



Teacher agency for Indigenous languages in education: A decolonial perspective from Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the role of teacher agency for Indigenous language education through a decolonial lens. Dominant views and practices of educational development and language policy often exclude teachers as mere implementers of top-down policy. Yet there is growing recognition of their crucial role in shaping policy at the micro level. Drawing on the example of four male teachers from Nepal, the authors examine how teachers develop and use their agency to create spaces for Indigenous languages. Building on a critical and decolonial perspective, the authors conceptualise teacher agency in language policy as a collective, political and relational phenomenon which extends well beyond the classroom. Their approach emphasises community connection and accountability, calling into question individual-centric frameworks. They conclude by calling for critical dialogue with Indigenous language teachers and a decolonial re-evaluation of teacher agency that respects Indigenous knowledge systems as a prerequisite for linguistically sustaining education.

Keywords comparative education · language policy · multilingual education · teacher agency · decolonial theory · Nepal

Résumé

L'agentivité des enseignants pour les langues autochtones dans l'éducation : un point de vue décolonial du Népal – Le présent article explore le rôle de l'agentivité des enseignants dans l'enseignement des langues autochtones à travers un prisme décolo-

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nial. Les conceptions et pratiques dominantes en matière de développement éducatif et de politiques linguistiques réduisent souvent les enseignants au rôle de simples exécutants de politiques imposées d'en haut. Néanmoins, on reconnaît de plus en plus leur rôle crucial dans l'élaboration des politiques au microniveau. Les auteurs prennent l'exemple de quatre enseignants masculins népalais afin d'examiner comment ils développent et exercent leur agentivité pour créer des espaces dédiés aux langues autochtones. Ils partent d'un point de vue critique et décolonial pour conceptualiser l'agentivité des enseignants dans les politiques linguistiques en tant que phénomène collectif, politique et relationnel, qui dépasse largement le cadre de la salle de classe. Leur approche met l'accent sur les liens avec la communauté et sur la redevabilité, remettant ainsi en question les cadres centrés sur l'individu. Ils concluent en appelant à un dialogue critique avec les enseignants de langues autochtones et, comme condition préalable à une éducation linguistiquement durable, ils préconisent une réévaluation décoloniale de l'agentivité des enseignants respectant les systèmes de savoirs autochtones.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in the adoption of inclusive language and education policies, in alignment with international agendas such as the United Nations' International Decade of Indigenous Languages (UN 2019), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2007), and the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015; see also Harding-Esch and Coleman 2021). These policies emphasise the use of Indigenous languages and multilingualism as mediums of instruction, particularly for the early years, drawing on the well-documented link between Indigenous languages and learning (e.g., Walter and Dekker 2011; Wawire and Kim 2018), engagement (e.g., Lowe et al. 2019; Smits et al. 2008), and wellbeing (e.g., Dockery 2020; Taff et al. 2018), while also seeking to embrace linguistic human rights and social justice (e.g., Piller 2016; Skutnabb-Kangas 2009; Tikly 2016).

While state policies mark significant milestones in the acknowledgement of linguistic rights as an indicator of political will, the gap between policy intent and actual impact remains a considerable challenge (Lo Bianco 2010). Language policy scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the crucial role of local actors, particularly teachers, in bridging the implementation gap (Johnson 2013; Ricento 2000). While traditional approaches to language policy have viewed micro- and meso-level actors as mere “cogs in the policy wheel” (Johnson 2013, p. 99), there is growing recognition of the need for teachers and other local actors to “fill up” what Nancy Hornberger terms the “ideological and implementational space” created by supportive policy through action at the levels of classroom, school and community (Hornberger 2005). Teachers are increasingly recognised as the “final arbiter of the language education policy and its implementation” (Mohanty et al. 2010, p. 228). For this reason, there is a rising interest in the role of teachers' agency in driving the success or failure of Indigenous language education policy (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leach 2014, 2021).

This article contributes to the comparative education literature by exploring the connections between education policy, teacher agency and the promotion of Indigenous languages in multilingual contexts. It responds to calls for the greater adoption and dissemination of Indigenous perspectives and methodologies in comparative education research (Sumida Huaman 2019, 2022). Through analysis of engaged ethnographic data collected with teachers in public schools across regional and remote Nepal, we analyse the ways in which teachers employ their agency to open-up ideological and implementational space (Hornberger 2005) for Indigenous and minoritised languages in education. We seek to investigate an emerging question within the comparative education and language policy literature:

How do teachers interpret, express and leverage their agency to create ideological and implementational space for Indigenous languages in education?

In responding to this question, we highlight approaches that recognise teachers as agents of change, which we consider imperative to effective education reform and to achieving linguistically sustaining education. We challenge conventional, neoliberal and Eurocentric understandings of agency and promote new ways of conceptualising agency from a decolonial perspective. Traditional definitions of agency centre the individual. Decolonial scholars, however, reject “the fiction of the individual” (Escobar 2013, p. 18) and argue that teacher agency should be understood as a locally situated, historical and mediated phenomenon, rather than as an autonomous power (Phyak et al. 2022). Throughout this article, we aim to problematise conventional understandings and build on decolonial conceptualisations of teacher agency that align with Indigenous epistemologies within the Nepali context.

