

Pedagogies of Loss: A Qualitative Study on How Aspirational Parenting Shapes Students' Transition from Bengali- to English-Medium Schooling

Raj Madhu¹, Asit K. Mantry², Biswabhusan Pradhan³

Central University of Jammu, India

¹ORCID: 0009-0001-0516-3365

²ORCID: 0000-0002-1162-0294

³ORCID: 0000-0001-6011-0605

ABSTRACT

Students face many challenges when the medium of instruction changes, and these difficulties intensify when the shift follows several years of learning in the mother tongue. The study examined the transition from Bengali-medium primary schooling to English-medium middle school in West Bengal, India, to understand how students and parents experience this change. Using a qualitative design, interviews with eight students and fifteen parents were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students face linguistic struggle, academic decline, emotional insecurity, reduced peer belonging, and diminished play. Parents justify these difficulties by emphasizing future mobility, social respect, and the symbolic value of English. A recurring pattern of loss emerges, described in this study as "Pedagogies of Loss." The study argues that the transition is not only a language shift but an emotional and developmental disruption shaped by aspirational parenting. These findings underscore the need for schools, teachers, and policymakers to adopt bilingual, developmentally sensitive, and emotionally supportive transition practices.

Keywords: Aspirational parenting, English-medium transition, English-medium instruction (EMI), pedagogies of loss, student well-being

INTRODUCTION

The transition from primary to middle school is widely recognized as one of the most challenging phases in a student's educational journey (Wood et al., 2026; Zeedyk et al., 2003). This challenge intensifies when the move involves a shift in the medium of instruction. For children who complete their early education in Bengali-medium schools and then enter English-medium middle schools, the transition becomes both linguistic and academic. Studies show that learning through a second language often slows processing and reduces comprehension, placing a higher cognitive load on students (Shahzad et al., 2013; Hincks, 2009; Nadif, 2025). Limited proficiency also directly affects performance in subjects such as mathematics and science, where understanding depends heavily on linguistic clarity (Mammino, 2026; Bernhofer & Tonin, 2022; Barwell, 2009).

International research highlights similar concerns. Students learning through a non-native language frequently experience linguistic barriers, academic disengagement, and social anxiety (Gu, 2011; Huang, 2012). In these classrooms, decoding language often takes precedence over learning content (Chou, 2014). These difficulties coexist with strong parental aspirations. Across different contexts, English is perceived as linked to mobility, modernity, and global citizenship (Arslan, 2009; Dhar & Betal, 2021). Yet children's lived experiences often contrast sharply with these expectations. Studies report heightened fear of mistakes, reduced confidence, and emotional distress among learners in English-medium settings (Somdee, 2012; Banditvilai & Cullen, 2018).

Despite the scale of these challenges, structured support during transition remains limited. Schools often provide administrative guidance but rarely offer sustained linguistic or socio-emotional support (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). While child-centered pedagogies and transitional scaffolding have been recommended (Andayani, 2019; Jarvis, 2012), their absence can convert English-medium transition into a source of anxiety rather than empowerment.

Two gaps emerge from this context. First, most studies focus on academic or linguistic difficulty but pay less attention to the emotional, social, and developmental impact on children. Second, although parental aspiration is well-recognized, little research examines how aspiration normalizes children's distress or how families interpret the costs of transition.

To address these gaps, this study explores the experiences of students who shift from Bengali-medium to English-medium schooling and examines the motivations of their parents. While existing EMI research provides important insights into linguistic and academic challenges, it rarely conceptualizes the transition as a cumulative and lived experience that reshapes children's emotional, social, and developmental worlds. This study moves beyond outcome-oriented perspectives by foregrounding how these dimensions intersect in everyday schooling. To capture this, the study introduces the concept of Pedagogies of Loss, which frames English-medium transition as a process through which children experience layered forms of erosion in confidence, belonging, voice, and childhood routines. By doing so, the study offers a conceptual lens that reinterprets EMI transition as not only an academic adjustment but a broader reconfiguration of childhood shaped by aspirational parenting. Hence, the research was guided by the following questions: (1) What challenges do students face after moving from Bengali-medium to English-medium schooling? (2) What motivates parents to shift their children to English-medium? and (3) What patterns emerge from these experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EMI Transitions and Student Challenges

Research on English-medium instruction (EMI) consistently shows that transitions from mother-tongue education generate intertwined linguistic, academic, and emotional challenges. Students encounter difficulty with unfamiliar vocabulary, subject-specific terminology, and rapid English instruction, which slows comprehension and disrupts engagement (Huang & Luo, 2023; Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Li et al., 2020). These linguistic demands are not isolated; they interact with new pedagogical expectations, requiring learners to simultaneously adapt to both language and content.

Beyond language, EMI studies highlight significant emotional and participation-related consequences. Limited proficiency often reduces confidence, increases fear of speaking, and contributes to withdrawal from classroom interaction (Reyes et al., 2023; Chambers, 2018). These effects are intensified in environments characterized by fast pacing, large class sizes, and limited scaffolding, where students struggle to keep up and gradually disengage (Sabri, 2024; Romano et al., 2023). Taken together, this body of work suggests that EMI transition affects not only comprehension but also students' sense of participation, belonging, and academic self-perception.

