



FIRST-LANGUAGE EXCLUSION AND SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG MARGINALIZED CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN: AN EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Abstract

First language exclusion is the exclusion or marginalisation of L1 or first language in any early childhood institution. Rapid language shifts in multilingual environments could limit understanding, emotional safety, involvement, self-expression of identity and school belonging. An explanatory sequential mixed method design was used in this study to investigate the relationship between first-language exclusion and socio-psychological wellbeing of the marginalised children between the age of 4-6 years of the public and low-cost early childhood education (ECE) institutions in Pakistan. The quantitative sample consisted of 480 children, 480 caregivers, 96 ECE teachers and 48 classrooms. Data collection methods comprised caregiver and teacher measures, structured classroom observation, child friendly pictorial vignettes and play based conversations, and qualitative interviews. The First-Language Exclusion in ECE Scale exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .89 for teachers and .86 for caregivers) and confirmatory factor-analysis indices were favorable (CFI = .95, RMSEA = .045, and chi-square/df = 2.34). There were more reports of structural forms of exclusion such as missing multilingual supports (84.5%), discouraged home-language use (78.2%), unsupported rapid immersion (71.0%), constrained instructional access (65.8%) and explicit prohibition/correction (42.4%) than explicit prohibition. Higher exclusion was associated with lower overall socio-psychological well-being (beta = -.42, 95% CI [-.49, -.35], $p < .001$), emotional security (beta = -.38, $p < .001$), and classroom participation (beta = -.45, $p < .001$). The association was mediated by teacher support, which was .21 ($p < .01$) with the interaction. Qualitative analysis produced three themes: misinterpreted withdrawal, identity devaluation versus linguistic affirmation and institutional pressure or 'guilty multilingualism'. Overall, integrated findings indicate that language exclusion takes place as an instructional-access and socio-psychological issue of inclusion. Participation, safety and belonging can be helped through additive, scaffolded multilingual transitions and respectful recognition of home languages. As the study was observational, the results are considered associations and not causes.

Keywords: first-language exclusion; home language; multilingual education; marginalized children; socio-psychological well-being; early childhood education; Pakistan; mixed methods



1. Introduction

1.1 Early Childhood, Language, and Well-Being

Early childhood is a time of fast and integrated growth of language, cognition, emotion, identity and social relationship. Language for young children is primarily a way to seek comfort, express needs, enter play, negotiate relationships, interpret adult expectations and make sense of unfamiliar events. The language acquired in family/community life thus becomes a cognitive resource, and a social bridge between family and school. Children can make new connections to meaning when ECE settings recognize that resource. If neglected or under-valued, the move to school can be a breakdown in communication, identity and emotional safety.

The subject of language education in the language of the learner is becoming more and more highlighted as an issue in terms of equity and quality of education. International guidance highlights the importance of home-language based and multilingual provision in helping to ensure access, learning, inclusion and continuity of children's cultural and linguistic identities (UNESCO, 2025; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). National and international languages are not excluded. Instead, it facilitates additive multilingualism, where children's current linguistic capabilities will be the foundation for learning Urdu or English or other curriculum languages. The second approach, called subtractive, on the other hand, minimizes or eliminates the first language (L1) in order to carry out the project of the dominant or additional language (L2) (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

Social and psychological implications for young children may exist with subtractive practices. Preschool children do not have the metalinguistic and emotional skills to explain why they are silent, confused or reluctant to participate. If a child has not learned the language of instruction he or she may be misinterpreted as being inattentive or less able, and if a child is corrected or ridiculed for using a community language, he or she may come to learn that a part of his or her identity is unwelcome. First-language exclusion, then, can potentially be linked to emotional insecurity, fear of going wrong, lack of agency, peer isolation, and loss of school belonging even if adults are trying to encourage the learning of Urdu or English.

1.2 Linguistic Diversity and Educational Hierarchy in Pakistan

The linguistic ecology in Pakistan is unique with Urdu, English and many community or regional and provincial languages. Not all these languages are institutionalized equally. English is closely tied to advancement in education and socioeconomic mobility; Urdu serves as the national language and a significant lingua franca; and languages like Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi and many others are used to connect children with family, locality and cultural identity. Such differences in status affect what is considered an acceptable form of communication in the classroom and what is limited to the home or informal environment.

Language policy and practice in classrooms are very different from province to province in Pakistan. A national review of ECE models identified that while there were differences across the provinces in governance, curriculum, access, implementation and classroom conditions, inequalities in participation and quality continued to exist (Samuel Hall 2023). If a mother-tongue is to be formally recognized, this is not a guarantee that teachers will have multilingual resources, relevant training and institutional authorization to use children's languages in strategic ways. However, in low-resource classrooms, a dominant language of instruction can be used even if a child's prior experience with the language is quite limited.

The mismatch between the institutional language expectations and children's sociocultural ecologies has been highlighted through the research conducted on the aspect of English-medium



policy in Pakistan. Manan, David and Dumanig (2015) demonstrated that exposure to English outside the classroom can be limited, which can limit comprehension and promote rote learning. For older Pakistani learners, deficient teacher training, fear of error, language anxiety, low confidence, poor parental support, and insufficient institutional support have been linked to lower participation rates (Mehmood et al., 2025d). Evidence from older learners does not readily translate to preschool children, but it can point to socio-cognitive pathways that may be particularly relevant to early childhood experiences of confusion and withdrawal with fewer linguistic and emotional resources to explain what is happening. Recent analyses have also highlighted the importance of language hierarchies that favour economically valued languages and preclude visibility of regional and indigenous identities in formal education (Syed & Shah, 2026).

1.3 Problem Statement

Children's transition to ECE services often takes place in a context where the language used to teach them is not the language in which they acquired their concepts, attachments, stories and emotional language. This discontinuity may be particularly harmful for children from socioeconomic disadvantage, rural or remote communities, or those who are: displaced or migrated; in a minority language; or with a disability; as well as those whose caregivers do not have a high level of education. Linguistic difference can exacerbate other forms of disadvantage when a child's first language is not valued, not used, or is disrespectful. If they are silent or don't participate as much, this can then be seen as a personal problem rather than a language environment problem.

The central research problem is that little direct evidence is available on the link between first-language exclusion and socio-psychological well-being of marginalised preschool children in Pakistan. Current research has been carried out mainly in the field of language policy, literacy, English-medium instruction, and older learners. There is limited knowledge about emotional security, self-confidence, participation, communication, peer interaction, identity and belonging in schools during ECE years and few opportunities for young children to voice their views in an appropriate manner. A mixed-methods research design is thus suitable for detecting quantitative patterns and also exploring the child, caregiver, and teacher's understanding of language-inclusive and language-exclusionary experiences.

1.4 Purpose, Objectives, and Research Questions

This study investigated the socio-psychological implications of first-language exclusion for marginalized children in Pakistani ECE settings. Because the design was observational rather than experimental, the study examined associations, contextual comparisons, observed patterns, and participants' perspectives; it did not treat statistical relationships as definitive causal effects.

Objectives

1. Determine the forms, frequency, and intensity of first-language exclusion experienced by marginalized children in sampled ECE settings.
2. Examine the relationship between first-language exclusion and children's emotional security, self-confidence, participation, communication, peer relationships, and school belonging, including differences across relevant child, family, classroom, and regional characteristics.
3. Explain the quantitative patterns through the perspectives of children, caregivers, and teachers and develop evidence-informed recommendations for language-inclusive ECE policy, curriculum, teacher preparation, and family engagement.