Language policy, as a form of nation-states’ governance mechanisms, has historically reproduced colonial linguistic ideologies (Tollefson 2013). Official language policy often ignores the voices of the actors whose languages have been historically oppressed, whilst at the same time imposing the symbolic power of the dominant national and colonial languages in state mechanisms. Critical scholars have therefore urged the adoption of decolonial perspectives to counter hegemonic colonial language ideologies. The latter, they argue, should be rejected in favour of inclusive language policies that recognise the agency of micro-level actors, including communities and their attendant linguistic and cultural knowledges (Phyak 2016; Tupas 2021).

An important implication of critical and decolonial frameworks for the study of language policy is the blurring of the traditional binary between structure and agency. Instead, the decolonial perspective recognises the dynamic, interrelated nature of systemic power and individual subjectivity (Carter 2013). According to Nancy Hornberger and David Cassels Johnson, this highlights the need for research that explores “microlevel interaction” (Hornberger and Johnson 2007, p. 510) that is cognisant of macro-level policy, structure and power, while also focused on the agency of local actors to find creative solutions to suit their local circumstances.

Hornberger’s (2005) notion of ideological and implementational space is an approach that powerfully captures the interplay between these two perspectives. Reflecting on the differing outcomes of seemingly similar policies, Hornberger

proposes a more dynamic model of policy enactment. She suggests that ideological and implementational space may be created by macro-level policy, but that these spaces must still be “filled up” through local action. Conversely, restrictive language policy can limit space, but local actors can still find and “wedge” open spaces in their local context. Hornberger’s perspective lays the groundwork for understanding the interplay between macro-level policies and local actions. The now substantial body of research (see Menken and García 2010) demonstrating this dynamic process points increasingly to the role of local agency, particularly teacher agency, in policy appropriation as being far more critical than previously understood (Johnson 2013; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2014, 2021).

Teacher agency is broadly understood as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the development of their educational contexts (Priestley et al. 2015). Conventional definitions of agency tend to focus on how individuals can act to change a given situation. For example, Anthony Giddens defines agency as “the capacity of *the individual* to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens 1984, p. 14, emphasis added). Later language policy literature has adopted an ecological approach to understanding teacher agency (Biesta and Tedder 2007). This approach sees the capacity of educators to critically shape their responses to problematic situations and to act within their environment as being influenced by individual efforts, but also by available resources, contextual considerations and structural factors (Phyak et al. 2022). This is consistent with Hornberger’s (2005) theory of ideological and implementational spaces, as teacher agency is both enabled and constrained by the policies and practices that shape the educational contexts in which they work.

While most authors now agree that individual agency is ecologically mediated, scholars theorising from Indigenous and Global South standpoints, such as this article’s second author Prem Phyak and colleagues, go further in their assessment of teacher agency as a “locally situated, historical and mediated phenomenon” (Phyak et al. 2022, p. 4). From this perspective, agency is not just about individual power, but also about the emotional and relational connections that teachers have with their students, families and communities, as well as the cultural and contextual factors that shape their actions and decisions. In this article, we build on the work of Phyak et al. (2022) and others to advocate for a new, critical and decolonial understanding of teacher agency for multilingual language education, particularly Indigenous language education, which has been historically oppressed and marginalised by colonial, racist policies and practices (Battiste 2013, Wiley et al. 2014).

Our perspectives on teacher agency for Indigenous languages in education are informed by decolonial and Global South scholarship (e.g., Maldonado-Torres and Cavouris 2017; Quijano 2007; Santos 2007). We consider decoloniality as a movement to resist, dismantle and transform the domination of power and reclaim autonomy. Arturo Escobar (2013) uses the concept of *autonomía* to refer to the self-determination and self-organisation of social movements in the Global South, especially those of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, who challenge the dominant oppressive models of development, modernity and globalisation. Escobar describes this as “the realization of the communal” (Escobar 2018a, p. 144)

and rejects the “fiction of the individual” (Escobar 2013, p. 18). Instead, Escobar’s notion of *autonomía* is deeply relational, distributed and collaborative (Heinrichs 2022), affirming the diversity and plurality of ways of knowing, being and relating, based on principles of interdependence, reciprocity and care (Escobar 2018b).

Applying this concept of *autonomía* to the context of Indigenous language education, there are a number of ways we might recognise the agency of teachers differently. For example, we might see teachers as political actors who resist and transform oppressive structures, collaborating and networking with other teachers, community groups and social movements to build collective forms of power and action. We might also recognise their ability to reclaim and revitalise their own and others’ knowledges, languages, cultures and identities, by creating alternative forms of education that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of their students and communities. While developed by a Colombian scholar based in a different context, we see parallels between *autonomía* and Indigenous Nepali epistemologies. For example, Phyak (2016) describes the Yaakthung concept of *cho:tlung* as collective sense of completeness, pride and accomplishment, the result of successful communal endeavour achieved by the cooperative agency of the group or community. In our discussion of four teachers’ profiles below, we consider how notions of *autonomía*, *cho:tlung* and other decolonial, Indigenous understandings of agency may be at play in each narrative.

