:** It was suggested that global languages such as English should be introduced from Std. 1. This will allow the students to become comfortable with teacher and lead to better adjustment. It was noted that English medium instruction was inadequate to support learning. Students had little knowledge of english which resulted into gaps in learning.

f. **Cognitive Benefits:** Children who come from diverse backgrounds or have parents who speak more than 2 languages show better cognitive abilities.

4. **Inclusive Education: Multilingualism plays a crucial role in fostering the inclusive education in India by accommodating the needs of students. Use of diverse teaching material can increase the inclusion of students.**

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Advantages of Multilingual Classrooms

These classrooms are beneficial for students as they contribute to the holistic development of students. Multilingual classrooms prepare them to thrive in the increasingly diverse and interconnected world.
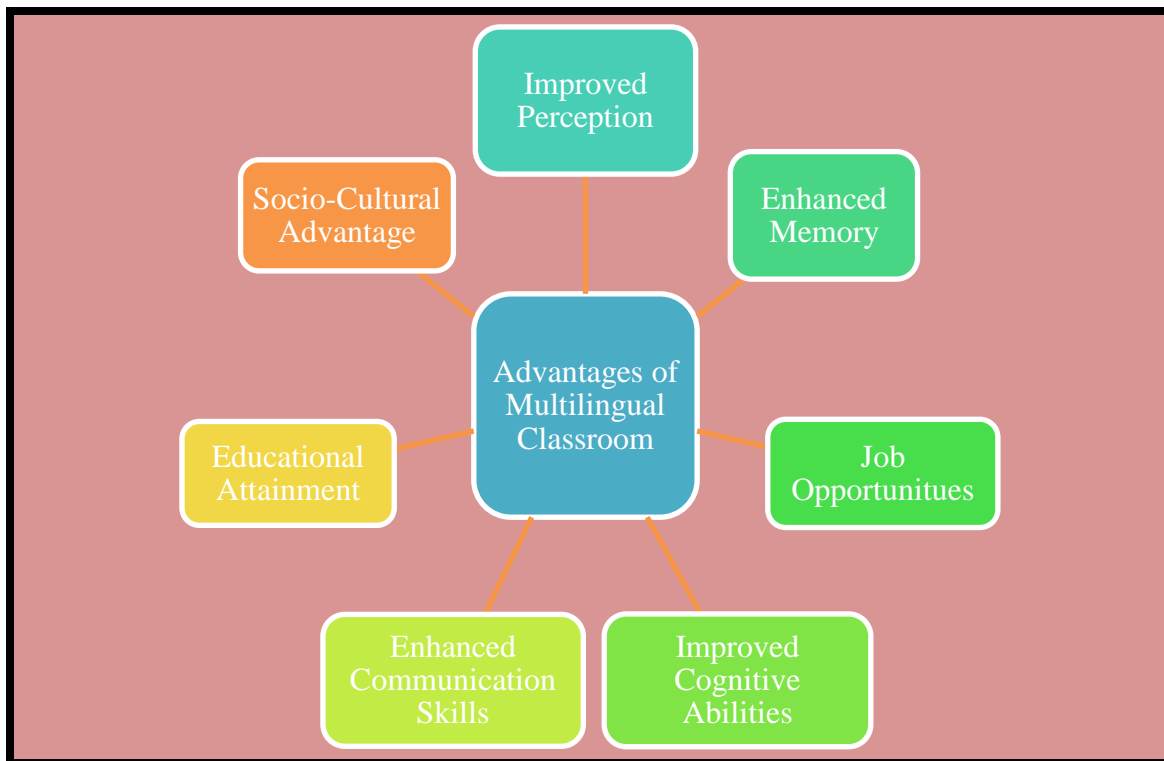

Fig. 1: Advantages of Multilingual Classrooms

1. **Improved Perception towards the World:** Learner with diverse needs and proficiency in 2 or more languages will have improved perception towards the world. It aids the students in cultivating empathy and respect towards each other. The students will be able to learn about other people's cultures, traditions and perspectives thus creating an inclusive society.
2. **Enhanced Cognitive Abilities:** This approach nurtures the ability of thinking, creativity and problem solving among students. Learning in familiar languages allows a student to enhance their comprehension and retention. Multilingual approaches also help in learning second

languages thus increasing their working memory. These classrooms stimulate the brain to switch between two languages requiring students to be alert all the time and improves their cognitive flexibility. Cognitive skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving are enhanced by this approach.

