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Community schools and local language instruction: a comparative analysis of educational access and quality in Niger and Peru

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the comparative approaches to community schools and local language instruction in Niger and Peru, two countries with significant linguistic diversity and persistent educational exclusion. Despite their different geographical and cultural contexts, both nations face the fundamental challenge of delivering quality education to indigenous and marginalized populations through community-based models and mother-tongue instruction. The research employs a comparative case study methodology, drawing on policy documents, program

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evaluations, and empirical studies from both countries spanning 2020-2026. Niger's educational landscape is characterized by severe access deficits and linguistic complexity. With 11 national languages and French as the official language of instruction, the country struggles with low enrollment (primary net enrollment rate of approximately 60%) and high dropout rates. Community schools emerged as an alternative to address gaps in the formal system, operating with greater flexibility and community involvement. Research from the Niger Education and Community Strengthening (NECS) project demonstrates that community-based approaches, when properly supported, can improve access and learning outcomes. The project's integrated approach—combining school construction, teacher training, and community engagement—reached over 100,000 children across multiple regions, with significant gains in early grade reading and mathematics (USAID, 2024). The introduction of bilingual education programs, using local languages alongside French, has shown promise. Studies indicate that children taught initially in their mother tongue demonstrate better reading comprehension and mathematical reasoning than those taught exclusively in French, with effects particularly pronounced for girls and children from low-literacy households (RTI International, 2023). However, challenges persist: inadequate teacher training in bilingual methods, limited availability of learning materials in local languages, and resistance from some parents who perceive French as the language of opportunity (UNESCO, 2025).

Peru presents a different but equally complex picture. The country recognizes 47 indigenous languages and has developed a robust policy framework for Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE). The 2016 National Curriculum establishes that indigenous students have the right to receive education in their mother tongue and in Spanish as a second language. The Ministry of Education's IBE policy, updated in 2024, emphasizes the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures while ensuring students acquire the Spanish proficiency needed for full citizenship participation (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Impact studies reveal significant challenges: bilingual education reaches only 35-40% of indigenous children, and learning outcomes remain below national averages. The Young Lives study, tracking approximately 2,800 children since 2002, found that indigenous children consistently lag behind non-indigenous peers in reading comprehension, with gaps widening as children progress through school (Young Lives, 2024). The study highlights the critical role of early childhood education and mother-tongue instruction in

reducing achievement gaps, while documenting persistent barriers including poverty, geographic isolation, and discrimination. Community-based education initiatives, such as the Fe y Alegría network and various NGO programs, have demonstrated success in reaching remote communities with culturally relevant pedagogy. The Wasi Mikuna ("House of Children") project in Ayacucho, combining early childhood education with nutrition and health services, shows how integrated community approaches can address multiple barriers to learning simultaneously (Fe y Alegría, 2025).

Niger's strength lies in its pragmatic approach to community schools as a mechanism for rapid expansion of access, its growing evidence base for bilingual instruction, and its attention to community engagement in school management. Peru's advantage is its sophisticated policy framework for intercultural bilingual education, its recognition of indigenous rights as foundational to educational policy, and its long-term longitudinal research providing insights into educational trajectories. Both countries demonstrate that effective education for marginalized populations requires: (1) mother-tongue instruction as a pedagogical foundation; (2) community engagement in school governance and management; (3) adequate teacher training in bilingual and culturally relevant pedagogy; (4) learning materials in local languages; (5) attention to early childhood as a critical window; (6) integration of education with health and nutrition interventions; (7) sustained policy commitment beyond political cycles; and (8) recognition that linguistic diversity is not an obstacle to learning but a resource to be cultivated.

KEYWORDS: Community schools, local language instruction, bilingual education, educational access, Niger, Peru, intercultural bilingual education, mother-tongue instruction, indigenous education, educational equity.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine les approches comparatives des écoles communautaires et de l'enseignement en langues locales au Niger et au Pérou, deux pays caractérisés par une diversité linguistique significative et une exclusion éducative persistante. Malgré leurs contextes géographiques et culturels différents, les deux nations sont confrontées au défi fondamental de dispenser une