Structural conditions further shape these experiences. The time required to develop academic language proficiency creates a persistent gap between students' cognitive ability and their capacity to express understanding (Chan & Hartshorne,

2022; Davids et al., 2025). This gap often manifests as stress, reduced self-esteem, and feelings of dislocation, particularly in under-resourced classrooms lacking adequate language support (Ismailov et al., 2021; Hasanah & Utami, 2020). While existing research recommends targeted interventions such as reading support and language skill development (Abdelhalim, 2015; Kuschel et al., 2023), these approaches largely remain focused on linguistic remediation.

As a result, the broader emotional, social, and developmental consequences of EMI transition remain underexplored. This limitation is particularly relevant to the present study, which seeks to examine not only the challenges students face after transitioning to English-medium schooling (RQ1), but also how these challenges are experienced as interconnected and cumulative in everyday school life.

Aspirational Parenting and the Symbolic Value of English

Research consistently identifies parental aspiration as a central force shaping children's entry into English-medium instruction. Across contexts, English is constructed not merely as a language but as a form of economic and symbolic capital, associated with upward mobility, social prestige, and global belonging (Chavez, 2024; Liu, 2024; Arslan, 2009). For many parents, English-medium schooling represents a strategic investment in their children's future, linked to access to higher education, employment opportunities, and social recognition.

These aspirations are further shaped by parents' own linguistic histories and socioeconomic positioning. Families with greater resources often provide structured exposure to English through reading practices, digital media, and early language training, while others rely on more limited or directive strategies (Park, & Ottewell, 2026; Butler, 2015; Chavez et al., 2023). Despite these differences, a shared belief persists that early immersion in English is essential for long-term success.

Existing research largely frames aspirational parenting as a positive and motivating force, associating it with higher student motivation, confidence, and academic achievement (Fan & Williams, 2010; Jung & Zhang, 2016). However, this emphasis on outcomes often obscures the immediate experiences of children during transition. Taken together, these studies suggest that while aspiration drives educational decision-making, it may also generate pressure, particularly when children are required to adapt rapidly to unfamiliar linguistic environments.

The emotional and psychological implications of such aspiration remain underexplored, especially in contexts where transitions are abrupt. Limited attention has been given to how parental expectations intersect with children's experiences of anxiety, identity disruption, or social exclusion during EMI transition. This gap is central to the present study, which examines not only what

motivates parents to shift their children to English-medium schooling (RQ2), but also how these motivations shape and sustain children's experiences during the transition.

Need for a New Lens

Existing EMI research documents linguistic and academic difficulties but treats emotional, social, and developmental disruptions as secondary effects rather than central features of transition. These overlooked dimensions include loss of confidence, belonging, and childhood routines. At the same time, parental aspiration is often framed positively, with limited attention to how it normalizes children's distress. This gap creates the need for a conceptual lens that foregrounds cumulative loss and explains how children's experiences are shaped by aspiration-driven parenting in the phase of linguistic transitions.

Building on these gaps, the concept of Pedagogies of Loss extends existing EMI frameworks by shifting the analytical focus from linguistic or academic deficits to the cumulative and lived experience of loss that accompanies abrupt medium-of-instruction transitions. This lens positions loss of confidence, belonging, voice, and continuity as central to the learning process itself. In doing so, it challenges outcome-oriented EMI perspectives and foregrounds the relational, developmental, and affective dimensions of transition as pedagogically significant.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative, exploratory design to understand how students and parents experience the transition from Bengali-medium primary education to English-medium middle schooling. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to examine lived experiences, emotional reactions, and subjective meanings (Cohen et al., 2000).

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in West Bengal, India, focusing on students who completed primary education in Bengali-medium schools and moved to English-medium schooling in Class Six. Because such transitions are relatively uncommon, a non-probability snowball sampling strategy was used. Initial participants helped identify additional families meeting the criteria, following Johnson's (2014) approach to snowball sampling.

Two groups participated in the study, (1) eight students (ages 12-13; four boys and four girls); and (2) fifteen parents (their mothers and fathers). Participants represented varied occupational and educational backgrounds.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interview was employed because it offers a balance between consistency and flexibility (Adams, 2015). It also allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words while giving the interviewer room to probe deeper into emerging issues.

Two interview guides were developed: one for students (covering challenges, confidence, academic performance, peer relations, and daily routines) and one for parents (covering motivations, expectations, decision-making, and reflections on children's adjustment).

All interviews were conducted in Bengali to maintain expressive comfort. Student interviews lasted 30-40 minutes; parent interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Conducting interviews in the mother tongue ensured that emotional nuances, hesitations, and culturally specific expressions were preserved. Data collection continued until saturation was reached; after a certain point, participant responses began to show repetition across both student and parent groups, indicating sufficient depth and coverage of the phenomenon under study.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity. Second, open coding was conducted manually, marking segments that reflected recurring patterns such as fear of speaking, parental aspirations, or academic decline. Student and parent transcripts were coded separately to respect the specific experiential contexts of each group.