Research Questions

1. What forms, levels, and classroom conditions characterized first-language exclusion among marginalized children in ECE settings across Pakistan?
2. How was first-language exclusion associated with children's emotional security, self-confidence, classroom participation, communication, peer relationships, and school belonging, and how did these patterns vary across relevant subgroups and classroom contexts?
3. How did children, caregivers, and teachers explain experiences of first-language inclusion and exclusion, and how did their accounts confirm, expand, contradict, or reframe the quantitative patterns?

Null Hypotheses

- H01: First-language exclusion is not significantly associated with children's overall socio-psychological well-being.
- H02: Children in language-inclusive and language-exclusionary classrooms do not differ significantly in emotional security, confidence, participation, communication, peer relationships, or belonging.
- H03: First-language exclusion does not significantly predict socio-psychological outcomes after controlling for relevant child, family, teacher, and classroom variables.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 First Language as a Cognitive, Emotional, and Cultural Resource

Early meaning making is rooted in a child's first language. It brings cultural-specific expressions of emotion, rules of respecting and cooperating with others, family stories, and the language in which social experiences are initially understood. Sociocultural view of learning is about how learning occurs through mediated participation with more capable others, with language being one of the major mediational tools (Vygotsky, 1978). A familiar language in ECE can benefit children in building on their prior knowledge, and can assist children to negotiate play and relationships with peers. The use of mother-tongue and multilingual approaches in the early years can help continuity of the previous children's knowledge and the new learning (Ball, 2011). Indigenous languages, traditions, and community knowledge can also be integrated into ECE curricula, which can help to promote multidimensional learning, cultural identity, and language vitality, although some constraints in the implementation of curricula may be created by rigid curricula and limited teachers' preparation (Mehmood et al., 2025a).

Inclusion of home-language also enhances continuity between family and preschool. Schwartz and Ragnarsdóttir (2025) understand this continuity in terms of the links between family language policy, language-in-education policy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and family funds of knowledge. Schools acknowledging family communicative practices allows for family caregivers to be more involved and for teachers to have access to children's experiences and competencies. If those practices aren't followed, children can experience mixed messages or expectations about which language and identity is "real" in each context.

The concept of multilingual development cannot simply be expressed as language systems that are separate and compete with each other. Rather than the majority of translanguaging perspectives focus on the entirety of the communicative repertoire multilingual learners use to make meaning, as described by García & Wei (2014) and García & Kleifgen (2018). In young children this repertoire can be mixed language words, gestures, objects, facial expression, imitation and peer support. Such



practices can be considered as mistakes that limit others' access to participation or as supports that do not close off access to learning while others gain proficiency in other languages.

2.2 First-Language Exclusion and Subtractive Schooling

First-language exclusion are behaviours that exclude, discourage, ignore or devalue the language that the child uses most in the family. It includes explicit (such as punishment, ridicule for the use of the language) and implicit (such as lack of any accessible explanation, lack of multilingual materials, exclusion of caregivers from the communication). Thus the concept is not only the language in which children have been taught to learn, but also the language in which they are taught how to learn.

Subtractive language environments send the message that the mastery of the dominant language must be separated from the first language. Cummins (2000) theorized that educational encounters can validate or invalidate learners' identities which then impact on engagement and achievement. Critical scholarship also uncovers that language standards are not neutral as they can legitimate the process of social stratification by making it sound as though the use of "high" language is a natural reflection of intelligence and appropriateness (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Piller, 2016). These are exacerbated in Pakistan, where the value of English is assessed postcolonial and market based, national roles are given to Urdu, and the education systems are inadequate for many regional languages (Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013; Syed & Shah, 2026).

Exclusion can take place even when teachers are speaking informally in a language they are familiar with. Teachers may have difficulties with challenging material but feel it is not a success as it is not seen as having achieved institutional expectations. In Pakistan, the concept of guilty multilingualism has been mentioned as teachers recognize the importance of multilingualism in practice but are pressurized to teach monolingually (Manan, Channa, & Haidar, 2022). The ambivalence at the ECE level can result in unequal practices, sometimes linguistic support is given and sometimes not, or even correction, silence or shame.

2.3 Socio-Psychological Pathways

The six related socio-psychological pathways analyzed were the study's focus. Lower comprehension can negatively impact emotional security when routines and expectations may be confusing. Second, language mistakes that are continually corrected or exposed to others may lead to fear, anxiety and diminished self-confidence. Thirdly, there may be limited opportunities for expression, which in turn can affect how likely students are to engage in classroom activities and how easy it is for teachers to observe their competence. Finally, limited peer communication can impact on friendship initiation and cooperative play. Fifth, devaluation of the home language can impact positive identity and school belonging. Sixth, poor language continuity between home and school can restrict the role of the caregiver and the teacher's knowledge of the child. Previous studies conducted in Pakistan have correlated cognitive load and language anxiety to decreased confidence and participation, and supportive emotional scaffolding with increased participation (Mehmood et al., 2025b, 2025c). These studies offer relevant mechanisms, but not direct evidence for preschool children.

These pathways are not the result of bilingualism or multilingualism per se. Exclusion, under-resourcing and unequal language status pose a risk. Multilingual ECE can contribute to the development of children's social and emotional learning when language is accessible, visual materials are provided, gesture is used, children are provided with peer mediation, and family identities are respected. For instance, McInnes et al. (2025) found that the ongoing training of



teachers who spoke the home languages of multilingual children and the recruitment of teachers who do spoke the home languages positively impacted the social-emotional and emotional-literacy engagement of multilingual children. Thus, the role that multilingualism plays as a barrier or resource to student learning depends in large part on the institutional and classroom contexts.

Children can react to an unfamiliar instructional language in many ways, such as: silent period, using bilingual peer(s), gesture, imitation, play, resistance or withdrawal. Assessment should thus not be limited in its focus to silence as a fixed psychological characteristic. It is important to use a combination of adult reports, repeated observations and child-friendly methods that are visual, narrative, nonverbal or play-based in order to differentiate language-access difficulties from general developmental issues.

2.4 Marginalization and Intersecting Inequalities

Language exclusion is likely to relate to other aspects of inequality. Families with financial resources can provide their children with private tutoring, bilingual books, digital resources, and exposure to the English language. In remote or fragile circumstances families might have less access to preparing children for the school language. Like that, stereotypes may be present for displaced, migrant and minoritized communities, and can be a mix of language, ethnicity, class and place. This can then be used to create different effects in the classroom on the child, depending on the support he/she has, and the social status of the language.

A design, which needs to be adopted throughout Pakistan, must take into account variation across regions, but not present the notion that any province or community is linguistically monolithic. It must also not be the language of marginalisation to talk of the marginalised languages as deficient. The focus of the analysis is on the relationship between institutional practice and children's experience. It is an orientation that corresponds to social-justice perspectives that consider the difficulty in learning as a problem not in the learner but in the recognition, resources and opportunities that the learner lacks (Piller, 2016; Tupas, 2015).

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution

The literature suggests that there are good theoretical reasons for making the connection between language exclusion and children's learning, identity, participation and emotional security, but there are three gaps. First, most of the Pakistani literature is related to language policy, English-medium instruction or older learners. Secondly, there is a lack of direct attention to socio-psychological outcomes in preschool. Third, national-level evidence seldom combines classroom observations, caregiver observations, and developmentally appropriate child voices. To fill these gaps, the present study was conducted in an explanatory sequential mixed methods design with a multilevel analytical approach and child-friendly participatory techniques.



