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Mental Health and Peer Relationships in Multilingual Classrooms: A Review of Empirical Studies from the Indian Context

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Abstract:

This empirical review examines recent field-based studies exploring the intersection of mental health, peer relationships, and language diversity among adolescents in multilingual classrooms, with a focus on the Indian educational context. Drawing from a range of empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, the paper highlights key findings related to language-based exclusion, psychological outcomes, peer dynamics, and institutional interventions. The review underscores a pressing need for inclusive policies, school social work integration, and culturally responsive pedagogy to address language-related disparities in mental well-being. It also identifies methodological trends and gaps, calling for intersectional and longitudinal approaches in future research. This paper aims to contribute to academic dialogue and practice-oriented solutions that make India's multilingual classrooms more inclusive and psychosocially safe spaces for all learners.

Keywords: multilingual education, adolescent mental health, peer dynamics, school social work, empirical review, India

Introduction: India's educational landscape is marked by immense linguistic diversity, with over 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects spoken across regions. While this multilingualism is a cultural strength, it also presents pedagogical and psychosocial challenges, particularly in government schools serving diverse populations. For adolescents, language proficiency not only affects academic outcomes but also plays a critical role in social belonging and emotional stability. Students who are not fluent in the dominant language of instruction often struggle with comprehension, engagement, and confidence in the classroom.

The rise in mental health concerns among school-going adolescents, including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, is increasingly being linked to these structural and communicative barriers. Peer acceptance, self-expression, and academic participation are all deeply influenced by language use and the attitudes surrounding it. Over the past decade, a

growing body of empirical research has focused on how language diversity impacts mental health and peer relationships in school settings. This paper synthesizes such findings from the Indian context to identify dominant trends, methodological strengths and weaknesses, and future research directions.

Method of Review: This review includes peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024. Inclusion criteria required that studies:

- Focus on school-age populations (preferably adolescents)
- Be conducted in multilingual or linguistically diverse settings
- Address mental health, social integration, or peer relationships
- Be based on primary data (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods)

Sources were collected from databases such as JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Shodhganga. A total of 28 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed thematically. Each study was evaluated based on methodology, sample size, region, target population, and thematic focus.

Language Diversity and Learning Outcomes: Annamalai (2014) and Mohanty (2019) argue that subtractive bilingualism, where the dominant school language replaces the home language, contributes to cognitive overload and emotional dissonance. This can hinder cognitive development and limit classroom participation. Several studies confirm that students who do not speak the medium of instruction at home struggle with comprehension, academic performance, and self-expression. For example, Kumar and Sarangapani (2021) found that tribal students in rural Gujarat were often hesitant to speak in class due to fear of linguistic embarrassment, which correlated with reduced motivation and low academic self-efficacy.

In another study, Shah and Patel (2018) conducted classroom observations in semi-urban schools in Maharashtra and found that teachers often ignored the participation of students who spoke in non-standard Hindi or Marathi. This alienation led to higher absenteeism and a drop in classroom engagement over time. These studies underline the urgent need for inclusive language policies and teacher training programs that respect students' linguistic identities.

Peer Relationships in Multilingual Classrooms: Studies by Rao and Mohanty (2020) and Basumatary (2018) highlight the role of peer dynamics in shaping classroom experiences. Linguistic minorities frequently face teasing, exclusion from group activities, or are stereotyped based on their accent or dialect. Such experiences can negatively impact their social confidence and self-worth. Quantitative data from Bhattacharya (2020) showed that 36% of Urdu-speaking adolescents in Delhi government schools experienced language-based peer rejection.

In contrast, schools that promoted multilingual group work and inclusive co-curricular activities reported better social integration and higher peer acceptance scores among minority students. For instance, Mehra (2019) documented a case study from a Delhi school where the introduction of a "Language Day"—where students were encouraged to teach basic phrases in their mother tongue—led to improved cultural sensitivity and reduced language-related bullying.

Psychological Impact of Language-Based Exclusion **Linguistic:** The marginalization contributes significantly to emotional distress. Mental health assessments in studies by Thomas et al. (2017) and Chauhan (2021) revealed elevated symptoms of anxiety, low self-esteem, and depressive tendencies among students who felt alienated due to language barriers. Importantly, these effects were more pronounced among first-generation learners, girls, and those from Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste backgrounds, suggesting the need for intersectional analysis.

A mixed-methods study by Menon (2022) demonstrated that language-related school stress was a key predictor of psychosomatic symptoms among tribal students in Maharashtra. Students reported headaches, stomach aches, and insomnia, which correlated strongly with their feelings of isolation and difficulty in understanding lessons. These findings point to the urgent need to address language-based exclusion not only as an academic issue but also as a serious public mental health concern.