Methods

Our study took an engaged dialogic approach (Davis and Phyak 2016), building on emancipatory understandings of language, education and policy (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Smith 2021). Engaged methods seek to address social issues and promote social change by collaborating with the communities or groups that are studied (Hornberger et al. 2018). As such, they form part of a “decolonial effort towards empowering the oppressed to fight for their own liberation” (Phyak 2016, p. 337). Such methods are based on principles of reflexivity, reciprocity and solidarity, and involve a critical and dialogical approach to knowledge production and dissemination (Davis and Phyak 2015).

Engaged dialogic methods may utilise diverse methods of data collection and analysis; however, a core feature is the establishment of a rapport with participants throughout the research process. Our primary method of data collection was dialogue (Freire 1970; Smith 2021). As with other Indigenist and decolonial qualitative data collection methods such as storytelling (Ober 2017) and yarning (Shay 2019), dialogue allows the researcher to be attentive and responsive to participants, acknowledging their concerns, expertise and goals. Dialogue within an engaged research framework helps us to:

[move] all concerned towards collective understanding of the challenges and possibilities of reform towards language policies and practices that reflect greater equity, social justice, and human well-being (Davis and Phyak 2015, p. 148).

Engaged dialogue enables the researcher not only to collect rich and meaningful data, but also to establish a collaborative and respectful relationship with participants and their communities, and thus, in a small way, to contribute to their empowerment and transformation.

Sample, data collection and analysis approach

The profiles shared in this article are drawn from larger ethnographic studies conducted by authors 2 and 3 in three schools across Nepal between 2021 and 2022. No new data collection was undertaken for this article. Rather, in conceptualising this exploration of teacher agency, we revisited the existing transcripts and purposively selected four teacher profiles from that larger dataset. This selection was made to represent diverse experiences across different Indigenous language communities, teacher positionalities (including insider/outsider status) and multilingual educational outcomes. This selection aligns with our engaged dialogic methodology, which centres individual narratives as sites of knowledge production whilst acknowledging their embeddedness within broader structural contexts.

All dialogues are ethnographically grounded and informed by local linguistic and socio-political contexts (Phyak 2023). Dialogues took place predominantly in the Nepali language, with some use of Indigenous languages. The dialogues with the Yaakthung teacher occurred bilingually, in Nepali and Yaakthung. The audio-recorded dialogues were transcribed and translated into English by authors 2 and 3 and jointly reviewed and analysed by all authors of this article. We acknowledge the methodological tension that comes with conducting interviews in the dominant, national language within a decolonial framework. Whilst conducting interviews in Indigenous languages would have been more aligned with decolonial principles, practical constraints led to the decision to use Nepali. We recognise that this choice reflects ongoing power dynamics and may have influenced participants' responses. We discussed this issue with the teachers before we talked to them and agreed to adopt a flexible approach.

In terms of analysis, we adopted a recursive approach. First, we discussed the ethnographic context of each teacher's school and the implications of this context on the implementational and ideological space made available for Indigenous languages. We then analysed dialogues with a focus on the expressions of agency in their multilingual teaching journey. This process occurred over many months in 2022, 2023 and 2024, through discussion and sharing between all authors, recognising "the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data" (Braun and Clarke 2019, p. 593).

As with all language policy research, this research is partial and positioned (Lin 2015). As authors, we brought to these discussions our own lived experiences and positionalities: as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Nepali and non-Nepali, researchers, teachers and lifelong learners. It is through these lenses that we interpreted and shared the data. Author 1 (Naomi Fillmore) is a non-Nepali, non-Indigenous woman who has lived and worked in Nepal alongside both co-authors on issues related to language policy and mother tongue education. She has also worked closely with

Indigenous communities on these issues in her own context of Australia. Author 2 (Prem Phyak) is an Indigenous Yaakthung from the historical land of Yaakthung Laaje, Limbuwan. He has been collaborating with Yaakthung communities, teachers and youth for more than a decade on issues around language policy. Author 3 (Jnanu Raj Paudel) is a non-Indigenous Nepali critical ethnographic researcher working with Indigenous communities in rural areas. He speaks Rana Tharu, one of Nepal's local Indigenous languages, in addition to Nepali and English. He has been supporting Indigenous Rana Tharus to implement mother tongue education in local schools.

Context

Nepal provides an appropriate context to explore teacher agency in educational development and language policy for several reasons. First, since 2015, the Constitution of Nepal has enshrined children's right to education in their mother tongue up to secondary level (GoN 2015, article 31), providing space in the curriculum for teaching of and in any of the 124 languages of Nepal (National Statistics Office 2021a). However, this commitment has been described as taking a "permissive rather than active stance" which has "given space for schools to maintain the linguistic status quo rather than follow directives to change school language policies" (Weinberg 2013, p. 353). Meanwhile, Nepal's governance system is undergoing concurrent reforms towards a decentralised, federalist structure, creating more autonomy and independence on the local level. The 2015 Constitution designates basic and secondary education as a local responsibility (GoN 2015, Schedules 8 and 9). Local governments and schools thus have the authority to legislate educational policies, including policies on language of instruction (Poudel and Choi 2020). They are also responsible for preserving and promoting Indigenous languages more broadly.