In the next phase, initial codes were progressively refined and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. For example, codes such as fear of speaking, hesitation, and embarrassment during participation were clustered under a broader category of speech anxiety, which later contributed to the development of the theme "Emotional Loss." Themes were developed through iterative comparison across cases, moving from descriptive coding to more interpretive thematic constructs that captured shared patterns across participants.

Throughout this process, coding decisions were regularly discussed among the authors. Any differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion and re-examination of the data until consensus was reached, ensuring that the final themes remained grounded in participants' accounts. Themes were

further refined by comparing student and parent narratives to identify points of convergence and divergence.

Throughout analysis, attention was given to emotional tone, implicit meanings, contradictions between parent and child narratives, and the broader sociocultural context. This ensured that the findings reflected not only what participants said but how they expressed distress, aspiration, or confusion.

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was undertaken by sharing emerging interpretations with a few participants to ensure that the findings resonated with their lived experiences. In addition, all authors were involved in reviewing the codes and refining the themes, reaching consensus to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' accounts.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's prior experience as a home tutor working with students transitioning from Bengali-medium to English-medium schooling informed sensitivity to the emotional and academic challenges discussed in this study. At the same time, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process to avoid imposing prior assumptions on participants' narratives. Care was taken to remain attentive to participants' own meanings and interpretations during data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. Oral consent was obtained from parents and students. Participants were assured of confidentiality and secure data storage. The study followed the ethical principles outlined in the American Psychological Association's (2017) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. Special care was taken during interviews with children to avoid pressure or discomfort; they were reminded that they could skip questions or stop at any time. Interviews were conducted in a supportive and non-judgmental manner, using age-appropriate language and allowing children to express themselves at their own pace. The researcher remained attentive to signs of hesitation or distress and paused or redirected questions when necessary to ensure emotional comfort. All participants were thanked and informed of their right to withdraw.

RESULTS

The findings show that the transition from Bengali-medium primary education to English-medium middle school restructures children's everyday experiences across linguistic, academic, emotional, social, and developmental domains (see Table 1). Rather than isolated difficulties, students describe a series of interconnected disruptions that collectively form a pattern of loss in which learning English advances alongside the erosion of voice, confidence, belonging, and childhood ease.

Table 1. *Themes, Codes, Definitions, and Illustrative Verbatims of Students*

Theme	Code	Definition of Code	Illustrative Verbatim
Linguistic Loss	Difficulty understanding instructions	Students struggle to follow teachers' English instructions due to speed and unfamiliar vocabulary.	"I get stuck... the teacher talks fast, and then I can't catch anything." "Teacher also asked questions in English. I could understand some parts..."
	Reading struggle	Students find English texts slow and difficult, affecting comprehension and pace.	"I read the textbook loudly, but... words sound strange... My tongue... doesn't move fast."
	Limited vocabulary	Students lack essential vocabulary, leading to dependence on translation or memorisation.	"The words are long." "words don't come fast in my head."
	Memory dependence	Students rely on memorised answers instead of comprehension due to language gaps.	"I write the meanings on the side." "I have to remember exact words."
	Mixed speech	Students switch between Bengali and English as a coping mechanism rather than bilingual confidence.	"if word is 'respiration,' I tell myself, 'eta holo shash-prohash.' Then I remember."
Academic Loss	Marks decline	Students' grades drop sharply compared to their performance in Bengali-medium school.	"I used to be a topper... Here I am not even in top ten." "even if I study more, my marks are low."
	Problem-solving struggle	Students struggle to solve subject problems because English interferes with comprehension.	"I can finish fast. Here... I don't even understand question."
	Expression struggle	Students cannot express ideas in English with the clarity they had in Bengali.	"I read the chapter again and tried to practice the sentences in English. But still...I feel my throat is stuck."
	Increased study time	Students spend disproportionately long hours studying due to slow processing and writing.	"they [English words] take me more time to write...In Bengali I can write faster."
Emotional Loss	Classroom mistake fear	Students avoid participation due to fear of making mistakes.	"I don't raise my hand... even if I know answer... I'm scared I will say something wrong."
	Speech anxiety	Students fear speaking aloud due to risk of correction or ridicule.	"When I speak wrong, they[classmates] correct in front of all... then I feel embarrassed."