Institutional Interventions and the Role of Social Work: The role of institutional support has received growing attention. Allen-Meares (2007) emphasizes the potential of school social work in addressing psychosocial barriers to learning. Indian studies echo this sentiment but also reveal systemic gaps. A study by Pillai and Das (2023) across 15 government schools in

Kerala showed that only 10% had a dedicated counselor, and none employed trained school social workers.

However, where social work-inspired practices were introduced—even informally—positive outcomes were observed. For example, Singh and Banerjee (2020) documented how peer mentoring programs reduced absenteeism among migrant students in Rajasthan. Similarly, Sharma (2021) found that student-led cultural events helped bridge linguistic divides and foster mutual respect. Schools that implemented language-bridging programs, multilingual reading corners, and inclusive announcements saw improved student morale and reduced dropout rates. This underscores the importance of multi-tiered support systems involving teachers, social workers, and community stakeholders.

7. Synthesis of Findings Across studies, several consistent patterns emerge:

- Language diversity often correlates with academic underperformance and social exclusion.
- Linguistic minority students are more vulnerable to mental health issues, especially when institutional supports are lacking.
- Inclusive pedagogical practices and peer support structures significantly improve psychosocial outcomes.
- There is a severe shortage of institutional support, particularly in public schools.

At the same time, studies vary in methodological robustness. While some employ rigorous statistical tools and large samples (e.g., Bhattacharya 2020), others rely on small, non-representative samples or anecdotal data. Qualitative research provides rich narrative insight but often lacks generalizability. There is also limited longitudinal research tracking long-term psychosocial impacts of linguistic marginalization. Moreover, relatively few studies include teachers' perspectives, which could provide a fuller understanding of classroom dynamics.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While the current body of literature offers valuable insights, there remain significant gaps that call for sustained empirical attention and theoretical refinement.

Intersectionality: One of the most urgent gaps lies in understanding how language interacts with other identity markers such as gender, caste, religion, socio-economic status, and disability. The intersectional disadvantages faced by students from multiple marginalized backgrounds remain underexplored. For instance, a tribal girl from a low-income background who is not fluent in the medium of instruction may face multiple layers of exclusion—academic, social, and emotional—which collectively affect her mental health and sense of self-worth (Mohanty 2019, p. 78). Research that foregrounds intersectionality would contribute to a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of student vulnerability and resilience.

Longitudinal Studies: Most existing studies offer cross-sectional insights, capturing only a moment in time. Longitudinal research is essential to trace the cumulative effects of language-related inclusion or exclusion over time. Such studies could illuminate how early experiences of linguistic marginalization influence long-term academic performance, emotional development, and peer identity formation (Thomas et al. 2017, p. 19; Menon 2022, p. 213). Longitudinal designs would also help examine the sustained impact of interventions like peer mentoring or bilingual support programs.

Urban vs. Rural Settings: India's vast geographic diversity necessitates comparative research across urban, semi-urban, and rural school contexts. While urban multilingual schools may face challenges related to migrant populations and overcrowding, rural schools often contend with inadequate resources, monolingual teaching, and low exposure to institutional support systems (Kumar and Sarangapani 2021, p. 156). Understanding these contextual differences is crucial for designing locally responsive policies and pedagogies.

Role of Digital Media: The rapid digitization of education, particularly post-COVID-19, has created new dimensions of exclusion for linguistic minority students. Language proficiency increasingly determines access to digital resources, comprehension of online content, and participation in virtual classrooms (Chauhan 2021, p. 122). There is a pressing need for empirical studies that examine how language shapes digital learning experiences and contributes to academic or emotional stress in multilingual contexts.

Teacher Training and Pedagogy: Teachers are key mediators of student experience, yet few studies explore how prepared they are to handle linguistic diversity. Many lack formal training in inclusive or multilingual pedagogy, and unconscious language bias may affect how they perceive and support students from minority language backgrounds (Rao and Mohanty 2020,

p. 225). Empirical evaluations of teacher training programs, classroom language use, and curriculum reform efforts would offer actionable insights into building equitable and empathetic school environments.

Conclusion Empirical evidence clearly indicates that linguistic diversity in Indian schools, while culturally enriching, presents serious psychosocial challenges for students, especially those from minority language backgrounds. Mental health concerns, peer alienation, and academic disengagement are prevalent among students who struggle with the dominant language of instruction. However, inclusive classroom strategies, peer mentoring, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and institutional support through school social work have proven effective in mitigating these issues. Addressing language-related mental health challenges requires a multipronged approach. Policy reforms must prioritize inclusive education frameworks, curriculum adaptations, and resource allocation for school counseling and social work. At the practitioner level, teachers and school administrators need to be trained to recognize signs of emotional distress linked to language exclusion and respond with empathy and strategy. Future research and policy must focus on integrating linguistic equity into mental health interventions, thereby ensuring that multilingualism becomes a bridge rather than a barrier in India's classrooms.

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