These factors have contributed to a paradoxical situation where, despite the most inclusive national policy in decades, there is an observable increase in the number of schools adopting English and Nepali over the mother tongue as mediums of instruction (Bessières et al. 2019). In cases where schools do implement mother tongue languages as mediums of instruction, emerging evidence suggests that this is the result of significant local agency and activism. Therefore, the role of local government, school leaders and teachers is critical in the successful "opening up" of ideological and implementational space for Indigenous languages in Nepali classrooms.

This underscores the critical need to study and understand teacher agency specifically in the Nepali context, as it directly impacts the practical realisation of inclusive language policies and the preservation of Indigenous languages. Lessons from the Nepali context will likely have implications for other Global South and First Nations contexts where there is an apparent mismatch between policy intentions and local outcomes. The exploration of teacher agency in this context may therefore contribute to broader international conversations on the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive language policies in diverse educational settings.

Language context

Nepal is a linguistically and culturally rich country, with at least 124 languages and 143 ethnic groups reported in the last census (National Statistics Office 2021a, 2021b). The official language, Nepali, is spoken as a first language by about 44 per cent of the population. Another nineteen languages are spoken by more than 100,000 people (Language Commission 2019), with the remaining languages used by smaller populations spread across the Himalayan nation. The teachers profiled in this article come from schools in three prominent Indigenous language communities: Rana Tharu, Yaakthung/Limbu and Magar Dhut.

Rana Tharu is a language of western Nepal. Though it has a long oral history, it has only recently been recognised as an independent language in Nepali official records (Language Commission 2019). Previously, Rana Tharu was subsumed into the much larger Tharu language, to which it is related although the two are not mutually intelligible (Webster 1992). The recent census, which was the first to record Rana Tharu separately from Tharu, reported 77,766 speakers of Rana Tharu, almost all located in the western *Terai* (lowlands) region of Sudurpashchim Province (National Statistics Office 2021a). Like other Indigenous communities in Nepal, Rana Tharu people maintain distinct cultural identities and traditions (Gautam 2021; Guneratne 1998). The community has been influential in mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE) programming in Nepal, having participated in the 2007 Government pilot (Hough et al. 2009) and advocated forcefully for their language rights (e.g., Bhatta 2021).

Yaakthung (also referred to as Limbu) is spoken by 350,436 individuals in eastern Nepal, comprising 1.2 per cent of Nepal's population. Yaakthung is among the thirteen languages used by more than one per cent of the country's citizens (National Statistics Office 2021a). The language has its own script, *Sirijunga*, and benefits from a long history of written literature and accessible reading materials, including textbooks and dictionaries (Shneiderman 2009). Yaakthung people have their own cultural practices and rich Indigenous knowledge, shaped by *Mundhum* (the power of strength or knowledge). The distinct and strong cultural traditions of the Yaakthung people were once upheld within their own autonomous state before the signing of a treaty in 1774 with the *Gorkhali* state (now Nepal). This treaty stated that the Limbu people would have autonomy over their lands and to retain linguistic, cultural and judicial rights. However, these provisions were gradually eroded by the Nepali state, including by nationalising their traditional lands, known as *Kipat*. Despite this, the Yaakthung people have been vocal in advocating for their linguistic rights, with records of their resistance to "Nepali only" policies dating back as far as 1870 (Phyak 2015, Weinberg 2013). Building on long-standing linguistic activism, the Yaakthung communities are now running Indigenous language programmes both in mainstream education and autonomous community schools (see Phyak 2016).

Magar Dhut is another large Indigenous language group in Nepal, spoken by around 809,863 people (2.78% of the population), mainly in the Lumbini and Gandaki provinces of central Nepal. Magar Dhut has traditionally been written with Devanagari script, but the community has also developed its own writing system based on the unique sound system of Magar Dhut, called *Akkha* (Gautam 2021).

Akkha has been used to produce a variety of texts including newspapers, magazines, textbooks and folk literature (Gautam 2021). Teaching-focused materials have also been developed in Magar Dhut (Regmi 2013). Like Rana Tharu and Tharu, Magar Dhut has often been submerged in data and research under other Magar language varieties spoken further west in Nepal, but there are major structural differences between these languages and they are not mutually intelligible (Gautam 2021). Recent census data now quantify Magar Dhut as a language in its own right.

Profiles of four Nepali teachers

In this section, we present profiles of four Nepali teachers (Table 1) which serve as windows into the interplay of individual and collective agency, community engagement, and the transformative journeys that shape teachers' roles as advocates for linguistically sustaining education. These themes are explored further in the subsequent discussion sections.