	Self-esteem loss	Students feel “less capable” or not equal due to language-based struggles.	“If I speak wrong English, they laugh. So, I say less.” “Then I feel... (pauses) I feel maybe I am not good.”
	Exam anxiety	Language complexity makes exams stressful and fear-inducing.	“I feel scared. I feel nervous before exams.” “Very nervous. Night before exam I can’t sleep. I pray, “Please God, help me.” Then in exam hall, I forget spellings.”
Social Loss	Peer bullying	Students face teasing due to pronunciation or background.	“They tease me if I pronounce wrongly... They call me by ‘Bengali-medium’.”
	Discussion reluctance	Students avoid peer discussions because they cannot keep up linguistically.	“Some boys talk to me sometimes. But... not like my old school friends.” “They talk in English, sometimes in Bengali. I feel shy to talk.” “Not like my old school friends.”
	Difficulty making friends	Language prevents smooth integration into new peer groups.	
	Inferiority feelings	Students feel inferior when compared to fluent English-speaking peers.	“, I think too much before saying. That makes me slow. By the time I say, the topic changes. Then I feel left out.”
	Limited friendship	Students become socially withdrawn or isolated.	“I only talk properly with one friend who also came from Bengali medium.”
Childhood Loss	Reduced play	Study pressure reduces time for leisure and recreation.	“There is playground. But... I don’t join much.”
	Increased workload	English slows reading and writing, increasing daily academic load.	“I play cricket... but not much now.” “I don’t draw now... So much homework, English words, grammar, science”
	Tuition dependence Loss of spontaneity	Students need external tuition for basic comprehension. Children lose relaxed, playful routines due to constant academic coping.	“sir[tuition] help me to do my school homework” “Homework, tuition, school... I stopped drawing. Ma says, ‘First study, later drawing.’”

Students’ Experiences: Layers of Loss

Linguistic Loss: Losing Voice, Ease, and Expressive Security

Students consistently described the transition as a disruption in linguistic comfort. The fluency and spontaneity they had in Bengali were replaced by hesitation, silence, and mixed speech. Much of this difficulty stemmed from challenges in understanding instructions and the fast-paced delivery of classroom English. As one student explained, “I get stuck... the teacher talks fast, and then I can’t catch anything.” Another student offered a similar description: “They [teachers] talk very fast... and the words are complex.”

Reading further intensified these difficulties. A student said, “I read the textbook loudly, but... words sound strange... My tongue... doesn’t move fast.” Long, unfamiliar words slowed reading and comprehension, leading students to

rely on translation or memorization. Several described writing Bengali meanings in the margins or memorizing answers due to limited vocabulary.

Mixed speech, involving switching between Bengali and English, emerged as a common coping strategy rather than a sign of bilingual confidence. Students expressed uncertainty about pronunciation and often avoided speaking to prevent mistakes. As a result, participation in classroom interaction became limited, and students experienced difficulty expressing what they understood.

Overall, these accounts reflect reduced fluency, hesitation in expression, and limited confidence in speaking within the classroom.

Academic Loss: Decline in Performance, Pace, and Academic Identity

Students described noticeable changes in their academic performance following the transition. Those who had previously performed well reported declines in marks, slower processing, and difficulty solving subject-based problems. One student captured this shift bluntly: “I used to be a topper... Here I am not even in top ten.” She recalled receiving, “Sometimes 6 out of 20 in English grammar,” in contrast to her earlier achievements.

Unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structures in English textbooks affected both reading comprehension and writing speed. As one student explained, “English words... take me more time to write... In Bengali I can write faster.” Students reported spending considerable time decoding question papers, forming sentences, and revising answers to avoid mistakes. Even subjects such as mathematics and science became difficult when problems were framed in English.

In response, many students increased their study time but reported limited improvement. Home tuition became necessary for basic understanding, though instruction often continued in a Bengali-English mix. Several students began describing themselves as “slow” or “weak,” reflecting a shift in how they perceived their academic abilities. These accounts indicate reduced speed in completing tasks, difficulty in comprehension and expression, and a decline in academic confidence.

Emotional Loss: Anxiety, Shame, and Diminished Self-Belief

Students described a range of emotional challenges during the transition, particularly anxiety related to fear of mistakes, embarrassment, and peer judgment. Classroom participation, which had previously been routine, became a source of distress. One student admitted, “I don’t raise my hand... even if I know answer... I’m scared I will say something wrong.” Another student shared, “When I speak wrong, they [classmates] correct in front of all... then I feel embarrassed.”

These experiences were often associated with feelings of shame. Many students reported silently rehearsing sentences before speaking or avoiding reading aloud. As one student explained, “If I speak wrong English, they laugh. So, I say

less.” Anticipation of mistakes and peer reactions led some students to withdraw from participation and remain quiet during class.

Exam situations further intensified stress. Students expressed concern about misunderstanding questions or underperforming due to language difficulties. Some described nervousness, difficulty concentrating, and frequent comparison with more fluent peers. Across accounts, students described reduced confidence, hesitation in speaking, and uncertainty in their abilities within the classroom.

Social Loss: Isolation, Bullying, and Erosion of Belonging

Social loss was one of the most painful dimensions of transition. Students found themselves excluded from peer groups, often because their English proficiency restricted participation in informal conversation. A student expressed this clearly: “Some boys talk to me sometimes. But... not like my old school friends.” The shift disrupted established peer identities and left students negotiating a new social landscape with inadequate linguistic tools.

For some, exclusion took the form of direct teasing. As a student shared, “They tease me if I pronounce wrongly... They call me by ‘Bengali-medium’.” The label positioned her as inferior within the classroom hierarchy. Another student described a similar moment: “He [a friend] says, ‘Oh you don’t even know this’ Then I feel like... I am dumb.”