3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory regards learning as "culturally organized interaction". Language plays a key role in attention, memory, problem-solving and emotional meaning-making. If there is no mediation and the classroom language is not accessible, children may have a lower zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and a lower level of guided participation. First-language inclusion, thus, is not considered an optional accommodation, but rather one pathway to participation, and one pathway to scaffolding.

3.2 Ecological Systems Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, development takes place in a series of interdependent layers of context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the microsystem, children's experiences are influenced by teacher responses, peer relationship and classroom systems. Continuity between home and school is part of the mesosystem, teacher preparation is part of the exosystem, assessment rules and allocation of resources are part of the exosystem, language ideologies, socioeconomic hierarchies, and national or provincial policy are part of the macrosystem. The chronosystem reflects changes in the policy and adaptation of children over time. This design does not leave L1 exclusion to "one teacher."

3.3 Social Identity and Additive–Subtractive Bilingualism

Social identity theory makes the prediction that positive or negative group memberships can influence the self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Language can indicate social and cultural affiliation; whether or not a language is accepted or rejected can send a message of recognition or low status. One of the most pertinent distinctions made by Cummins (2000) is between the two types of bilingual contexts: additive and subtractive. Additive settings involve working with the first language alongside other languages, while subtractive settings involve the assumption that the first language needs to be removed in order to advance in the learning process. The conceptual model thus assumes that teacher relationships, psychological safety, classroom language practices and identity affirmation can be seen as potential mechanisms that connect language conditions with socio-psychological well-being.

3.4 Conceptual Model

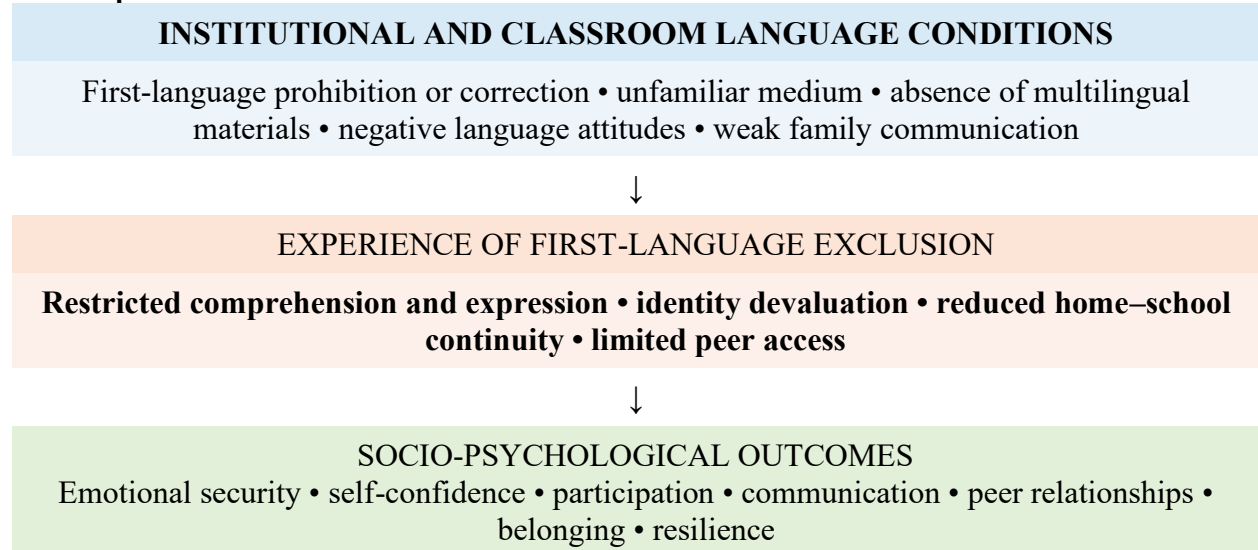


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway examined in the study. Associations were expected to vary by gender, socioeconomic status, region, prior exposure to the instructional language, teacher support, and classroom resources.



4. Methodology

4.1 Paradigm and Design

The study used mixed methods with an explanatory sequential design (QUAN -> qual) and followed a pragmatic paradigm. The quantitative phase involved describing the distribution of first language exclusion, and identifying associations with child outcomes. The qualitative phase then attempted to articulate common patterns, outliers, regionization and apparent contradictions in selected cases from the quantitative sample. The integration took place through case selection, analysis, joint displays and interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

4.2 Setting, Population, and Scope

Children aged 4-6 years attending public or low cost ECE services, their primary caregivers and ECE teachers. The sampling framework aimed to represent all the areas in the province of Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, INA, GBA, and AJK, both urban and rural, remote and linguistically diverse. Pakistan-wide' thus applies to coverage of the major administrative regions, rather than a census of each district or language community.

4.3 Sampling Strategy and Target Sample

A stratified sampling (two-stage) was carried out. The strata used were the administrative regions with districts and ECE sites selected to provide urban-rural and socio-economic variation. Probability procedures were used in combination with purposive site selection in situations where a complete sampling frame was not available and the procedures were used in a transparent manner. The planned sample structure is shown in Table 1. The quantitative sample achieved in Chapter 5 was 480 children, 480 caregivers, 96 teachers and 48 classrooms. Achieved qualitative samples by participant group were not captured in the records provided, and thus were not inferred for this revision.

Table 1. Planned sample structure used in the study design

Participant group	Target quantitative sample	Target qualitative subsample	Primary contribution
Children aged 4–6	Approximately 480	Approximately 48	Observation, child-friendly vignettes, well-being indicators
Primary caregivers	Approximately 480	Approximately 24	Home-language profile, child adjustment, home–school continuity
ECE teachers	Approximately 96	Approximately 24	Classroom language practices, policy and resource constraints
Classrooms/centres	Approximately 48	Selected contrasting cases	Context, language ecology, inclusive and exclusionary practices



4.4 Eligibility Criteria

Children were eligible if they were 4-6 years old, enrolled in an ECE setting, used a first/home language with limited institutional status or accessibility in the classroom, had caregiver consent and developmentally appropriate assent, and met at least one prespecified marginalization criterion. These criteria included low household resources, rural or remote residence, displacement or migration, low caregiver education, disability, or minority-language status. Children with communication differences were not automatically excluded; data-collection procedures were adapted when ethically and methodologically appropriate.

4.5 Variables and Measures

Table 2. Construct-to-measure alignment.

Construct	Operational domains	Source	Analytical output
First-language exclusion	Prohibition/correction, accessibility, teacher responsiveness, peer acceptance, resources, family communication	Teacher, caregiver, observation	Composite scores and contextual profiles
Socio-psychological well-being	Emotional security, confidence, engagement, communication, prosocial interaction, peer relations, belonging	Teacher, caregiver, observation, child response	Domain and total scores
Language background	First language(s), home use, exposure to Urdu/English, family literacy practices	Caregiver	Covariates and subgroup analysis
Classroom ecology	Language(s) used, teacher strategies, peer mediation, visual support, class size, resources	Observation and teacher interview	Classroom-level predictors
Child experience	Emotions, perceived fairness, coping, preferred supports, identity meanings	Pictorial vignettes and play-based conversation	Qualitative themes and case explanations

4.6 Instrument Development and Validation

A demographic and home-language profile recorded children's language repertoires, exposure to the instructional language, family composition, socioeconomic indicators, caregiver



education, migration/displacement, and ECE attendance. The research-developed First-Language Exclusion in ECE Scale was used for teacher and caregiver reports and was complemented by a structured classroom observation protocol. Items distinguished explicit prohibition/correction from implicit exclusion or lack of linguistic support and also included indicators of positive language inclusion.