Profile 1 – Yogendra¹

Yogendra has been a primary teacher for over 30 years and enjoys a long-standing connection with the Rana Tharu community. His own community language is Doteli, which originates in the hill regions of far-western Nepal, adding another layer to his outsider status within the *Terai*-based Rana Tharu community. He teaches at Sikshasadan School² in Kanchanpur district and was the headteacher when the school became an MTB MLE school as part of the government pilot programme in 2007. Sikshasadan School continued the programme beyond the pilot period and has since been awarded the status of a “model” MTB MLE school. As a model school, Sikshasadan has influenced two other schools in the same *palika* (rural municipality) to commence an MTB MLE programme.

Yogendra was instrumental in establishing the MTB MLE programme at Sikshasadan School. As headteacher, he was approached by the government and offered the opportunity to participate in the pilot. After training and learning about the benefits of mother tongue-based education, Yogendra was keen to implement MTB MLE. However, his long experience with the Rana Tharu community meant that he knew he could not make a unilateral decision. He spent several months convincing the community of the benefits of the plan, which was not easy. Despite living in this community for decades, as a Doteli person, Yogendra was still viewed by the Rana Tharu community as an outsider. He needed to engage in dialogue with parents, Elders and community members to assure them of the programme's benefits and purpose. Eventually, Yogendra got the community's approval, thanks to his long

¹ All teachers' names are pseudonyms.

² School names are also pseudonyms.

Table 1 Sample teachers' details

Teacher	Teacher's mother tongue	Position in school	School and location	School's ethno-linguistic community	Teaching languages
Yogendra*	Doteli	former headteacher; now classroom teacher	Sikshasadan school*, Kanchanpur district	Rana Tharu	Rana Tharu, Nepali and English
Ram*	Rana Tharu	classroom teacher	Sikshasadan school*, Kanchanpur district	Rana Tharu	Rana Tharu, Nepali and English
Indra*	Yaakthung	classroom teacher	Mangena School*, Panchthar district	Yaakthung	Yaakthung, Nepali and English
Ganga Prasad*	Nepali	headteacher	Janata Basic School*, Palpa district	Magar Dhut	Nepali and English

Note: * = pseudonym

association with the community as well as his ability to speak Rana Tharu at an advanced level:

“I have a great passion for the Rana language. I advocate for the use of the Rana language in education despite being an outsider. I have spent 50 years of my life in the community.”

During the first few years of the programme, with strong central government support, the programme was successful. However after the pilot ended and resources waned, things became more difficult. Yogendra describes this time as “the dark nights after the full moon”. Many of the other schools involved in the pilot desisted and switched to Nepali or English as the medium of instruction after pilot funding ended. But Sikshasadan School continued the Rana Tharu programme and still maintains it to this day.

As headteacher throughout this period, Yogendra showed determination in continuing the programme even when the financial and technological challenges became insurmountable for many other schools in similar circumstances. Today, Yogendra has changed roles and is now a classroom teacher. When talking about his time setting up and leading the programme as headteacher, Yogendra spoke in very active terms, but he now understands his role very differently. He talks about observing his colleagues and the new headteacher from the sidelines, showing curiosity for how they approach challenges or successes, while being ready to support them on their terms:

“Though I do not belong to the Rana Tharu ethnic community and language by birth, I do support the new headteacher in creating space for mother tongues in the classroom.”

When discussing the mother tongue programme in Sikshasadan School, Yogendra is passionate and knowledgeable. He understands the empirical and affective benefits of learning in the mother tongue and critiques the structural and political barriers that have posed challenges to the programme over the years. He laments the lack of support given by political leaders, and the impact of generations of oppressive language policies on Indigenous language maintenance and transition to younger generations:

“Youth and political leaders are not serious about the use of the mother tongue in education, even at home. Unlike the young people and the intellectuals of this community, I have a great passion for the Rana language.”

Profile 2 – Ram

Ram is a member of the Rana Tharu community and a native speaker of Rana Tharu. He has been a teacher at the primary level for 18 years, now teaching at Sikshasadan School where he has worked with Yogendra since the MTB MLE programme was set up.

As part of the decentralisation processes and new federalist system in Nepal, Kanchanpur district (where Sikshasadan School is located) now has greater

responsibility for basic educational policy and delivery. While the first district government was generally supportive of MLE, the second elections saw the incoming candidate for mayor campaigning on a platform of improving “quality” in education, an adjective often used in Nepal as synonymous with English medium of instruction (EMI) (see Fillmore and Paudel 2022; Pradhan 2019). After gaining office, the new mayor and district government implemented an EMI policy, requiring all schools in the district to convert to EMI. Though this clearly contradicts national government goals as articulated in the constitution and other high-level documents, under the new federalist system the district government has a stronger say on local education policy than ever before. During the last academic year, many schools in the district ceded to the new district government and switched to EMI. However, Ram and his colleagues have actively resisted the change and vocally advocated for the continuation of MTB MLE. At the time of writing,³ Sikshasadan School continues to teach in Rana Tharu in open defiance of the district policy.