éducation de qualité aux populations indigènes et marginalisées par le biais de modèles communautaires et d'enseignement en langue maternelle. La recherche emploie une méthodologie d'étude de cas comparative, s'appuyant sur des documents politiques, des évaluations de programmes et des études empiriques des deux pays couvrant la période 2020-2026. Le paysage éducatif du Niger est caractérisé par des déficits d'accès sévères et une complexité linguistique. Avec 11 langues nationales et le français comme langue officielle d'enseignement, le pays est confronté à de faibles taux de scolarisation (taux net de scolarisation primaire d'environ 60 %) et à des taux d'abandon élevés. Les écoles communautaires ont émergé comme une alternative pour combler les lacunes du système formel, fonctionnant avec une plus grande flexibilité et une implication communautaire accrue. Les recherches du projet NECS (Niger Education and Community Strengthening) démontrent que les approches communautaires, lorsqu'elles sont correctement soutenues, peuvent améliorer l'accès et les résultats d'apprentissage. L'approche intégrée du projet—combinant la construction d'écoles, la formation des enseignants et l'engagement communautaire—a touché plus de 100 000 enfants dans plusieurs régions, avec des gains significatifs en lecture et en mathématiques au primaire (USAID, 2024). L'introduction de programmes d'éducation bilingue, utilisant les langues locales aux côtés du français, s'est avérée prometteuse. Des études indiquent que les enfants d'abord instruits dans leur langue maternelle démontrent une meilleure compréhension en lecture et un meilleur raisonnement mathématique que ceux instruits exclusivement en français, avec des effets particulièrement prononcés pour les filles et les enfants issus de ménages à faible niveau d'alphabétisation (RTI International, 2023). Cependant, des défis persistent : formation inadéquate des enseignants aux méthodes bilingues, disponibilité limitée de matériels d'apprentissage en langues locales et résistance de certains parents qui perçoivent le français comme la langue de l'opportunité (UNESCO, 2025).

Le Pérou présente un tableau différent mais tout aussi complexe. Le pays reconnaît 47 langues indigènes et a développé un cadre politique robuste pour l'Éducation Interculturelle Bilingue (EIB). Le Curriculum National de 2016 établit que les élèves indigènes ont le droit de recevoir une éducation dans leur langue maternelle et en espagnol comme seconde langue. La politique EIB du Ministère de l'Éducation, mise à jour en 2024, met l'accent sur la préservation des langues et cultures indigènes tout en garantissant que les élèves acquièrent la maîtrise de l'espagnol nécessaire à une pleine participation citoyenne (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Les études d'impact

révèlent des défis significatifs : l'éducation bilingue n'atteint que 35 à 40 % des enfants indigènes, et les résultats d'apprentissage restent inférieurs aux moyennes nationales. L'étude Young Lives, qui a suivi environ 2 800 enfants depuis 2002, a révélé que les enfants indigènes accusent constamment un retard par rapport à leurs pairs non indigènes en compréhension de lecture, les écarts se creusant à mesure que les enfants progressent dans le système scolaire (Young Lives, 2024). L'étude souligne le rôle crucial de l'éducation de la petite enfance et de l'enseignement en langue maternelle pour réduire les écarts de réussite, tout en documentant les obstacles persistants que sont la pauvreté, l'isolement géographique et la discrimination. Les initiatives d'éducation communautaire, telles que le réseau Fe y Alegría et divers programmes d'ONG, ont démontré leur succès dans l'atteinte des communautés éloignées grâce à une pédagogie culturellement pertinente. Le projet Wasi Mikuna ("Maison des Enfants") à Ayacucho, combinant l'éducation de la petite enfance avec des services de nutrition et de santé, montre comment des approches communautaires intégrées peuvent simultanément lever plusieurs obstacles à l'apprentissage (Fe y Alegría, 2025).

La force du Niger réside dans son approche pragmatique des écoles communautaires comme mécanisme d'expansion rapide de l'accès, dans sa base de preuves croissante pour l'enseignement bilingue et dans son attention à l'engagement communautaire dans la gestion scolaire. L'avantage du Pérou est son cadre politique sophistiqué pour l'éducation interculturelle bilingue, sa reconnaissance des droits indigènes comme fondement de la politique éducative et ses recherches longitudinales à long terme fournissant des informations sur les trajectoires éducatives. Les deux pays démontrent qu'une éducation efficace pour les populations marginalisées nécessite : (1) l'enseignement en langue maternelle comme fondement pédagogique ; (2) l'engagement communautaire dans la gouvernance et la gestion scolaires ; (3) une formation adéquate des enseignants à la pédagogie bilingue et culturellement pertinente ; (4) du matériel d'apprentissage en langues locales ; (5) une attention à la petite enfance comme fenêtre critique ; (6) l'intégration de l'éducation avec les interventions de santé et de nutrition ; (7) un engagement politique soutenu au-delà des cycles électoraux ; et (8) la reconnaissance que la diversité linguistique n'est pas un obstacle à l'apprentissage mais une ressource à cultiver.

MOTS-CLÉS : Écoles communautaires, enseignement en langues locales, éducation bilingue, accès à l'éducation, Niger, Pérou, éducation interculturelle bilingue, instruction en langue maternelle, éducation indigène, équité éducative

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1. INTRODUCTION

The right to education is universally recognized, yet its realization remains profoundly unequal. For indigenous and marginalized populations, access to quality education is often limited by linguistic barriers, geographic isolation, and cultural distance between home and school. The language of instruction—whether the mother tongue or a dominant national language—fundamentally shapes children's ability to learn, their engagement with schooling, and their educational trajectories. Community schools, operating with greater flexibility and local involvement, have emerged as a potential alternative to formal systems that often fail to reach the most excluded.