Because group discussions and playtime conversations occurred mostly in English, students struggled to join in. Several described spending breaks times alone. Social loss therefore involved loss of peer connection, loss of easy friendship, loss of belonging, and loss of social confidence. It redefined students’ place within their school community.

Childhood Loss: Shrinking Play, Rising Workload, and Loss of Ease

The transition also reshaped children’s daily rhythms, reducing the space for play, leisure, and spontaneity. Increased study time, heavy homework loads, and the need for tuition compressed what had previously been free time. Students described spending evenings rewriting notes, practicing spelling, or struggling to complete basic assignments in English. Tasks that once took minutes now required hours due to slow reading, slow writing, and constant translation.

Playtime diminished sharply. Many described going straight from school to tuition, with little time for games or rest. Tuition teachers were essential for comprehension but sometimes impatient, adding to emotional strain. As one student mentioned “I don’t draw now...So much homework, English words, grammar, science”

Childhood loss encompassed loss of free time, loss of play, loss of spontaneity, and loss of daily ease. Students moved from a balanced routine to one dominated by academic coping. The transition did not just reshape schooling; it reshaped childhood itself.

Parents’ Motivations: Aspirational Parenting

Parents’ accounts show a consistent pattern of aspiration, comparison, and future-oriented anxiety that goes far beyond choosing a school (see Table 2). English appears in their narratives as economic capital, social capital, and symbolic identity. At the same time, parents normalize their children’s distress as an expected or necessary cost. Together, these motivations explain how aspirational parenting becomes a central driver of the loss children experience during the transition to English-medium schooling.

Table 2. *Themes, Codes, Definitions, and Illustrative Verbatims of Parents*

Theme	Code	Definition of Code	Illustrative Verbatim
Career and Mobility Aspirations	Future security	Parents see English as necessary for stable careers and avoiding generational hardship.	“My wish is simple... that he studies well, gets a good job, and doesn’t have the same struggles we [both parents] had.”
	English as requirement	English proficiency is viewed as essential for interviews, admissions, and advancement.	“Jobs, higher studies, everything... If you don’t know English, you will struggle... first question, ‘Introduce yourself in English.’ Then what will happen?”
	Strategic investment	The transition is understood as a long-term investment despite children’s current distress.	“English-medium is important for his future. And no matter what, I am trying my best...”
Prestige and Social Respect	Social stigma of Bengali medium	Parents fear judgment or assumptions of weakness when children remain in Bengali-medium schools.	“When people hear your child is in Bengali medium, immediately they think, ‘Oh, this family could not afford English school,’ or ‘the child is weak.’”
	Comparison pressure	Relatives and peers influence decisions through constant comparison.	“In our family, relatives compare children... then there is pressure about why not our son [study in English medium school].”
	English as status symbol	English-medium schooling is perceived as modern, prestigious, and a marker of good parenting.	“They[other parents] think if the child is in English medium, then automatically he is intelligent and modern.” “They[other parents] are educated, they speak in English even with teachers.”
Belief in ‘Better Schooling’	Perceived discipline	Changes such as increased study time are interpreted as signs of improved discipline.	“Sometimes she surprises me... she explains some science terms in English... she also became more disciplined with study.”
	Workload seen as positive	Heavy workload is viewed as commitment rather than pressure or distress.	“She spends most of her time studying.”
	Assumed school quality	Parents believe English-medium schools offer superior resources and opportunities.	“I think the best I can do is provide the resources like good school, tuition, books and her new school is very modern, everyone says it’s the best school in the city.”

Justifying Children's Suffering	Suffering as temporary	Distress is viewed as a temporary hurdle that will produce future benefits.	"Maybe she struggles a little now, but later she will be thankful."
	English as source of confidence	Parents link confidence and success directly to English fluency.	"I want her to speak English fluently... so she can face the world without fear." "I just want him to stand anywhere and speak confidently... That's why English is important."
	Normalizing erosion	Anxiety and withdrawal are reframed as necessary sacrifices for long-term success.	"We wanted her to have better future. She will face problem now; we know that English is tough but with time she will learn it. We are doing it for her, without English, you can study, but opportunities are less."

Career and Mobility Aspirations: English as the Gateway to a Secure Future

Across interviews, parents described English as essential for future stability. Their decisions were shaped more by expectations of future outcomes, such as better jobs, higher salaries, and access to higher education, than by the child's present comfort. One student's mother articulated this clearly: "My wish is simple... that he studies well, gets a good job, and doesn't have the same struggles we [both parents] had." Parents frequently referred to English as an important factor in interviews, admissions, and career advancement.

For many, English-medium schooling was viewed as necessary to avoid future disadvantage. Another student's mother said, "Jobs, higher studies, everything... If you don't know English, you will struggle... first question, 'Introduce yourself in English.' Then what will happen?" Parents consistently linked English proficiency with future opportunities and security.

These accounts show that decisions about schooling were closely tied to long-term expectations, with emphasis placed on future outcomes even when children experienced difficulty during the transition.

Prestige and Social Respect: English as Social Capital and Symbolic Power

Parents also linked English to social status, respect, and protection from judgement. Many described Bengali-medium education as socially risky because it invites assumptions about limited ability or lack of resources. As one student's mother stated, "When people hear your child is in Bengali medium, immediately they think, 'Oh, this family could not afford English school,' or 'the child is weak.'"