Ram, supported by colleagues, has vocally opposed the new district policy. He has met repeatedly with the mayor and government officials, but feels his voice is often ignored in these forums: “What to do? Nobody hears the voices of low-profile people like me.” There is a clear power differential between Ram, a local teacher and an Indigenous person, and the mayor. While they both have individual agency, the structures and resources are set up in a way to privilege that of the mayor, highlighting the tension between structure and agency, the “perennial issue” in language policy (Hult 2010). Nevertheless, Ram persists. He continues to teach in Rana Tharu and to raise his voice in opposition to the local-level policy. He describes the support he receives from his colleagues and community empowering him to continue in his advocacy.

Profile 3 – Indra

Indra is a member of the Yaakthung community and lives on *Yaakthung Laaje* (Limbu people’s land) in Panchthar district. He has been a secondary-level teacher for over ten years. Having trained as an English teacher, he now teaches in Yaakthung, Nepali and English. Indra is multilingual and multiliterate, speaking, reading and writing four languages (Yaakthung, Nepali, English and Malay). Though he was never given the opportunity to learn Yaakthung literacy formally during his schooling, Indra and his school peers set up an informal study group to learn the Sirijunga script and read Yaakthung together. He thus showed admirable agency and initiative even as a youth.

Indra has also added Bahasa Malay to his linguistic repertoire, which he learnt during the three years he spent as a foreign migrant worker in Malaysia. His time in Malaysia was a defining experience for Indra. After his return to Nepal, he was inspired to author a multilingual storybook (in Yaakthung, Nepali and English) narrating his experiences overseas. He was hired as a teacher in a local Yaakthung

³ The first draft of this article was submitted to this journal for consideration in March 2024.

school, Mangena School in the Panchthar district. Based on his relatively high level of literacy in Sirijunga script, he was first recruited to teach Yaakthung, but his college degree in English education and experiences abroad meant that he was then also asked to teach English classes.

In his teaching, Indra freely mixes Yaakthung, English and Nepali. He particularly privileges Yaakthung, however, using it widely even in classes that are designated as “English” or “Nepali”, thus wedging open new spaces for his Indigenous language (Hornberger 2005). When reflecting on why he employs this approach, Indra recognises that his own experiences of learning and using multiple languages has been natural and flexible, so he approaches languages in the same way in the classroom. He mentions how he creates space for Yaakthung in his class as follows:

“I teach both Yaakthung and English. Using Yaakthung is natural, but I also find it interesting to use Yaakthung in English. Students become more creative and motivated to learn in English classes by using Yaakthung. [...] I ask them to use Yaakthung concepts to understand English words. They learn both languages simultaneously.”

Mangena School has been teaching Yaakthung in some form for around ten years, but when Indra was hired it had only very limited written resources in the language to support teaching. Indra organised the community to develop new resources, using his students as documenters to collect stories, poems and essays from parents and Elders, and eventually producing a set of resources in Yaakthung covering grades 6 to 12. Indra recognises that the success of his teaching relies heavily on such support from parents and the community.

The context in Panchthar District is considerably different to Kanchanpur district. In Panchthar, the local government is highly supportive of Yaakthung teaching, even introducing it in senior year levels, and providing reasonable funding to schools like Mangena who are teaching the language. The local government leader is himself of Yaakthung descent and recognises the important role of language for learning and wellbeing. Furthermore, in Panchthar district, parents and community are clear in their desire for their children to learn in Yaakthung, influenced by the long and rich cultural history of the Yaakthung people. Indra knows this and feels accountable to the community to meet their expectations for their children. When rationalising his own role in promoting Yaakthung, he stated:

“I feel that it’s my responsibility to teach Yaakthung in school. This will make the younger generation understand the value of Yaakthung.”

Profile 4 – Ganga Prasad

Ganga Prasad, the headteacher at Janata Basic School in the hinterland of Palpa district, has worked in education for over two decades, with fifteen years of service as headteacher. The school serves a predominantly Magar Dhut-speaking community. Ganga Prasad is the only member of the seven-person staff who is not from the Magar Dhut community. He lives in a different town to the school, located about 1.5 hours’ drive away.

Janata Basic School participated in the MTB MLE pilot programme in 2007 (the same programme that Yogendra and Ram's school participated in), but the programme is no longer in operation. Ganga Prasad is not shy in expressing his opposition to any reintroduction of MLE at the school. He explains that the pilot programme was not based on community demand but was imposed by the government: "This programme was not demanded by the community; the government handed it to the community." Consequently, from his perspective, when the programme did not yield the expected results, parents gradually withdrew their children.

However, discussions with other members of the school staff and community, conducted as part of the same wider ethnographic fieldwork, reveal other factors at play. They describe the programme's failure as stemming from the headteacher's extreme negative attitude towards Indigenous people, their languages and their inclusion in education. Ganga Prasad's mother tongue is Nepali; he does not speak Magar Dhut and does not recognise the value of its inclusion in school, arguing that students arrive at school already speaking Magar and Nepali and that EMI would therefore be more beneficial. He demonstrates a very passive attitude towards the role of schools and learning: "If children already speak a language, what's the point of including it in school?" He regularly critiques Magar language policies and MLE, and his ideological opposition flows on into implementational barriers: for example, Ganga Prasad does not pass on information about MLE training opportunities to Magar teachers or support them to attend when they find out through other means. Despite qualified Magar teachers being available, Ganga Prasad has retained the headteacher position.