Socio-psychological well-being was assessed through age-appropriate adult-report and observational indicators rather than a direct child self-report scale. Researcher-designed domains included emotional security, self-confidence, participation, communication, peer relationships, and school belonging. Additional-language proficiency was not used as a proxy for psychological well-being. Child-friendly qualitative activities were used separately to elicit children's perspectives through developmentally appropriate verbal and nonverbal forms.

The manuscript reports an instrument-development process involving literature review, item development, expert review, translation and back-translation, cognitive interviewing, pilot testing, and psychometric analysis. Expertise was intended to cover ECE, developmental psychology, multilingual education, measurement, and relevant Pakistani languages. The reported Results section provides internal-consistency coefficients and confirmatory factor-analysis fit indices; item-level factor loadings, detailed expert-panel composition, and measurement-invariance output were not included in the supplied materials and are therefore not reconstructed here.

4.7 Child-Friendly Qualitative Methods

The qualitative protocol was designed to avoid privileging highly verbal children and to prevent the study from reproducing the language barrier under investigation. It used illustrated vignettes, emotion cards, dolls, drawing, storytelling, and optional role play. Scenarios included a child who did not understand instructions, a child corrected for using a home language, peer exclusion related to accent, support from a bilingual peer, and welcome from a multilingual teacher. Prompts asked what the character might feel, what had happened, what could help, and whether the situation resembled the child's experience. Children could respond in any language available to them and could use gesture or play; multilingual researchers or trained interpreters were used when required.

4.8 Data Collection Procedure

1. Preparation included ethical and administrative permission, regional collaboration, recruitment and training of multilingual research assistants, instrument preparation, and safeguarding procedures.
2. A pilot in sites outside the main sample was used to test translations, observation categories, child vignettes, administration time, and inter-rater procedures.
3. During the quantitative phase, caregiver and teacher questionnaires were administered and structured classroom observations were conducted, with two observations per classroom where feasible. Data were then scored, checked, and prepared for analysis.
4. Preliminary quantitative analysis informed purposive selection of contrasting cases across high, medium, and low exclusion profiles, differing socio-psychological outcome patterns, and regional contexts.
5. The qualitative phase used child-friendly sessions, teacher interviews, caregiver interviews, and focused observations of selected cases. The exact achieved qualitative participant counts were not documented consistently in the supplied manuscript materials; accordingly, this revision does not assign unsupported sample numbers.



6. Integration was conducted through participant- and classroom-level joint displays that linked quantitative profiles with qualitative explanations and supported mixed-methods meta-inferences.

4.9 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis included examination of missing-data patterns and distributions, reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, construct-validity assessment, bivariate associations, group comparisons, and hierarchical or multilevel regression models as supported by the achieved data structure. Models estimated associations between first-language exclusion and socio-psychological outcomes while controlling for relevant child, family, teacher, and classroom covariates, including age, gender, socioeconomic indicators, caregiver education, prior exposure to Urdu or English, teacher experience, and classroom size. Interaction terms were used to examine potential moderation by teacher support and selected subgroup characteristics. Effect sizes and confidence intervals were reported where they were available in the supplied output summary.

4.10 Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Analysis

Interviews, field notes, and child sessions were transcribed in the original language and translated for cross-case analysis as required. Reflexive thematic analysis followed familiarization, coding, theme development, review, naming, and interpretive writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Typical and atypical cases were retained. Children's gestures, emotions, play actions, and use of objects were interpreted cautiously and contextually rather than treated as direct psychological facts.

Mixed-methods integration was organized through participant- and classroom-level joint displays that allowed quantitative and qualitative findings to confirm, extend, challenge, or reframe one another. For example, a high exclusion score could be interpreted differently when qualitative evidence showed protective peer networks or strong caregiver preparation, while average quantitative scores could mask experiences of shame or identity devaluation evident in narrative or play.

4.11 Quality, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Quantitative quality procedures included standardized training, pilot testing, reliability analysis, construct validation, transparent handling of missing data, and double-coding of an observation subsample. Qualitative trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across data sources, reflexive memoing, peer discussion of themes, negative-case analysis, and an audit trail. Adult perspectives could be used to contextualize interpretations, but children were not expected to validate complex adult-generated summaries.

Researcher reflexivity was treated as important because investigators may hold preferences regarding English, Urdu, regional languages, or mother-tongue education. The protocol therefore required attention to power, assumptions, and linguistic biographies during data collection and interpretation. Translation choices were treated as analytical decisions rather than as purely mechanical substitutions.

The ethical protocol required informed consent from parents/caregivers, developmentally appropriate child assent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and safeguarding. Children were not compelled to criticize teachers, demonstrate loyalty to a language, or continue an activity they wished to stop. Pseudonyms and codes protected identity, and small language communities were described cautiously to reduce deductive disclosure. A distress and safeguarding/referral procedure was included. The supplied manuscript did not identify the approving ethics committee, institutional



reference number, or approval date; these details should be inserted from the study records before journal submission.

5. Results

Results are presented in the sequence of the explanatory sequential design. Quantitative findings first describe the achieved sample, measurement quality, first-language exclusion, socio-psychological outcomes, associations, and moderation. Qualitative findings then explain children's, caregivers', and teachers' experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The section concludes with mixed-methods integration and explicit decisions on the null hypotheses.

5.1 Participant and Site Characteristics

The reported final quantitative sample comprised 480 children aged 4-6 years, 480 primary caregivers, 96 ECE teachers, and 48 classrooms. Among the children, 52.1% were boys and 47.9% were girls, with a mean age of 5.2 years ($SD = 0.6$). Study sites spanned Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. More than 60% of participating children were reported to come from rural or remote households characterized by economic vulnerability and/or regional-language minority status. The supplied results summary did not provide integer site counts by administrative region, so regional percentages are not reproduced in this revised manuscript.

Table 3. Participant characteristics and study coverage

Characteristic	Reported value
Children aged 4–6 years	n = 480
Primary caregivers	n = 480
ECE teachers	n = 96
Classrooms	n = 48
Boys	52.1%
Girls	47.9%
Child age	M = 5.2 years; SD = 0.6
Rural/remote or economically/linguistically vulnerable households	>60%
Administrative regions represented	Punjab; Sindh; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; Balochistan; Islamabad Capital Territory; Gilgit-Baltistan; Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Note. Achieved sample totals and demographic values are reproduced from the supplied Chapter 5 results summary. Exact regional site counts were not available in the supplied records.

5.2 Measurement Quality

The First-Language Exclusion in ECE Scale showed high reported internal consistency for both teacher ($\alpha = .89$) and caregiver ($\alpha = .86$) reports. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the



proposed two-factor distinction between explicit prohibition and implicit exclusion/lack of support, with reported fit indices of chi-square/df = 2.34, CFI = .95, and RMSEA = .045. The socio-psychological well-being domains also showed strong internal consistency, with reported coefficients ranging from alpha = .82 to .91. Item-level factor loadings, confidence intervals for reliability estimates, and measurement-invariance results were not included in the supplied results summary and are therefore not inferred.