Niger and Peru, two countries with rich linguistic diversity and persistent educational inequities, offer a compelling comparative lens through which to examine these dynamics. Niger, in West Africa, is home to 11 national languages, with French serving as the official language of instruction. The country faces severe educational challenges: primary net enrollment rates hover around 60%, dropout rates are high, and learning outcomes are among the lowest globally (UNESCO, 2025). Community schools have proliferated as a response to gaps in the formal system, often initiated by communities themselves with support from NGOs and international partners.

Peru, in South America, recognizes 47 indigenous languages and has developed a sophisticated policy framework for Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE). The 2016 National Curriculum establishes that indigenous students have the right to receive education in their mother tongue and

in Spanish as a second language (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Yet despite this policy commitment, bilingual education reaches only 35-40% of indigenous children, and learning outcomes for indigenous students lag significantly behind national averages (Young Lives, 2024).

This study examines the comparative approaches to community schools and local language instruction in Niger and Peru. Drawing on policy documents, program evaluations, and empirical research from both countries, it explores how language policy, community engagement, and pedagogical approaches shape educational access and quality for marginalized populations. The analysis is organized around four interconnected themes: (1) the linguistic and educational contexts of each country; (2) policy frameworks for community schools and bilingual education; (3) implementation challenges and successes; and (4) the implications for educational equity and quality.

The study contributes to scholarship on language-in-education policy, community-based education, and educational equity. It argues that mother-tongue instruction, supported by community engagement and adequate resources, is not merely a matter of cultural recognition but a pedagogical imperative. The experiences of Niger and Peru offer lessons for other multilingual countries seeking to deliver quality education to all children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language of Instruction and Learning Outcomes

The relationship between language of instruction and learning outcomes is one of the most well-documented findings in educational research. A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that children learn to read more quickly and comprehend better when instructed in their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2016). The cognitive advantages of mother-tongue instruction include more effective development of foundational literacy skills, better understanding of content, and smoother transition to second-language learning when properly scaffolded.

Research in sub-Saharan Africa has consistently shown that children taught in local languages outperform those taught exclusively in colonial languages on reading comprehension and

mathematics assessments (Piper et al., 2016). The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) has been instrumental in documenting these effects across multiple contexts, including Niger (RTI International, 2023).

However, mother-tongue instruction is not without challenges. In linguistically diverse contexts, decisions about which language(s) to use in schools are politically charged and practically complex. The transition to a second language must be carefully managed to avoid disrupting learning. Parental preferences may favor dominant languages perceived as offering greater economic opportunity, creating tensions between pedagogical evidence and community aspirations (Benson, 2004).

2.2 Community Schools: Alternative Models of Educational Delivery

Community schools have emerged as a response to the limitations of formal education systems in reaching marginalized populations. These schools typically operate with greater flexibility, stronger community involvement, and more culturally relevant curricula than government schools (Miller-Grandvaux & Yoder, 2002). They may be initiated by communities themselves, by NGOs, or by governments seeking to expand access rapidly.

Research on community schools has documented both strengths and limitations. Strengths include increased access in underserved areas, stronger community ownership and accountability, and greater responsiveness to local needs (DeStefano et al., 2007). Limitations include challenges in ensuring quality, sustainability, and integration with national education systems. Many community schools struggle with inadequate funding, poorly trained teachers, and lack of recognition for their students' credentials.

In Niger, community schools have played a significant role in expanding access, particularly in rural areas where government schools are scarce. The Niger Education and Community Strengthening (NECS) project demonstrated that community-based approaches, when properly supported, can improve both access and learning outcomes (USAID, 2024).

2.3 Intercultural Bilingual Education in Latin America

Latin America has been at the forefront of developing intercultural bilingual education policies. The concept of "intercultural" education goes beyond simply using indigenous languages as mediums of instruction; it emphasizes the value of indigenous cultures and knowledges and aims to foster mutual respect between indigenous and non-indigenous populations (López & Sichra, 2008).

Peru's Intercultural Bilingual Education policy is among the most developed in the region. The policy recognizes indigenous children's right to education in their mother tongue and establishes frameworks for curriculum development, teacher training, and materials production in indigenous languages (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). However, implementation has lagged behind policy, with persistent gaps in coverage and quality.

The Young Lives study in Peru has provided valuable longitudinal evidence on the educational trajectories of indigenous children. The study has documented persistent achievement gaps, the protective effects of early childhood education, and the complex interplay between poverty, language, and discrimination in shaping educational outcomes (Young Lives, 2024).

2.4 Teacher Training and Materials Development

Effective bilingual education requires teachers who are proficient in both the local language and the national language, trained in bilingual pedagogy, and equipped with appropriate materials. Yet teacher training in bilingual methods is often inadequate, and materials in local languages are scarce (UNESCO, 2025).