3. **Job Opportunities at Global Level:** Multilingual individuals are more in demand for employment as compared to the monolingual individuals. Knowledge of different languages allows them to become better communicator.

4. **Enhanced Communication Skills:** learning different languages allows the students to communicate themselves effectively in different situations. They become more capable at navigating through language barriers.

5. **Increased Educational Attainment:** students with the knowledge of two or more languages tend to perform better in academics as compared to their monolingual counterparts. Improved vocabulary helps in their literacy skills and overall achievement.

6. **Promotion of Multiculturalism:** lingual and cultural diversity are addressed and celebrated in multilingual classrooms. This helps in creating the inclusive and welcoming learning environments for students.

To summarize, multilingualism offers numerous benefits such as increased cultural understanding, vocabulary, academic achievement, cognitive development, communication skills, language acquisition, and promotion of multiculturalism. The students who learn from this approach tends to appreciate diversity, have empathy and improved perception towards other people.

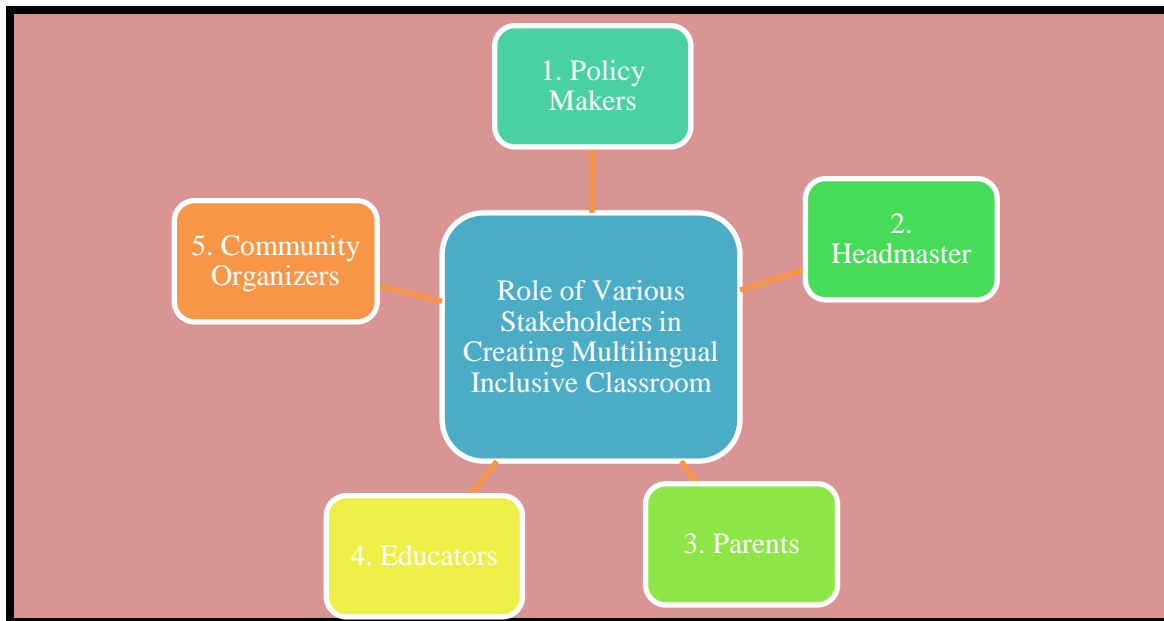## Role of Various Stakeholders in Creating Multilingual Inclusive Classroom