Table 4. Reported measurement reliability and confirmatory factor-analysis indices

Measure / index	Reported value	Interpretive function
First-Language Exclusion in ECE Scale – teacher report	Cronbach's α = .89	Internal consistency
First-Language Exclusion in ECE Scale – caregiver report	Cronbach's α = .86	Internal consistency
Socio-psychological well-being domains	α = .82–.91	Internal consistency range
χ^2 /df	2.34	CFA model fit
CFI	.95	CFA comparative fit
RMSEA	.045	CFA residual fit

Note. The reported two-factor solution distinguished explicit prohibition from implicit exclusion/lack of support. Item-level loadings and additional fit diagnostics were not supplied.

5.3 Forms and Prevalence of First-Language Exclusion

Descriptive results indicated that first-language exclusion occurred through both explicit restrictions and less visible forms of limited linguistic access. The most frequently reported condition was the absence of multilingual print or visual resources (84.5%), followed by discouragement of home-language use during informal play (78.2%) and rapid immersion in an unfamiliar instructional language without transitional support (71.0%). Instructional access was reported as severely constrained in 65.8% of settings, and explicit prohibition or correction of mother-tongue use was reported in 42.4%. The pattern suggests that structural and implicit exclusion was more common than direct prohibition. The supplied summary did not clearly identify the exact denominator used for every prevalence percentage; therefore, the percentages are presented as reported values rather than converted into classroom counts.

Table 5. Reported forms and prevalence of first-language exclusion

Exclusionary classroom condition	Reported prevalence
Absence of multilingual print or visual resources	84.5%
Discouragement of home-language use during informal play	78.2%
Rapid immersion without transitional linguistic support	71.0%



Exclusionary classroom condition	Reported prevalence
Instructional access severely constrained	65.8%
Explicit prohibition/correction of mother-tongue use	42.4%

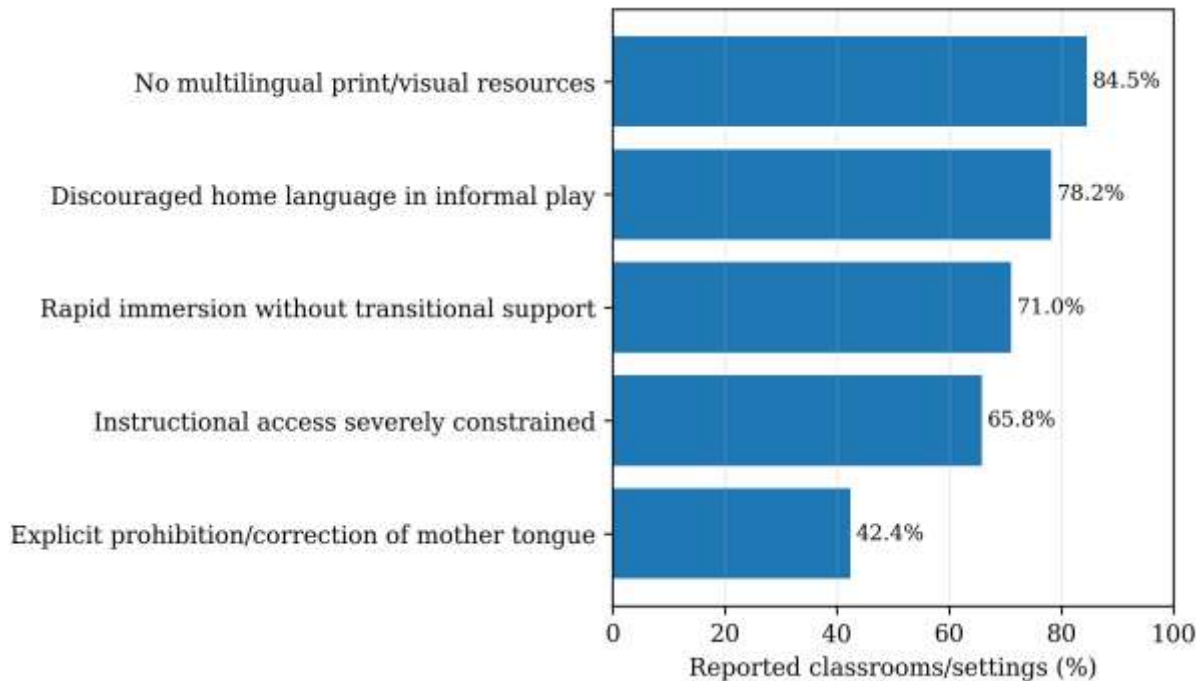


Figure 2. Reported prevalence of first-language exclusion practices and conditions.

5.4 Socio-Psychological Outcomes

On the reported 1–5 socio-psychological well-being scale, peer relationships had the highest mean score ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.78$), followed by emotional security ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.84$). Self-confidence averaged 2.95 ($SD = 0.91$), communication and expression averaged 2.88 ($SD = 0.89$), and school belonging averaged 2.85 ($SD = 0.92$). Classroom participation had the lowest reported mean ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.95$). The descriptive pattern therefore placed participation, belonging, and communication among the comparatively lower-scoring domains. Because these are descriptive statistics, differences among domain means should not be treated as statistically significant unless supported by a formal within-sample comparison.

Table 6. Reported socio-psychological well-being scores

Outcome domain	Mean	SD
Emotional security	3.12	0.84
Self-confidence	2.95	0.91
Classroom participation	2.78	0.95
Communication and expression	2.88	0.89

Outcome domain	Mean	SD
Peer relationships	3.20	0.78
School belonging	2.85	0.92

Note. Scores were reported on a 1-5 standardized scale. Error bars in Figure 3 represent ± 1 SD and are descriptive, not confidence intervals.

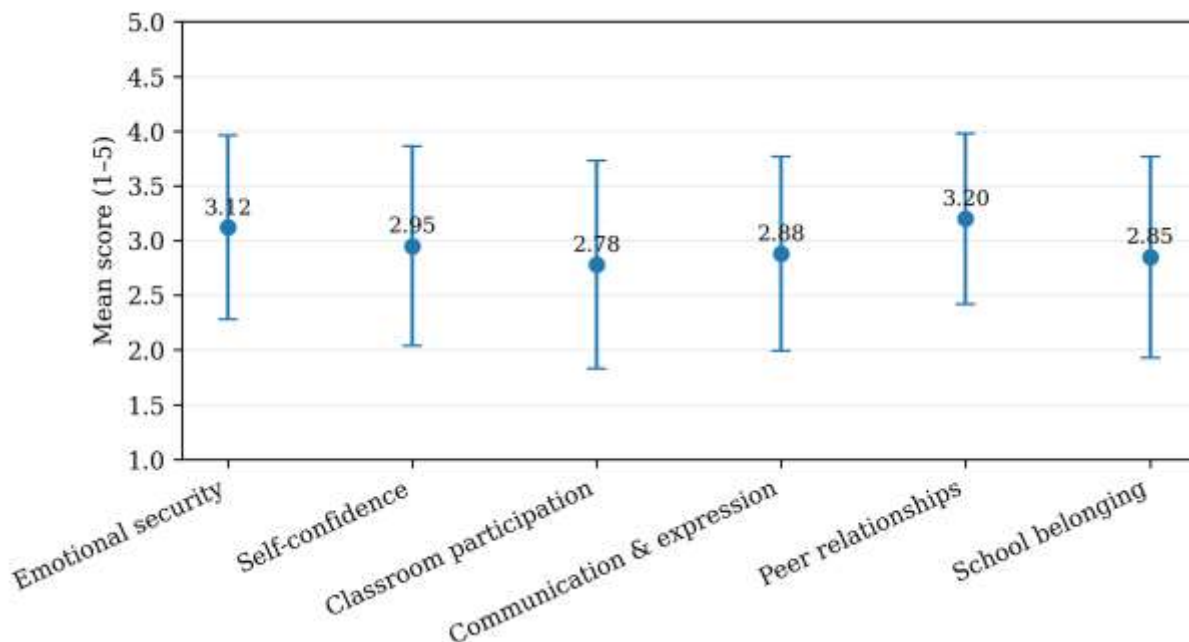


Figure 3. Reported mean socio-psychological outcome scores; error bars represent ± 1 SD.