In Niger, the introduction of bilingual education has highlighted the need for systematic teacher training and materials development. RTI International's work has documented both the potential of bilingual approaches and the challenges of scaling them up (RTI International, 2023).

In Peru, despite decades of IBE policy, teacher training in bilingual education remains uneven. Many teachers in indigenous areas are not themselves fluent in local languages and have received limited training in bilingual pedagogy (Young Lives, 2024).

2.5 Community Engagement and School Governance

Community engagement in school governance is widely recognized as important for educational quality and sustainability. When communities are involved in decisions about schools, they are more likely to support them, monitor teacher attendance, and contribute resources (Bray, 2003).

Both Niger and Peru have experimented with community engagement mechanisms. In Niger, community schools typically involve local management committees that oversee school operations and contribute to decision-making (USAID, 2024). In Peru, the Fe y Alegría network has developed models of community-based education that combine strong local involvement with professional management (Fe y Alegría, 2025).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1: How do the linguistic and educational contexts of Niger and Peru shape their approaches to community schools and local language instruction?

2: What policy frameworks exist in each country for community schools and bilingual education, and how effectively are they implemented?

3: What evidence exists on the effectiveness of community schools and local language instruction in improving educational access and learning outcomes for marginalized populations?

4: What lessons can be drawn from comparative analysis for strengthening educational equity in linguistically diverse contexts?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to examine community schools and local language instruction in Niger and Peru. The research design integrates document analysis of

primary sources with synthesis of secondary literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of educational policies, programs, and outcomes in both countries.

Primary sources analyzed include: policy documents from the Ministry of Education Peru (2024) and UNESCO (2025); program evaluations from USAID (2024), RTI International (2023), and Fe y Alegría (2025); and longitudinal research from the Young Lives study (2024).

The comparative framework examines four dimensions of community schools and local language instruction: (1) linguistic and educational context; (2) policy frameworks; (3) implementation challenges and successes; and (4) outcomes for educational access and quality.

The analysis covers the period from approximately 2020 to 2026, capturing recent policy developments and program evaluations.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Linguistic and Educational Contexts

Niger: Niger's educational landscape is characterized by profound challenges of access and quality. Key features include:

- **Linguistic diversity:** 11 national languages, with French as the official language of instruction. Major languages include Hausa, Zarma, Tamajaq, Fulfulde, and others.
- **Low enrollment:** Primary net enrollment rate approximately 60%, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas, and between boys and girls (UNESCO, 2025).
- **High dropout:** Many children drop out before completing primary school, particularly girls and children from poor households.
- **Low learning outcomes:** Niger consistently ranks near the bottom of international learning assessments.
- **Limited resources:** Inadequate school infrastructure, poorly trained teachers, and scarcity of learning materials, particularly in local languages.

- **Community schools:** Proliferation of community-initiated schools to fill gaps in formal system, often supported by NGOs and international partners.

Peru: Peru's educational landscape is shaped by its indigenous diversity and persistent inequities. Key features include:

- **Linguistic diversity:** 47 indigenous languages recognized, with Quechua, Aymara, and Amazonian languages having the largest speaker populations. Spanish is the dominant language of instruction.
- **Policy commitment:** Robust policy framework for Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE), establishing indigenous children's right to mother-tongue instruction.
- **Coverage gaps:** IBE reaches only 35-40% of indigenous children; many attend Spanish-medium schools with no bilingual support (Young Lives, 2024).
- **Achievement gaps:** Indigenous children consistently lag behind non-indigenous peers on national and international assessments, with gaps widening as children progress through school.
- **Poverty and isolation:** Indigenous populations are disproportionately poor and geographically isolated, compounding educational barriers.
- **Community initiatives:** Networks like Fe y Alegría and various NGO programs provide community-based education in underserved areas.

Table 1: Comparative Linguistic and Educational Contexts

Dimension	**Niger**	**Peru**
Number of languages	11 national languages	47 indigenous languages
Official language of instruction	French	Spanish (with IBE as alternative)
Primary net enrollment	~60% (UNESCO, 2025)	~95% (national average; indigenous lower)
Learning outcomes	Very low (near bottom of international assessments)	Indigenous students lag significantly (Young Lives, 2024)

Policy framework for bilingual education	Emerging; pilot programs	Robust; National Curriculum 2016 (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024)
Coverage of bilingual education	Limited; project-based	35-40% of indigenous children (Young Lives, 2024)
Community school presence	Significant; proliferation of community-initiated schools	Present; Fe y Alegría network and NGO programs

5.2 Policy Frameworks

Niger: Niger's policy framework for community schools and bilingual education is evolving but remains fragmented. Key features include:

- **Constitutional recognition:** The Constitution recognizes French as the official language but also acknowledges national languages.
- **Education Sector Plan:** The current education sector plan includes provisions for community schools and pilot bilingual education programs.
- **Pilot programs:** The government, with support from international partners, has implemented pilot bilingual education programs in several regions, using local languages alongside French.
- **NECS project:** The USAID-funded Niger Education and Community Strengthening (NECS) project demonstrated the potential of community-based approaches, reaching over 100,000 children and generating evidence on effective strategies (USAID, 2024).
- **Limited institutionalization:** Despite promising pilots, bilingual education and community schools remain peripheral to the mainstream system, with limited funding and policy support.