Relatives, neighbors, and colleagues played a strong role in shaping these decisions. A student's father noted, "In our family, relatives compare children... then there is pressure about why not our son [study in English medium school]." Such comparisons contributed to a sense of pressure, leading parents to view English-medium schooling as a marker of good parenting and social standing.

Some parents described a competitive environment among families, where enrolling a child in an English-medium school was associated with better care and stronger commitment to the child's future. Across accounts, English-medium education was closely associated with social recognition and maintaining status within the community.

Belief in 'Better Schooling': Discipline, Resources, and Imagined Quality

Parents often believed English-medium schools offer better discipline, advanced resources, and modern curricula. Improvements in children's behavior such as reduced leisure or increased study time were interpreted as evidence of superior schooling. A student's mother observed: "Sometimes she surprises me... she explains some science terms in English... she also became more disciplined with study." However, this "discipline" often corresponded to shrinking playtime and heightened stress. Yet parents saw long study hours as commitment, not pressure. Another student's mother said, "She spends most of her time studying."

Parents viewed English-medium education not through children's lived experiences of loneliness, mockery, declining confidence but through a projected sense of quality. Their belief in English as a route to holistic development often overshadowed signs of emotional cost. They judged the school's value through long-term hopes rather than the child's immediate well-being, reinforcing the transition even when children struggled daily.

Justifying Children's Suffering: Sacrifice as Part of Aspiration

The strongest theme was how parents rationalized children's distress. Fear of speaking, academic decline, or social exclusion were described as temporary hurdles and necessary sacrifices. A student's mother said, "Maybe she struggles a little now, but later she will be thankful." Another mother echoed this future-oriented justification: "I want her to speak English fluently... so she can face the world without fear." Confidence was consistently linked to English proficiency, even when children expressed insecurity.

These statements show how emotional erosion becomes reframed as meaningful growth. Parents imagine a confident English-speaking adult and treat the child's present suffering as part of the journey toward that imagined future. The gap between parental aspiration and children's lived experience becomes clear; parents view the transition as productive sacrifice; and children experience it as erosion. Aspirational parenting thus becomes a central driver of pedagogies of loss. It generates the transition, sustains it despite visible distress, and turns suffering into a justified step toward imagined global belonging.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with existing scholarship on English-medium transitions while extending current understandings by foregrounding the cumulative, lived experiences embedded within aspiration-driven linguistic shifts. As widely documented, students encountered linguistic barriers related to comprehension, pronunciation, and subject-specific vocabulary (Mridula & Ahsan, 2025; Özçelik, Kavanoz, & Yılmaz, 2024; Imam & Al-Mahmud, 2024; Lyu and Hsueh, 2026). The silence, hesitation, and withdrawal observed here mirror patterns of disengagement noted in prior EMI research (Mahawattha & Rassool, 2023; Eusafzai, 2022), while anxiety linked to pacing and “Only English” norms echoes earlier findings (Mbabazi, 2019; Tanoli et al., 2021).

At the same time, these patterns may also be interpreted as part of a temporary adjustment phase in second-language learning. However, the persistence and interconnected nature of the difficulties reported in this study suggest that they extend beyond short-term adaptation and involve broader disruptions in students’ emotional, social, and developmental experiences. In contrast to existing EMI frameworks, which primarily emphasize linguistic proficiency and academic outcomes, this study highlights domains that remain underexamined, including reduced play, weakened peer relationships, and constrained forms of expression (de Heer et al., 2016; Eusafzai, 2022).

Parental motivations similarly align with prior research linking English-medium enrolment to aspirations for mobility, global integration, and perceived educational advantage (Irfan et al., 2023; Maharani et al., 2024; Vicontie & Santosa, 2023; Singh and Singh, 2024). However, the findings also indicate that parental aspiration can normalize children’s distress, reframing anxiety, isolation, and academic difficulty as necessary stages. This extends existing discussions on multilingual aspiration (Butler, 2015; Ní Dhíorbháin et al., 2024) by showing how aspiration not only motivates educational decisions but also shapes how children’s difficulties are interpreted and sustained.

Taken together, the concept of Pedagogies of Loss advances EMI scholarship by shifting the analytical focus from isolated linguistic challenges to the cumulative and relational dimensions of transition. It reframes EMI as a process of language acquisition, one that reorganizes children’s participation, identity, and everyday experiences within schooling. This perspective calls for a more critical and child-centered understanding of aspiration-driven transitions.

A Pattern of “Pedagogies of Loss”

The findings reveal a recurring pattern in students’ narratives: the transition to English-medium schooling generates overlapping forms of erosion that reshape their linguistic, emotional, social, and developmental worlds. These disruptions are not isolated; they accumulate and interact, forming what this study describes as pedagogies of loss.

Pedagogies of loss refer to the gradual and layered diminishment children experience when they enter a schooling environment that demands rapid adjustment to a new language without adequate support. The shift affects expressive confidence, academic identity, peer relationships, and the everyday rhythms of childhood. Students lose their previous fluency and ease in learning, feel heightened anxiety during participation, experience reduced belonging among peers, and often sacrifice play and leisure as they attempt to keep up.