5.5 Associations and Group Comparisons

Higher first-language exclusion was significantly associated with lower overall socio-psychological well-being ($\beta = -.42$, 95% CI $[-.49, -.35]$, $p < .001$). In adjusted multilevel models controlling for child age, gender, socioeconomic status, and teacher experience, first-language exclusion negatively predicted emotional security ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) and classroom participation ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$). The largest standardized association among the three reported outcomes was observed for classroom participation.

Group comparisons indicated that children in highly language-inclusive classrooms had higher emotional security than children in exclusionary classrooms, $t(478) = 8.42$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .78$. Active classroom participation also favored inclusive classrooms, with a reported effect size of $d = .85$. Group means, group standard deviations, a confidence interval for d , and the corresponding inferential statistic for participation were not included in the supplied results summary and are therefore not reconstructed.

Table 7. Reported associations and group-comparison results

Analysis / outcome	Reported statistic	Direction / interpretation
First-language exclusion → overall socio-psychological well-being	$\beta = -.42$; 95% CI $[-.49, -.35]$; $p < .001$	Higher exclusion associated with lower well-being
First-language exclusion → emotional security	$\beta = -.38$; $p < .001$	Negative association adjusted
First-language exclusion → classroom participation	$\beta = -.45$; $p < .001$	Negative association adjusted
Inclusive vs. exclusionary classrooms: emotional security	$t(478) = 8.42$; $p < .001$; $d = .78$	Inclusive classrooms higher
Inclusive vs. exclusionary classrooms: active participation	$d = .85$	Inclusive classrooms higher; other test statistics not supplied

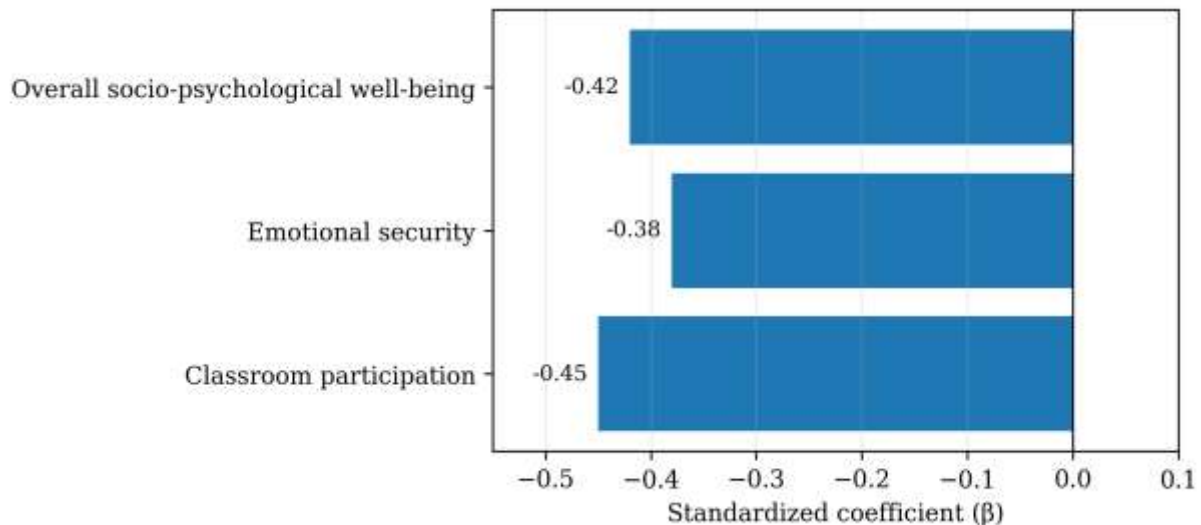


Figure 4. Reported standardized associations between first-language exclusion and selected socio-psychological outcomes.

5.6 Moderation and Subgroup Findings

Teacher support and pedagogical scaffolding moderated the reported relationship between first-language exclusion and children's confidence. The positive interaction coefficient ($B = .21$, $p < .01$) indicates that stronger support reduced the magnitude of the negative association between exclusion and confidence. Directional subgroup findings suggested more pronounced adverse patterns among lower-socioeconomic-status rural children with no prior exposure to the instructional language than among urban peers with passive exposure to Urdu or English media. Because subgroup-specific coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and exact sample sizes were not supplied, subgroup results are interpreted directionally rather than as quantified effect estimates.

**Table 8. Reported moderation and subgroup findings**

Finding	Reported evidence	Reporting status
Teacher support/pedagogical scaffolding buffered effects on confidence	Interaction $B = .21$; $p < .01$	Quantified moderation effect
Lower-SES rural children with no prior instructional-language exposure showed stronger adverse patterns	Directional subgroup finding	Exact subgroup effect estimates not supplied
Urban peers with passive Urdu/English media exposure showed comparatively less pronounced adverse patterns	Directional subgroup finding	Exact subgroup effect estimates not supplied

5.7 Qualitative Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of child-friendly vignette sessions, teacher interviews, and caregiver narratives generated three core themes. Together, the themes framed language exclusion as an emotional, identity-related, and institutional process rather than solely a problem of instructional comprehension.

Theme 1: The Silent Barrier and Misinterpreted Withdrawal. Children were described as responding to unfamiliar or exclusionary language environments with silence, hesitation, and reduced participation. Adults sometimes interpreted this behavior as shyness or low ability, whereas the qualitative accounts linked it to confusion, fear of public error, and emotional withdrawal. The supplied Chapter 5 draft included the following child statement from a pictorial vignette task: 'The boy sits quietly because he does not know the big school words; the teacher thinks he is sleeping, but he is scared to speak wrong.' The wording should be checked against the original transcript before publication.

Theme 2: Identity Devaluation versus Linguistic Affirmation. Subtractive practices were described as signaling that children's home-language identities were less welcome in the classroom. By contrast, bilingual peer support, culturally familiar stories, and welcoming multilingual gestures were associated with visible pride, emotional safety, and stronger peer attachment. The theme therefore distinguishes passive tolerance of linguistic difference from active affirmation of children's linguistic identities.

Theme 3: Institutional Pressures and 'Guilty Multilingualism.' Teachers described tension between monolingual institutional expectations in Urdu or English and the practical need to draw on children's home languages. The supplied analysis characterized this tension as 'guilty multilingualism': teachers recognized the value of multilingual support but experienced pressure to suppress or minimize it. Their accounts linked such pressure to weaker emotional connection and reduced comprehension among children with limited exposure to the instructional language.



Table 9. Qualitative themes and explanatory contribution

Theme	Core pattern	Contribution to explanation
1. Silent barrier and misinterpreted withdrawal	Silence, hesitation, fear of error, confusion, and reduced participation	Explains why low participation may reflect linguistic insecurity rather than a stable child deficit
2. Identity devaluation vs. linguistic affirmation	Home-language suppression contrasted with bilingual peer support, familiar stories, and welcoming gestures	Links language practices to identity, emotional safety, and peer attachment
3. Institutional pressures and “guilty multilingualism”	Teachers experienced conflict between monolingual expectations and children’s multilingual needs	Locates exclusion partly in policy/institutional constraints rather than individual teacher intention

Note. Only one direct child quotation was supplied. No additional quotations have been invented or added.