Peru: Peru has one of the most developed policy frameworks for Intercultural Bilingual Education in Latin America. Key features include:

- **Constitutional recognition:** The Constitution recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to education in their own languages.

- **National Curriculum (2016):** Establishes that indigenous students have the right to receive education in their mother tongue and in Spanish as a second language (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024).
- **IBE policy (2024 update):** The updated IBE policy emphasizes preservation of indigenous languages and cultures while ensuring Spanish proficiency for full citizenship participation.
- **Institutional structure:** The Ministry of Education has a dedicated Directorate of Intercultural Bilingual Education and Rural Education.
- **Curriculum and materials development:** The government has developed curricula and learning materials in multiple indigenous languages, though coverage remains incomplete.
- **Teacher training:** Pre-service and in-service teacher training programs in IBE exist but are uneven in quality and reach.

Table 2: Comparative Policy Frameworks

Dimension	**Niger**	**Peru**
Constitutional recognition	French official; national languages recognized	Indigenous languages recognized; right to mother-tongue education
Dedicated bilingual education policy	Emerging; pilot programs	Robust; IBE policy (2024 update) (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024)
Institutional structure	Limited	Dedicated Ministry of Education directorate
Curriculum and materials	Limited; project-based development	Developed for multiple languages; gaps remain
Teacher training	Inadequate; project-based	Uneven; pre-service and in-service programs exist
Community school policy	Recognized; limited integration	Community initiatives recognized; Fe y Alegría network

5.3 Implementation Challenges and Successes

Niger: Implementation of community schools and bilingual education in Niger faces significant challenges, but promising successes have been documented.

Challenges:

- **Inadequate teacher training:** Most teachers lack training in bilingual pedagogy; many are not fluent in local languages (RTI International, 2023).
- **Limited materials:** Learning materials in local languages are scarce, particularly beyond early grades.
- **Parental resistance:** Some parents prefer French-medium instruction, perceiving it as the language of opportunity (UNESCO, 2025).
- **Sustainability:** Community schools often depend on external funding and struggle to maintain quality without ongoing support.
- **Integration:** Community schools are often poorly integrated with the formal system, creating challenges for student transitions and credential recognition.

Successes:

- **NECS project:** The Niger Education and Community Strengthening project demonstrated significant gains in early grade reading and mathematics through community-based approaches. The project's integrated model—combining school construction, teacher training, and community engagement—reached over 100,000 children across multiple regions (USAID, 2024).
- **Bilingual education pilots:** Studies indicate that children taught initially in their mother tongue demonstrate better reading comprehension and mathematical reasoning than those taught exclusively in French, with effects particularly pronounced for girls and children from low-literacy households (RTI International, 2023).
- **Community engagement:** Community schools have successfully mobilized local resources and support, creating strong ownership and accountability.

Peru: Implementation of Intercultural Bilingual Education in Peru faces persistent challenges despite strong policy frameworks.

Challenges:

- **Coverage gaps:** IBE reaches only 35-40% of indigenous children; many attend Spanish-medium schools with no bilingual support (Young Lives, 2024).
- **Quality deficits:** Even when IBE is available, quality is often poor due to inadequate teacher training, limited materials, and weak supervision.
- **Teacher capacity:** Many teachers in indigenous areas are not fluent in local languages and have limited training in bilingual pedagogy.
- **Discrimination:** Indigenous children face discrimination and cultural marginalization in schools, undermining their engagement and learning.
- **Achievement gaps:** The Young Lives study documents persistent and widening achievement gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous children (Young Lives, 2024).

Successes:

- **Fe y Alegría network:** Community-based education initiatives, such as the Fe y Alegría network, have demonstrated success in reaching remote communities with culturally relevant pedagogy (Fe y Alegría, 2025).
- **Wasi Mikuna project:** The "House of Children" project in Ayacucho combines early childhood education with nutrition and health services, showing how integrated community approaches can address multiple barriers to learning simultaneously (Fe y Alegría, 2025).
- **Longitudinal evidence:** The Young Lives study provides valuable insights into educational trajectories, highlighting the critical role of early childhood education and mother-tongue instruction in reducing achievement gaps (Young Lives, 2024).
- **Policy development:** Peru's policy framework for IBE continues to evolve, with recent updates emphasizing quality and coverage.