Ganga Prasad therefore offers a counterexample to the earlier profiles, illustrating the detrimental impact of teachers' agency if it is disconnected from the community and lacking respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Findings and discussion

This article seeks to understand how teachers in Nepal interpret, leverage and express their agency to support or subvert Indigenous languages in education. This includes working towards an understanding of the source of their agency. Put another way, what is it that gives teachers power and resilience to resist colonial policies and ideologies in their local spaces? While the journeys taken by our profiled teachers are unique, they contain common discursive threads that point to shared understandings and expressions of teacher agency from an Indigenous, decolonial lens. Our intention is to contextualise the individual experiences of the profiled teachers within the larger literature by showing how their narratives resonate with broader issues in educational development and language policy. Our analysis emphasises the communal, situated and transformative aspects of teacher agency, offering a perspective that aligns with Indigenous epistemologies and challenges conventional understandings.

Agency as collective and communal

Traditionally, teacher agency is understood as an individual phenomenon, reflecting teachers' beliefs and attributes as autonomous actors. However, the experiences of Yogendra, Ram and Indra unveil a broader understanding of agency that extends beyond the classroom into their communities, families and traditional associations. Yogendra, Ram and Indra, to varying degrees, cite their connections and communality as being critical to their (relatively) successful language teaching endeavours. For example, Ram credits his colleagues and community as empowering him to advocate against oppressive district policies, explaining that he is acting on behalf of the community as a whole and not just for himself or his professional position. Similarly, Indra recounts how he works with students, parents and community members to develop resources in the Yaakthung language, as no formal textbooks are available. While other schools in the area are moving to EMI, parents at his Mangena School want their children to learn in Yaakthung. Indra therefore feels accountable to parents and the community to resist pressure from the municipality and district and continue Yaakthung instruction. Yogendra explains how, even after several decades of living in the Rana Tharu community, research evidence and government support were not a sufficient basis to start a new MTB MLE programme. He needed to strengthen the connections and relationships he had built over those decades to foster trust and support for the new programme before the community would accept the proposal and the programme could go ahead. He credits his Rana Tharu language abilities and long-standing connections to the community as being crucial to gaining this acceptance.

Clearly, for these teachers, their connections inside and outside of the school gates informed their practice and their expressions of agency. This shows how their role as teachers is deeply embedded in their relationships with the broader community. This relationality has been noted by researchers in other Indigenous contexts. For example, Karen Hughes (2013), in sharing the life story of a Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Elder, shows how her significant agency and determination in the face of colonial oppression was fuelled by her people's Indigenous knowledge systems of relationality and kin; a resilience she later transmitted to her descendants through storytelling, language and cultural practice. Collective and communal teacher agency can therefore be seen as a source of support, learning and innovation for teachers, as well as a way of challenging and transforming the structures that constrain their work (Phyak et al. 2022).

Conversely, Ganga Prasad's profile shows the negative outcomes when a single teacher, in a position of power, disregards the communal and reciprocal aspects of agency for multilingual education and prioritises personal goals. Ganga Prasad is not connected to the school community and does not appear to feel any accountability to students, parents or community members. He spends very little time in the community, visiting only to perform his professional duties, then returning to his hometown. Previous studies have noted the potential negative impacts of teachers who are disconnected from other teachers, students and community. For example, Phyak (2023) shows that administrator and teacher power can be used to enforce a monolingual and monocultural language policy that devalues the linguistic and

cultural diversity of the students, even in the context of a supportive multilingual and multicultural national language policy. Therefore, maintaining a sense of community and connection between teachers and their students, colleagues and communities is central to a collaborative and participatory approach to multilingual education, and a key aspect of a critical, decolonial understanding of teacher agency.

Agency as situated and shifting

Teacher agency as situated and shifting means that agency is not a fixed or stable attribute of individuals or groups, but rather a dynamic and context-dependent process that emerges from the interaction of various factors, involving personal, relational, structural, temporal and spatial dimensions (Priestley et al. 2015). Yogendra, Ram and Indra exemplify how agency is not a static concept confined to a single domain or role, but is woven into their situated experiences and identities, which are forever shifting as they navigate the diverse linguistic, cultural and political landscapes that define their communities.

Agency inevitably changes over time as teachers learn, adapt and innovate in response to the changing circumstances and challenges that they face, adjusting, improvising and experimenting with new strategies and solutions (Biesta and Tedder 2007). For example, Ram's resistance to the EMI policy imposed by the local government demonstrates how agency responds to external forces. Ram had not previously needed to be a vocal advocate for multilingual education, nor had he seen himself as such, until external downward pressure and community needs required him to step up to the role. Similarly, Yogendra's transition from headteacher to classroom teacher illustrates how agency transforms with changing roles and responsibilities. Where previously Yogendra saw himself as a leader actively involved in establishing a new MTB MLE programme, he now describes his role as that of an ally, advocating for multilingualism "from the side" (Benson and Kosonen 2021). Furthermore, Indra's multilingual and flexible teaching approach, which privileges Yaakthung even in designated Nepali or English classes, reflects a dynamic responsiveness to the linguistic needs and cultural richness of the community. Yogendra is very much aware of his own position as an outsider (exemplified in the quotes shared earlier) and of how this influences his perspective and the way he engages with the Rana Tharu community.