5.8 Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration at the classroom level showed complementarity between the quantitative and qualitative strands. Quantitative measures identified lower well-being in contexts with higher reported exclusion, while qualitative evidence suggested mechanisms linking exclusion with children's responses. Bilingual peers were described as informal linguistic and emotional bridges; teacher warmth, visual and gestural scaffolding, and family-school communication were also identified as protective conditions. These explanations helped account for divergent cases in which classrooms with moderate exclusion scores nevertheless showed relatively positive child well-being.

The integrated interpretation indicates that the association between first-language exclusion and socio-psychological well-being was not uniform across classrooms. Exclusion scores captured institutional and interactional constraints, while supportive classroom practices appeared to offset some of their effects. Divergent cases were retained as analytically important rather than forced into a single pattern, consistent with the explanatory sequential design.

Table 10. Mixed-methods joint display of key quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative pattern	Qualitative explanation	Integrated inference
Higher exclusion associated with lower overall well-being ($\beta = -.42$)	Children described fear, silence, confusion, and identity-related discomfort	Exclusion may reduce well-being through restricted comprehension, psychological safety, and identity affirmation



Quantitative pattern	Qualitative explanation	Integrated inference
Negative association with classroom participation ($\beta = -.45$)	Silence was sometimes a response to fear of error or inaccessible “school words”	Low participation should not automatically be interpreted as low ability or trait shyness
Negative association with emotional security ($\beta = -.38$)	Welcoming multilingual gestures, familiar stories, and bilingual peers were linked with safety and connection	Language inclusion may operate through relational and emotional mechanisms
Moderate exclusion with relatively positive well-being in divergent cases	Teacher warmth, visual/gestural scaffolding, bilingual peers, and family-school communication acted protectively	Supportive classroom ecology can buffer, but does not erase, institutional language barriers
Teacher support interaction $B = .21$ for confidence	Teachers reported using multilingual support despite monolingual pressures	Teacher agency and scaffolding may moderate the socio-psychological consequences of exclusion

5.9 Hypothesis Decisions

H01 was rejected because first-language exclusion was significantly associated with overall socio-psychological well-being ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$). H02 received partial evidence against the null: emotional security differed significantly between inclusive and exclusionary classrooms ($t(478) = 8.42$, $p < .001$, $d = .78$), and active participation showed a substantial reported effect size ($d = .85$); however, inferential statistics were not supplied for confidence, communication, peer relationships, or school belonging, so H02 should not be rejected globally across all six domains. H03 was rejected for the adjusted outcomes that were reported: first-language exclusion significantly predicted emotional security ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) and classroom participation ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$) after covariate adjustment. Evidence for the remaining domains was not supplied in sufficient detail for additional hypothesis decisions.

5.10 Summary of Results

Across the reported quantitative and qualitative results, first-language exclusion was common and was associated with less favorable socio-psychological outcomes. Structural forms of exclusion, particularly absent multilingual resources, discouraged home-language use, and unsupported immersion, were reported more frequently than direct prohibition. Higher exclusion was associated with lower overall well-being, emotional security, and classroom participation, while teacher support functioned as a protective moderator for confidence. Qualitative themes explained how fear of error, silence, identity devaluation, and institutional monolingual pressure could produce these patterns, and how bilingual peer support, teacher warmth, multimodal scaffolding, and family-school linguistic continuity could buffer them. The integrated findings address the study's research questions while also showing that protective classroom ecology can reduce, but not necessarily eliminate, the disadvantages created by inaccessible language conditions.



6. Discussion

6.1 Principal Findings

The key result was that first-language exclusion was found to be more than just a language of instruction choice. It had been linked to children's availability of belonging, emotional security, participation, comprehension. Children can be linguistically excluded even if there is no prohibition, as indicated by structural forms of exclusion. Combined with the positive buffering interaction of teacher support, the negative relationships with overall well-being, emotional security, and classroom participation suggest that both institutional language conditions and relational aspects of classroom practice are important.

6.2 Interpretation through the Conceptual Framework

The findings are congruent with the study's sociocultural, ecological, social-identity and additive-subtractive bilingual model. Language in the classroom may be inaccessible, which may limit access to mediated participation and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) from a sociocultural perspective. In an ecological view, language conditions are constructed by language hierarchies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), family-school continuity, resources, and school policy in addition to individual teachers. Social-identity theory may help explain how correction or devaluation of a home language can impact on a sense of belonging and self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The additive subtractive distinction also helps to explain that it is not a problem of learning Urdu or English, or learning another language, but a problem of additional-language learning that is organized as a sudden replacement or a stigmatization or a limitation of the child's language(s) (Cummins, 2000).

6.3 Relationship to Previous Research

The reported patterns are consistent with the findings of Pakistani studies which found a gap between language expectations in institution and learners' sociocultural environment (Manan et al., 2015), and studies that revealed that language anxiety, fear of error, cognitive overload and low confidence were associated with reduced participation of older learners (Mehmood et al., 2025b, 2025c, 2025d). The current research builds on that discussion in early childhood by examining early childhood sensitive outcomes like emotional security, participation, peer relationships, and belonging. The theme of the qualitative findings is also related to the idea of 'guilty multilingualism' (i.e., teachers' awareness of the benefits of multilingualism in practice, yet operating under a monolingual framework) (Manan et al., 2022). Simultaneously, findings about the positive effects of cultural responsiveness and multilingualism on identity and engagement align with the research on the significance of indigenous knowledge, family-school continuity, and multilingual professional development (Mehmood et al., 2025a; McInnes et al., 2025; Schwartz & Ragnarsdóttir, 2025).



6.4 Mixed-Methods Interpretation and Protective Conditions

For the interpretation of silence, the qualitative strand was a very important one. The quietness in an ECE setting can be a sign of: observation, temporary additional-language 'silent period', culturally appropriate interaction, anxiety, fear of error and exclusion. Based on this, the child friendly accounts and the adult stories in the book therefore warn against assuming that 'quiet' is a stable personality trait 'shyness', 'inability' or 'inattention'. Divergent cases also revealed how average exclusion scores should not be treated mechanically, with teacher warmth, visual and gestural scaffolding, bilingual peers, and good communication between school and home showing potential to buffer some of the negative experiences. All of these factors do not remove institutional language barriers but they point to practical ways in which classrooms can stay psychologically safer when experiencing multilingual transitions.

6.5 Scope of Inference

Because of the way the study was conducted, there can only be association and explanation, not definitive causal statements. The results of this study cannot therefore be taken to imply that the teaching of Urdu, English or multi-lingual schooling are per se unhelpful. The key contrast is between the supportive, additive transitions, and environments where children's current linguistic capabilities are disregarded, marginalized, and not available. This is relevant for policy, as it is not a matter of all teachers being fluent in all home languages, but of having respectful attitudes towards language, multimodal scaffolding, family engagement, and staged access to other languages in effective multilingual ECE.