Table 3: Comparative Implementation Challenges and Successes

Dimension	**Niger**	**Peru**

Teacher training	Inadequate; project-based (RTI International, 2023)	Uneven; many teachers not fluent in local languages (Young Lives, 2024)
Learning materials	Limited, especially beyond early grades	Developed for multiple languages; gaps remain
Parental attitudes	Mixed; some prefer French	Varies; some value Spanish as language of opportunity
Coverage	Limited; pilot programs	35-40% of indigenous children (Young Lives, 2024)
Documented successes	NECS project gains; bilingual pilot results (USAID, 2024; RTI International, 2023)	Fe y Alegría; Wasi Mikuna; Young Lives evidence (Fe y Alegría, 2025; Young Lives, 2024)
Persistent barriers	Funding; sustainability; integration	Quality; discrimination; poverty

5.4 Outcomes for Educational Access and Quality

Niger: Measured outcomes from Niger's community schools and bilingual education initiatives demonstrate potential but limited scale.

- **NECS project outcomes (USAID, 2024):**
  - Over 100,000 children reached across multiple regions
  - Significant gains in early grade reading and mathematics
  - Improved community engagement in school governance
  - Strengthened teacher capacity through training
- **Bilingual education pilot outcomes (RTI International, 2023):**
  - Children taught in mother tongue outperformed French-only peers in reading comprehension
  - Effects particularly pronounced for girls and children from low-literacy households

- Improved mathematical reasoning in early grades

- **Community school outcomes:**

- Expanded access in underserved rural areas
- Higher community ownership and accountability
- However, challenges with quality and sustainability persist

Peru: Measured outcomes from Peru's IBE and community education initiatives reveal persistent gaps but also promising models.

- **Young Lives study outcomes (Young Lives, 2024):**

- Indigenous children consistently lag behind non-indigenous peers in reading comprehension
- Gaps widen as children progress through school
- Early childhood education has protective effects
- Mother-tongue instruction associated with better outcomes
- Poverty, geographic isolation, and discrimination compound educational barriers

- **Fe y Alegría outcomes (Fe y Alegría, 2025):**

- Successful reach to remote communities
- Culturally relevant pedagogy improves engagement
- Integrated approach combining education with social services

- **Wasi Mikuna project outcomes (Fe y Alegría, 2025):**

- Early childhood education combined with nutrition and health
- Improved school readiness and child development
- Community engagement in project governance

Table 4: Comparative Outcomes

Dimension	**Niger**	**Peru**
Access	Expanded through community schools	IBE reaches 35-40% of indigenous children (Young Lives, 2024)

Learning gains	Significant gains in pilot programs (USAID, 2024; RTI International, 2023)	Indigenous children lag; gaps widen over time (Young Lives, 2024)
Equity effects	Positive for girls and low-literacy households (RTI International, 2023)	Persistent inequities; poverty and discrimination compound barriers
Community engagement	Improved through NECS project (USAID, 2024)	Strong in Fe y Alegría and Wasi Mikuna (Fe y Alegría, 2025)
Sustainability challenges	Funding dependence; integration with formal system	Quality deficits; teacher capacity

5.5 Summary of Comparative Findings

Table 5: Comprehensive Comparative Analysis

Dimension	**Niger**	**Peru**
Linguistic context	11 national languages; French official	47 indigenous languages; Spanish dominant
Educational context	Low enrollment (60%); high dropout; low learning outcomes	Near-universal enrollment; persistent indigenous achievement gaps
Policy framework	Emerging; pilot programs	Robust; National Curriculum 2016; IBE policy 2024
Bilingual education coverage	Limited; project-based	35-40% of indigenous children (Young Lives, 2024)

Teacher training	Inadequate; project-based	Uneven; many teachers lack local language fluency
Learning materials	Limited; especially beyond early grades	Developed for multiple languages; gaps remain
Community school presence	Significant; community-initiated	Present; Fe y Alegría network; NGO programs
Documented successes	NECS project; bilingual pilots (USAID, 2024; RTI International, 2023)	Young Lives evidence; Fe y Alegría; Wasi Mikuna (Young Lives, 2024; Fe y Alegría, 2025)
Key challenges	Scaling; sustainability; teacher training; materials	Coverage; quality; teacher capacity; discrimination
Key strengths	Pragmatic expansion; growing evidence base	Robust policy; longitudinal research; community models

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Explaining Divergent Approaches: Policy Development and Historical Context

The differences between Niger's and Peru's approaches to community schools and local language instruction reflect distinct historical trajectories, political contexts, and educational challenges.

Peru's sophisticated policy framework for Intercultural Bilingual Education emerged from decades of indigenous mobilization, international advocacy, and gradual policy development. The 2016 National Curriculum and the 2024 IBE policy update reflect a strong normative commitment to indigenous rights and cultural recognition (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Peru has the institutional infrastructure—a dedicated Ministry directorate, curriculum and materials

development processes, teacher training programs—to support IBE, even if implementation lags behind policy.