Fig. 2: Role of Various Stakeholders in Creating Multilingual Inclusive Classrooms

1. **Role of Policy Makers**

- Updated curriculum for elementary education should be provided in order to improve the linguistic knowledge of students.
- Various assessment tools should be developed to assess the linguistic skills of students.
- Policy makers should provide core funding and initiatives to schools in order to support multilingual learners.
- The barriers such as inequal resource distribution, language related discrimination, and geographical barriers should be taken into account.
- Provide flexibility in the cases of teaching the foreign languages.
- Collaboration efforts with other stakeholders should be done to ensure the proper implementation of policies.

2. **Role of Headmaster**

- Parents of disabled children should be involved in order to get most benefit of the multilingual program.
- Provide trained mentors for ensuring the proper implementation of program.

- Updated study materials, resources and in-service training to the class teachers should be provided on regular basis.

- Provisions should be made for making formal and informal learning of languages mandatory.

- Multilingual teaching approaches should be introduced to parents also in order to involve every stakeholder.

- To provide positive learning environment for children with diverse needs.

- Teachers should be motivated to collaborate with each other and document their findings in order to improve the learning through multilingual classrooms.

3. Role of Parents

- Parents should promote language acquisition at home through books and videos.

- Parents should cultivate an environment that appreciates diversity and the acquisition of languages as a life skill.

- Parents should engage in cultural exchange initiatives or local language clubs.

- Family should collaborate with teachers to support their child's learning development and academic achievement.

- They should advocate for their child's linguistic and cultural rights in the school community.

4. Role of Educators

- They should pursue professional development opportunities to refine their skills in multilingual teaching approaches.

- Engage with the community to grasp the cultural backgrounds of their students.

- Teachers should design instructional strategies by keeping the diverse background of students in mind.

- They should foster and support an inclusive classroom where all languages are respected.

5. Community Organisers

- They should provide supplementary resources and resource persons for introducing the multilingual approaches in schools.

- Seminars and workshop should be organized to improve the enrolment of diverse needs students.

The participation of all stakeholders i.e., parents, teachers, headmaster and policymakers are required to create a multilingual inclusive classroom. Teacher's job is to design an instructional material suitable for all children and other stakeholders should do their part to construct and implement policies. Furthermore, parents should collaborate with school staff on regular basis to covey them about the cultural rights of their children. Together, they can foster an environment where linguistic and cultural diversity is valued.

Challenges in Creating Multilingual Classrooms

1. **Difficulty with Families:** Sometimes conversing with families who speak different language is a challenge for teachers.
2. **Lack of Qualified Teachers:** One of the challenges of multilingualism is shortage of qualified teachers. Proper training is required for the teachers to become fluent in several dialect and cultures. Teaching in a class with many languages can be tricky. In this setup, teachers often deal with challenges in making sure everyone understands.
3. **Impact on Student's Achievement:** Acquisition of multiple languages can negatively impact the student's academic performance as it requires constant attention of mind. Students, each speaking different languages, might find it hard to grasp and express ideas, leading to gaps in learning
4. **High Cost of Learning:** Learning a new language is not affordable by everyone. Providing training to teachers also requires budget and efforts from the government.

Conclusion

To conclude, multilingualism present an opportunity to foster inclusive classrooms and in promoting qualitative education, especially in linguistically diverse country like India. By using languages as a tool for teaching and assessment, multilingual classrooms accommodate the different requirements of students including girls, women, minorities and students with special needs. Multilingualism results into enhanced communication skills, understanding about culture and respect towards other people. However, some challenges are also present in creating the multilingual inclusive classroom. It is possible to overcome these challenges by collaboration

between various stakeholders of education. By collaborating effectively, they can create an inclusive society where every student feels valued and empowered to succeed.

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