7. Implications

7.1 Teachers and ECE Centres

- Set clear classroom rules about the importance of all children's and families' languages.
- Use the child's first/home language strategically, where appropriate, in greetings, reassurance and key routines, emotion words and connections to prior knowledge.
- Use pictures, objects, movement, gesture, modelling and play along with verbal instructions to ensure access in more than one language.
- Do not punish, ridicule or publically correct home-language use, accent or code-switching.
- Ask the caregivers to share stories, songs, words and culturally relevant play items.
- Consider that before diagnosing a child as “shy”, “inattentive”, or “late”, determine if the child’s behavior changes when language support and multimodality is enhanced.
- Utilize the bilingual peers as supportive partners rather than as ongoing translators or adult teaching assistants.
- Arrange for progressive change-over either to Urdu, English or other curriculum languages, rather than a complete replacement of children's language use.

7.2 Teacher Education and Curriculum

Teacher education programs should differentiate between pedagogical translanguaging and unplanned translation/codeswitching. Teachers require practical strategies for engaging in multilingual routines, culturally responsive assessment, family communication, socio-emotional support, and participation that is psychologically safe. Guidance for curriculum should be flexible with examples linked to multilingualism and low cost ways of implementing the learning activities in classrooms where teachers are not fluent in all children's home language, as this is a recurring issue in Pakistani language education (Mehmood et al., 2025a, 2025d).



7.3 Policy and Assessment

The transition from children first languages to Urdu/English and other curriculum languages should be the focus of federal and provincial policies in an additive rather than subtractive way. Implementation relies on teachers' deployment, multilingual and contextually appropriate resources, family-school collaboration, and indicators of accessibility and inclusion that go beyond compliance with a specified medium of instruction. Early assessment should also allow children to express their understanding in more than one way and should discriminate between an understanding of the concept and skill in the language of instruction.

8. Limitations

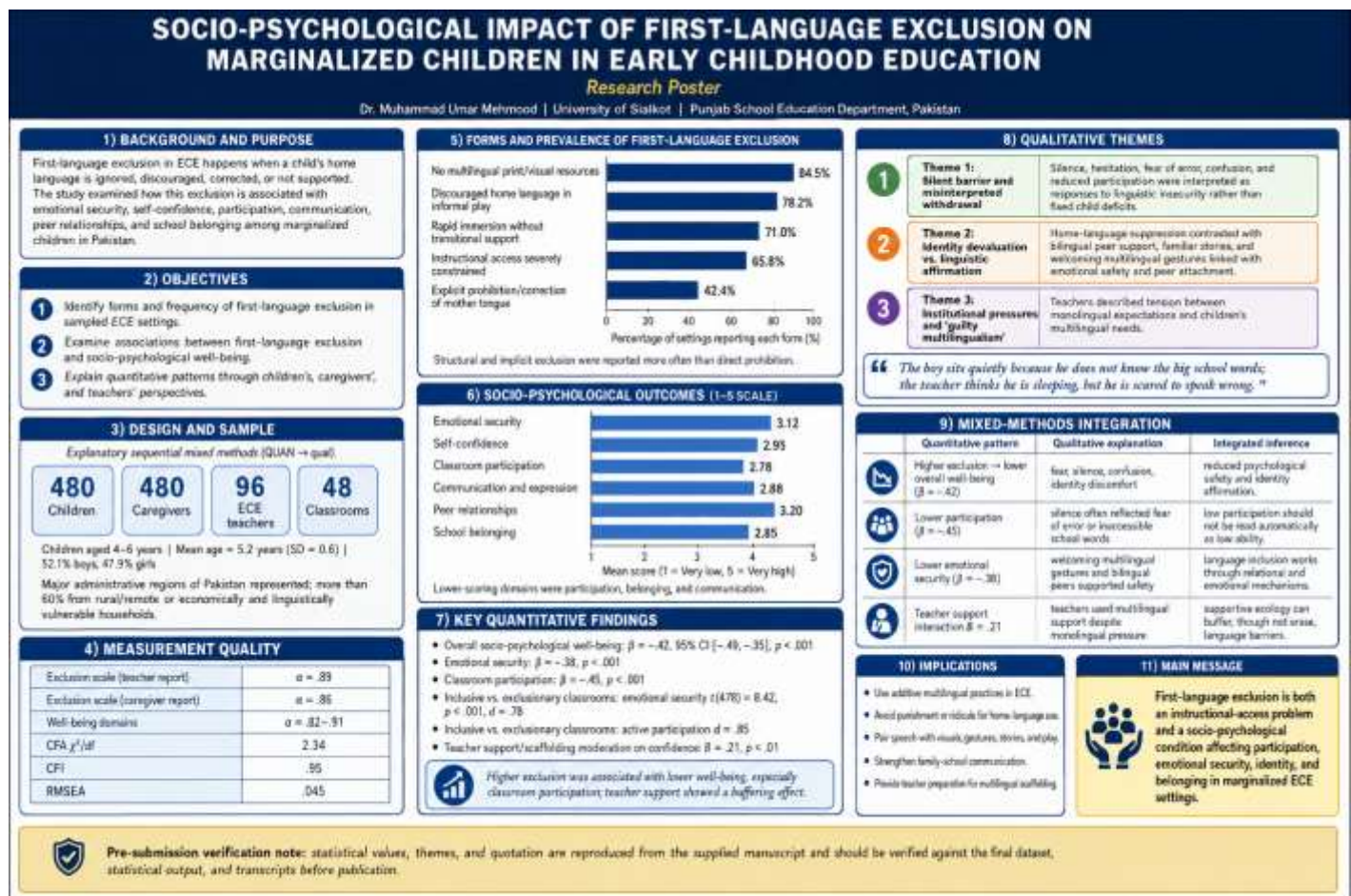
- The cross section main phase restricts causal inferences; the design allows associations and explanatory mechanisms but not causal effects.
- The Pakistan-wide coverage does not constitute all districts, language communities or ECE institutional models.
- Translation into more than one language may result in nuance differences even after going through translation, back-translation and multiple language review processes.
- Social desirability, differences in expectations or shared method variance can affect teacher/caregiver reports.
- Repeated visits were planned to minimize reactivity; classroom observation may have affected teachers' behavior.
- Poverty, school quality, migration, and discrimination are all related to first-language exclusion, and statistical adjustment for these factors cannot completely remove all the residual confounding.
- Children's language acquisition may be multiple or language use may change across settings; a single 'first language' label does not sufficiently capture such children.
- The results summary provided was not detailed enough to record the exact denominators for each prevalence percent and/or integer site count for each regional site; these should be verified with the final codebook and site register prior to submission.
- Qualitative sample, achieved by a participant group, was not documented consistently for the supplied materials, and only one direct quotation of a child was available for verification.
- There is missing information in the provided summary report, such as item-level CFA loadings, measurement-invariance results, participation group by subgroup estimates, and complete inferential statistics for the participation group comparison.

9. Conclusion

First-language exclusion in ECE is not only about the language that is mentioned in a textbook or timetable. It involves the question of whether young people can grasp expectations, articulate feelings, show competence, build relationships, and feel their family identities are legitimate in school. The reported analysis revealed that greater exclusion was linked to poorer overall socio-psychological wellbeing, emotional security, and participation within the classroom, with some evidence of the effect of teacher support and multilingual scaffolding. The qualitative results also revealed the impact of silence, fear of error, identity devaluation, institutional monolingualism on children's experiences, as well as the positive effect of bilingual peers, teacher warmth, visual support and continuity with families on access. The findings are in line with transitions grounded in

an additive, culturally responsive, and emotionally safe approach to the language of the curriculum for Pakistan's multilingual and unequal ECE context, instead of an abrupt replacement of children's language resources. The study then establishes language inclusion as a part of ECE quality, equity, family engagement, and child well-being.

Graphical Posture of the RESEARCH





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