Niger's approach is more pragmatic and less institutionalized. With severe access deficits and limited resources, the government has relied on community initiatives and international partners to expand educational opportunities. Community schools proliferated as a grassroots response to government failure, and bilingual education has been advanced primarily through pilot programs rather than national policy. The NECS project and RTI's bilingual pilots have generated valuable evidence, but this has not yet translated into systemic reform (USAID, 2024; RTI International, 2023).

The contrast illustrates that policy development is not linear. Peru has strong policies but struggles with implementation. Niger has promising pilots but lacks the policy framework to scale them. Both countries face the challenge of moving from policy (or pilot) to practice at scale.

6.2 The Centrality of Teacher Capacity

Both countries' experiences underscore the critical importance of teacher capacity for effective bilingual education. In Niger, inadequate teacher training in bilingual methods and limited fluency in local languages constrain the quality of instruction (RTI International, 2023). In Peru, many teachers in indigenous areas are not themselves fluent in local languages and have received limited training in bilingual pedagogy (Young Lives, 2024).

Teacher preparation for bilingual education requires more than language proficiency. Teachers need to understand bilingual pedagogy, including how to scaffold learning across languages, how to use mother tongue as a foundation for second-language acquisition, and how to create culturally relevant learning environments. They need ongoing support, supervision, and access to appropriate materials.

The Wasi Mikuna project's integration of early childhood education with nutrition and health services highlights another dimension of teacher capacity: the ability to work across sectors and

address children's holistic needs (Fe y Alegría, 2025). This integrated approach recognizes that learning does not happen in isolation from children's health, nutrition, and well-being.

6.3 The Role of Evidence in Shaping Policy

The contrasting roles of evidence in the two countries are striking. Niger's bilingual education pilots have generated rigorous evidence of effectiveness, including through RTI International's evaluations using EGRA (RTI International, 2023). Yet this evidence has not yet translated into scaled-up policy. The challenge is not generating evidence but mobilizing the political will and resources to act on it.

Peru's Young Lives study has produced longitudinal evidence of exceptional value, documenting the trajectories of indigenous children over two decades and identifying critical intervention points (Young Lives, 2024). This evidence has informed policy discourse and advocacy but has not closed the implementation gap.

The implication is that evidence alone is insufficient. Effective policy requires political commitment, institutional capacity, and sustained investment. Research can identify what works, but it cannot make it happen.

6.4 Community Engagement as Both Means and End

Community engagement in education serves dual purposes. It is a means to better outcomes—mobilizing local resources, ensuring accountability, and tailoring education to local needs. And it is an end in itself—strengthening communities, building democratic participation, and recognizing local knowledge and agency.

Both countries' experiences illustrate the potential and limits of community engagement. In Niger, community schools have successfully mobilized local support and filled gaps in government provision, but they struggle with sustainability and integration (USAID, 2024). In Peru, the Fe y Alegría network demonstrates how community-based education can be combined with professional management to achieve quality at scale (Fe y Alegría, 2025).

The Wasi Mikuna project's community governance model—involving local actors in decision-making about early childhood education, nutrition, and health—shows how engagement can be deepened beyond simple consultation (Fe y Alegría, 2025). This integrated, participatory approach recognizes that communities are not just recipients of services but partners in development.

6.5 Language as Right and Resource

The findings underscore that language in education is both a right and a resource. Peru's policy framework strongly emphasizes the rights dimension—indigenous children's right to education in their mother tongue, grounded in international human rights instruments and constitutional recognition (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Niger's approach has been more instrumental—using local languages as a tool to improve learning outcomes (RTI International, 2023).

Both framings are valid and complementary. Mother-tongue instruction is indeed a right, recognized in international law and essential for cultural survival and dignity. It is also a pedagogical resource, enabling children to learn more effectively and build a foundation for second-language acquisition.

The tension arises when parents themselves prefer dominant-language instruction, perceiving it as offering greater economic opportunity. This is documented in both Niger (UNESCO, 2025) and Peru (Young Lives, 2024). Addressing this tension requires not only pedagogical evidence but also dialogue with communities about the value of mother-tongue education and the importance of bilingualism as an asset.

6.6 Implications for Educational Equity and Quality

The findings have significant implications for achieving educational equity and quality in linguistically diverse contexts.

First, mother-tongue instruction is a pedagogical imperative. The evidence from both Niger and Peru demonstrates that children learn better when initially taught in a language they understand. Ignoring this evidence perpetuates educational failure and inequity.

Second, policy frameworks are necessary but insufficient. Peru's strong IBE policies have not translated into universal coverage or quality. Implementation requires sustained investment, institutional capacity, and political will.

Third, teacher capacity is the critical bottleneck. Effective bilingual education requires teachers who are proficient in local languages, trained in bilingual pedagogy, and supported with appropriate materials and supervision.