This pattern emerges through the interaction of school structures and family expectations. Fast-paced instruction, rigid language norms, and peer hierarchies intersect with parents’ aspirations for mobility and respect. Together, these forces produce a transition in which children must carry the emotional and developmental weight of aspiration-driven schooling.

The findings point to four interconnected dimensions of loss: linguistic, emotional, social, and childhood loss, which collectively explain how a sudden English-medium transition restructures childrens’ daily life (see Figure 1).

Linguistic Loss

Linguistic loss involves the erosion of expressive ease and fluency children once had in their mother tongue. Students lose the ability to speak spontaneously, think comfortably, or engage confidently in class. Silence, mixed speech, and reliance on memorized answers replace earlier linguistic security. Fast-paced instruction and rigid correct English expectations reinforce this insecurity, shifting children away from their stable linguistic identities.

Emotional Loss

Emotional loss arises from performing academically in a language students cannot yet command. Fear of ridicule, anxiety during participation, and shame after mistakes contribute to declining confidence. Institutional expectations rarely allow time for gradual adjustment, leading students to lose not only self-belief but also a sense of psychological safety within the classroom.

Social Loss

Social loss refers to reduced belonging and peer connection when English becomes the basis of status and inclusion. Students experience mockery, exclusion in group conversations, and reduced friendship opportunities. Peer cultures that

treat English fluency as a marker of intelligence intensify feelings of inferiority. This loss disrupts children's social identity and limits their ability to integrate into new peer communities.

Childhood Loss

Childhood loss captures the shrinking of play, leisure, and creative freedom. Increased workload, tuition dependence, and pressure to catch up compress daily routines. What disappears is not only free time but the emotional ease that defines childhood. Aspirational expectations combine with school demands to convert leisure into compensatory academic labor. Together, these dimensions show that English-medium transition is not a single challenge but a structural reorganization of childhood, best understood through the lens of pedagogies of loss.

Aspirational Parenting as the Driver of “Pedagogies of Loss”

A central finding of this study is that pedagogies of loss are produced not only by school structures but also by the force of aspirational parenting. Parents' hopes for mobility, confidence, and global belonging shape decisions that expose children to linguistic and emotional strain. Aspirational parenting acts as the engine that initiates, sustains, and legitimizes the transition. This mechanism unfolds across four interconnected processes.

Imagined Futures

Parents hold vivid expectations of who their children must become to succeed in a competitive world. These imagined futures are grounded in parents' own struggles and in the social pressures surrounding English as a pathway to dignity and opportunity. English-medium schooling becomes the key that unlocks adult confidence, job interviews, higher studies, and social respect. Because these imagined identities feel urgent and necessary, the future carries more psychological weight in decision-making than the child's present emotional comfort. The transition is therefore framed not as a choice but as preparation for survival and mobility.

Pressure and Decision-Making

These imagined futures generate significant internal and external pressure. Externally, parents operate in environments where English-medium schooling is equated with intelligence, modernity, and good parenting. Comparisons with relatives and neighbors reinforce a fear of being judged for keeping a child in Bengali-medium education. Internally, parents feel responsible for ensuring their children do not fall behind, which produces a sense of urgency. As a result, transitions often occur abruptly, even when children are not developmentally or

linguistically prepared. The decision becomes a socially charged response to fear of future disadvantage and of present stigma.

Transition and Loss

Once the shift takes place, children encounter the four losses documented in this study: linguistic insecurity, academic decline, social exclusion, and the compression of childhood. Parents recognize these difficulties, yet the symbolic value of English makes the costs appear unavoidable. For children, the transition is destabilizing; for parents, it is strategic. This mismatch in perception lies at the heart of pedagogies of loss. The losses children experience are not incidental side effects but predictable consequences of an aspiration-driven linguistic transition.

Normalization of Erosion

Finally, parents tend to normalise the distress their children experience during the transition. Academic decline, hesitation in speaking, and social withdrawal are viewed as temporary setbacks rather than indicators of harm. These difficulties are reframed as necessary stages of growth and as part of the effort required to secure a better future. Within this logic of aspiration, present discomfort becomes an acceptable sacrifice because it is believed to lead to long-term reward. Loss, therefore, is not seen as a warning sign but as an expected and even meaningful step toward imagined success. Parents are not acting with harmful intent; rather, aspiration reshapes their interpretation of children’s struggles, casting erosion as progress and suffering as preparation.