These narratives underscore the notion that teacher agency is not a fixed entity but rather a responsive, situated force shaped by the ever-changing dynamics of the educational and sociocultural milieu. The effectiveness of teacher agency to implement multilingual education therefore hinges on its adaptability and alignment with the shifting sociolinguistic landscape and responsiveness to community needs.

Agency through ideological clarification

Finally, our teacher profiles highlight the importance of investing in Indigenous language teachers' ideological clarification (Fishman 2001; Kroskrity 2009); that is, the

raising of critical ideological awareness of the people who have been hegemonised by colonial ideologies (Phyak 2016).

Indra's journey towards ideological clarity came through his experiences as an Indigenous person in a colonial state and a foreign migrant worker in another post-colonial state, Malaysia. His time abroad not only enriched his linguistic repertoire with Bahasa Malay but also catalysed his drive to become a Yaakthung language teacher and children's book author on his return. In Yogendra's case, his ideological clarification came through attending MTB MLE training as part of the 2007 pilot and being presented with evidence of the benefits of teaching and learning in students' mother tongues. This prompted him to share his learnings with the Rana Tharu community within which he was so embedded:

“The knowledge that I have gathered by participating in trainings and seminars has made me an advocate for the cognitive benefit of using the mother tongue, which I share though I am not the headteacher.”

Both of these experiences transcend conventional educational boundaries, yet have shaped the teachers' agency as educators.

Furthermore, the pathways by which teachers reached ideological clarity also shaped their conceptualisations of language and pedagogical approaches. Indra's multilingual experiences abroad fostered a fluid understanding of language boundaries that translates into flexible translanguaging practice, whilst Yogendra's development through structured MTB MLE training likely influenced his more systematic approach to language separation. These differing routes to critical awareness demonstrate how varied experiences of ideological clarification shape teachers' commitment to Indigenous languages, conceptions of language and pedagogical approaches.

Implications for policy

The agency of the teachers featured in this article shows that the experiences, struggles, knowledges and activism of Indigenous language teachers offer critical insights and resources to develop and implement “sustainable multilingual education” (Hult 2023) in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Though none of the SDGs explicitly covers minority language rights, the goal dedicated to education, SDG 4, strives to “ensure *inclusive* and *equitable quality* education and promote lifelong learning opportunities *for all*” (UN 2015, online, emphases added), and SDG 10, aiming to “reduce inequality within and among countries” (ibid.), is also relevant. Building on teacher agency centres teachers in creating and implementing multilingual and Indigenous language education policies, ensuring sustainability and ownership through community–school partnership.

Policymakers at all levels should engage Indigenous language teachers directly in policymaking processes. This study has demonstrated that teachers with a strong critical awareness and commitment to their communities can play a crucial role in creating and filling ideological and implementational spaces for Indigenous languages. Yet their voices are often absent from language and education policymaking processes. Policymakers should recognise and leverage this bottom-up agency by

actively involving Indigenous language teachers in the development and implementation of language education policies, in ways that respect their situated and connected positionalities. Long-term mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous language teachers and local communities should be established to ensure policies remain responsive to on-the-ground realities.

Conclusions

This article has sought to understand how teachers interpret, leverage and express their agency to support or subvert the use of Indigenous languages in education. While traditional conceptions of teacher agency within educational development and language policy have often confined it to an individual and classroom-centric phenomenon, the experiences of the four teachers presented here underscore a critical shift in perspective, advocating for a broader understanding of teacher agency through an ecological, decolonial and Indigenous lens. Their narratives emphasise that teacher agency is a collective, situated and relational force, deeply embedded in community and identity. In a landscape where schooling too often perpetuates oppressive language policies, teachers serve as key actors in resisting such policies to create space for Indigenous languages.

This study also shows that the source of teachers' agency and power to resist hegemonic policies varies considerably. We have highlighted a number of common themes, including connection and reciprocity to community, recognition of situated positionalities, and ideological clarification through transformative experiences. These themes underscore that teacher agency is not just an individual attribute but is collectively shaped and enacted in relation to community needs and aspirations. However, Ganga Prasad's case demonstrates that teacher agency can also work against linguistic justice when disconnected from community accountability and Indigenous epistemologies. His resistance to Magar Dhut instruction, despite community support for the language, illustrates how individual agency divorced from decolonial principles can perpetuate oppressive language policies. This contrast highlights that, whilst teachers can be key actors in challenging oppressive language policies and carving out space for Indigenous languages, their agency must be grounded in community relationships and Indigenous ways of knowing in order to achieve the linguistic justice envisioned in the SDGs (UN 2015). Ultimately, this study underscores the need for policymakers and researchers to prioritise the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous language teachers in the pursuit of linguistically sustaining education.

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