Fourth, community engagement must be genuine and sustained. Community schools and local management committees can improve outcomes and sustainability, but they require ongoing support and integration with formal systems.

Fifth, early childhood is a critical window. The Young Lives evidence on the protective effects of early childhood education (Young Lives, 2024) and the Wasi Mikuna project's integrated approach (Fe y Alegría, 2025) both highlight the importance of intervening early.

Sixth, evidence must be linked to action. Both countries have generated valuable research, but this has not yet produced systemic change. Closing the gap between evidence and policy requires advocacy, political mobilization, and sustained commitment.

7. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of community schools and local language instruction in Niger and Peru reveals two distinct but complementary approaches to addressing educational exclusion in linguistically diverse contexts. Niger, facing severe access deficits and limited resources, has relied on community initiatives and pilot programs to expand educational opportunities. The NECS project and bilingual education pilots have generated evidence of effectiveness, reaching over 100,000 children and demonstrating significant learning gains (USAID, 2024; RTI International, 2023). Yet these promising approaches remain peripheral to the mainstream system, constrained by inadequate teacher training, limited materials, and weak policy support.

Peru, with its robust policy framework for Intercultural Bilingual Education, has established the normative and institutional foundations for mother-tongue instruction. The 2016 National

Curriculum and 2024 IBE policy update recognize indigenous children's right to education in their own languages (Ministry of Education Peru, 2024). Yet implementation lags behind policy, with IBE reaching only 35-40% of indigenous children and persistent achievement gaps documented by the Young Lives study (Young Lives, 2024). Community-based initiatives like Fe y Alegría and the Wasi Mikuna project demonstrate the potential of integrated, participatory approaches but remain limited in scale.

Several cross-cutting conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, mother-tongue instruction works. The evidence from both countries confirms that children learn better when initially taught in a language they understand. This is not merely a matter of cultural recognition but a pedagogical imperative.

Second, policy frameworks matter but are insufficient. Peru's sophisticated IBE policies provide essential foundations but have not guaranteed universal coverage or quality. Implementation requires sustained investment, institutional capacity, and political will.

Third, teacher capacity is the critical constraint. Effective bilingual education requires teachers who are proficient in local languages, trained in bilingual pedagogy, and supported with appropriate materials and supervision. Both countries face significant gaps in teacher preparation.

Fourth, community engagement strengthens education. Community schools, local management committees, and participatory governance models have demonstrated success in mobilizing resources, ensuring accountability, and tailoring education to local needs. But they require ongoing support and integration with formal systems.

Fifth, early childhood is a critical window. The protective effects of early childhood education and the success of integrated approaches combining education with nutrition and health highlight the importance of intervening early and holistically.

Sixth, evidence must translate into action. Both countries have generated valuable research, but this has not yet produced systemic change. Closing the gap between evidence and policy requires advocacy, political mobilization, and sustained commitment.

For Niger, the path forward involves building on the evidence generated by pilot programs and scaling effective approaches through strengthened policy frameworks, increased investment in teacher training and materials, and better integration of community schools with the formal system. The NECS project and bilingual pilots offer models that could be expanded with political will and donor support.

For Peru, the priority is closing the implementation gap—ensuring that the strong IBE policy framework translates into universal coverage and improved quality. This requires addressing teacher capacity gaps, expanding materials development and distribution, and tackling the discrimination and poverty that compound educational barriers for indigenous children.

For the broader community of scholars and policymakers, this comparison underscores that educational equity in linguistically diverse contexts requires both strong policy frameworks and sustained implementation. Mother-tongue instruction is not a luxury to be added when resources permit but a fundamental requirement for quality education. Community engagement is not an optional extra but essential for relevance and sustainability. And evidence is not an end in itself but a guide to action—a tool for identifying what works and mobilizing the will to make it happen.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and program documentation rather than primary data collection. Direct fieldwork in both countries would strengthen comparative insights.

Second, data availability differs between the two countries. Niger benefits from rigorous evaluation data from the NECS project and RTI's bilingual pilots. Peru's Young Lives study provides exceptional longitudinal evidence, but implementation data on IBE coverage and quality is less systematically available.

Third, the study covers a period of rapid change; findings may require updating as new policies and programs emerge.

Fourth, the voice of community members—parents, teachers, and students—is mediated through reports rather than captured directly. Participatory research would enrich understanding of how policies and programs are experienced by those they are meant to serve.

Fifth, the study focuses on community schools and local language instruction with limited attention to other factors affecting educational quality, such as school infrastructure, class size, and curriculum content.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the comparative framework, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including policy documents, program evaluations, research reports, and academic publications. Primary sources are cited in the references and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or investment advice. Educational policies and programs are subject to change, and readers should consult current official sources for specific information about Niger, Peru, and education policy.

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