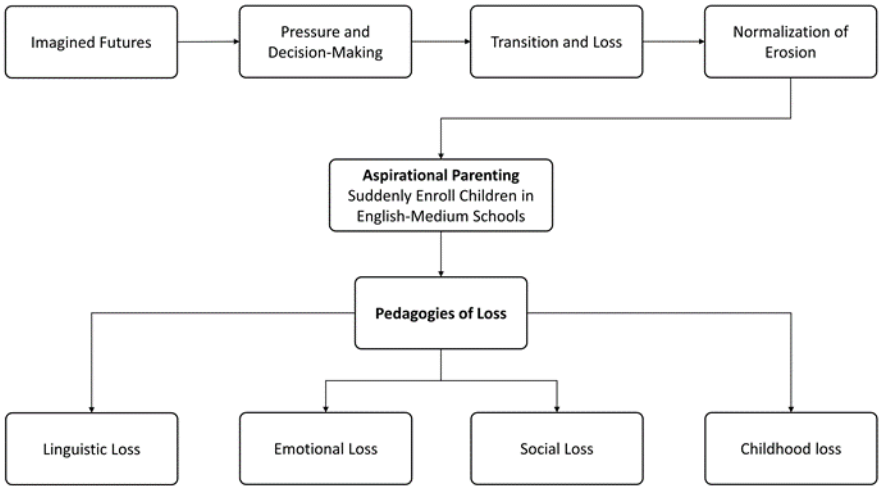


Figure 1: *Conceptual Diagram of “Pedagogies of Loss” in English-Medium Transition*

IMPLICATIONS

Short-Term Implications

Schools and teachers can reduce immediate transition-related difficulties by supporting both comprehension and emotional safety. Given students' reported difficulty in understanding instructions and fear of participation, practices such as translanguaging, using Bengali alongside English, and slowing instructional pacing in the initial phase can improve comprehension and reduce anxiety. At the classroom level, interpreting silence as part of linguistic adjustment rather than lack of ability is critical. Allowing flexible forms of expression, including partial use of Bengali, peer discussion, or written responses, can enable participation without fear. Formative assessment practices that prioritize understanding over linguistic accuracy can further reduce performance pressure.

Parents also play a key role during this phase. As findings indicate experiences of anxiety, withdrawal, and reduced confidence, parents should avoid comparison pressure and recognize these responses as part of the transition process. Creating a supportive home environment where mistakes are normalized and bilingual learning is encouraged can help sustain confidence and emotional well-being. Protecting time for play and rest is equally important, given the observed reduction in leisure and increased academic load.

Long-Term Implications

At a structural level, schools and policymakers need to strengthen transition pathways. The findings highlight persistent challenges in comprehension, participation, and emotional adjustment, indicating the need for formal support systems. Schools should provide sustained language support through foundation English programmes, vocabulary development, and subject-specific bridging sessions. Teacher preparation should include training on linguistically responsive and emotionally sensitive pedagogies.

Policymakers can support these efforts by developing bilingual transition guidelines that outline appropriate pacing, scaffolding, and flexible language use during the first years of transition. Pre-transition bridging courses can help reduce initial linguistic difficulty, while school-based counselling services can address emotional and social challenges identified in this study. Monitoring mechanisms are also necessary to ensure that rigid "English-only" practices do not hinder participation during the adjustment period.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights a central contradiction in the transition from Bengali-medium to English-medium schooling. For parents, the shift represents aspirations for mobility, employment, and social advancement. For children, however, it is experienced as a series of interconnected challenges affecting language use, academic performance, emotional well-being, peer relationships, and everyday routines.

The concept of Pedagogies of Loss captures this tension by reframing EMI transition as more than a linguistic adjustment. It highlights how these challenges accumulate across linguistic, emotional, social, and developmental domains, particularly when the transition occurs abruptly and without adequate support. In doing so, the study extends EMI scholarship by foregrounding the lived and relational dimensions of transition, which often remain underexamined in policy and practice.

The findings also show how aspirational parenting shapes these experiences by framing difficulty as necessary for future success. In this way, children's challenges are not only experienced but also interpreted and sustained within broader expectations of mobility and achievement.

This study is based on a small, context-specific sample, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. While the study provides in-depth insights into participants' experiences, the results may not represent the full diversity of EMI transitions across different regions or socio-economic contexts. The reliance on interview data captures participants' perceptions at a particular point in time and does not reflect how these experiences may evolve longitudinally. In addition, the study does not include teachers' perspectives, which are important for understanding classroom practices and institutional responses to transition-related challenges.

Overall, the study suggests that linguistic transition should be understood not only as a pedagogical shift but as an emotional and developmental process. Addressing it requires approaches that are linguistically responsive, context-sensitive, and attentive to children's well-being alongside parental aspirations.

AI Use Disclosure Statement

The authors used QuillBot Premium and ChatGPT (Version 5.2) for language editing to improve readability and clarity after the manuscript was prepared.

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RAJ MADHU, is a Research Scholar in the Department of Educational Studies, Central University of Jammu. His major research interests lie in the area of educational philosophy, indigenous education, second language education, inclusive education and peace education. Email: rajmadhu481@gmail.com

ASIT K. MANTRY, is a Professor and HOD in the Department of Educational Studies, Central University of Jammu. His major research interests lie in the area of educational philosophy, educational leadership, integral education and value education. Email: asit.edu@cuammu.ac.in

BISWABHUSAN PRADHAN, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Tourism and Travel Management, Central University of Jammu. His major research interests lie in the area of educational technology, educational tourism, and value education. Email: biswa.ttm@cuammu.ac.in
