

Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): Challenges and Pathways for Integrating Tribal Languages into Formal Education

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Abstract—India’s linguistic diversity is vast and complex in nature; however, rapid socio-economic changes and the dominance of mainstream languages have placed many dialects and local languages at high risk. Although the National Education Policy 2020 advocates Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and emphasizes the use of the mother tongue in early learning, a significant gap persists between policy provisions and their effective implementation in educational settings. This paper offers a conceptual analysis of integrating tribal language preservation within India’s multilingual education environment by addressing this policy practice divide. It examines key challenges, including the shortage of trained teachers, lack of instructional materials in tribal languages, limited institutional support and socio-cultural barriers. In the presented paper a conceptual framework is proposed that links policy, institutional mechanisms, community engagement and technological integration for effective implementation. The study further highlights the importance of community participation, Indigenous knowledge systems and digital innovations such as local language content and digital archives in sustaining linguistic diversity. The paper suggests that meaningful inclusion of tribal languages in formal education is essential for promoting equity, cultural continuity and inclusive learning. It concludes by suggesting strategic pathways aligned with NEP 2020 to strengthen mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and ensure sustainable language preservation.

Index Terms—Tribal Language Preservation, Multilingual Education, NEP 2020, Mother Tongue-Based Education, Indigenous Languages

I. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with hundreds of languages representing rich cultural, historical, and cognitive traditions. As

per 1961 Census of India has documented 1,652 mother tongues, reflecting the country’s vast linguistic diversity. Under the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL), 117 of these have been identified as endangered. By 2011, the number of reported mother tongues increased to 2,843; however, detailed linguistic classification reduced this to 1,369 recognized languages, while 1,474 remained unclassified. The census further categorized languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers as endangered, highlighting the vulnerability of many tribal languages. These statistics underscore the urgent need for integrating such languages into formal education through MTB-MLE approaches. These tribal languages serve as vital carriers of Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and cultural identity. They are not merely tools of communication but embody the worldviews and lived experiences of tribal communities across regions such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal.

However, in recent decades, these languages have experienced a steady decline due to socio-economic transformations, urbanization, migration, and the increasing dominance of mainstream languages such as Hindi and English (Raj, 2025; Teja & Singh, 2025). In 2022-2023 UNESCO published a report in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts under the Ministry of Culture that emphasizes the urgent need to protect India’s tribal and indigenous languages. In the Northern zone, covering Chandigarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, around 25 languages have been identified, including Spiti, Jad, Darmiya, Gahri, and Kanashi. The Northeast zone, comprising states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim,

and Tripura, shows the highest linguistic diversity with 43 languages, including Aimol, Tangam, Sherdukpen, Singpho, and Tarao. In the East Central region covering Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh 15 languages such as Bhunjia, Birhor, Bondo, Toto, Gorum, Santhal, Mundari, and Ho are reported as endangered languages.

In contrast, the West Central zone, including Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Daman, Diu, Dadra Nagar Haveli, and Goa, has only 5 identified languages, such as Nihali, Baradi, Bharwad, Diwehi, and Bhala. The Southern region, comprising Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, accounts for 20 languages, including Toda, Soliga, JenuKurumba, Siddi, and Urali. Finally, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands region has 9 languages, such as Sentinelese, Onge, Shompen, Lamongse, and Luro. This distribution highlights both the richness and uneven spread of endangered tribal languages across India. This decline is particularly visible among younger generations, who are often educated in dominant languages and gradually lose proficiency in their mother tongue.

The erosion of tribal languages raises concerns not only about linguistic loss but also about the disappearance of cultural heritage and Indigenous epistemologies. Language is deeply intertwined with identity, and its loss can lead to marginalization and cultural disconnection (Nag, 2024). In this context, education becomes a critical site for intervention. The integration of tribal languages into formal education systems can serve as a powerful mechanism for preservation, revitalization, and intergenerational transmission.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes the importance of multilingualism and emphasizes the use of the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction in early education (Government of India, 2020). However, despite progressive policy frameworks, there remains a significant gap between policy intentions and their implementation (Singh, 2025). This paper seeks to explore how tribal language preservation can be effectively integrated into India's mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) framework by addressing this policy-practice divide. It adopts a conceptual approach to analyse challenges,

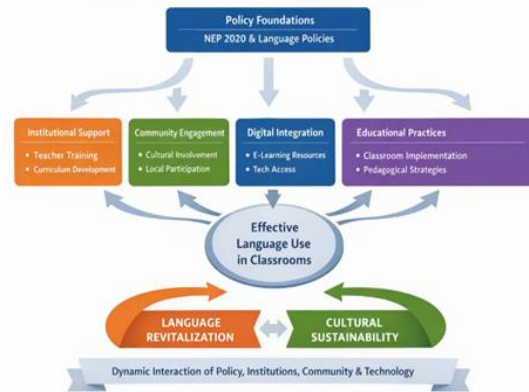
opportunities, and pathways for sustainable linguistic inclusion.

II. POLICY CONTEXT: MOTHER TONGUE BASED- MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

2.1 Overview of NEP 2020:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative shift in India's educational vision by emphasizing holistic, inclusive, and culturally rooted learning. As highlighted in the policy, education is considered fundamental for achieving social justice, equity, and national development (Government of India, 2020). One of its central features is the promotion of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), which recognizes the cognitive, pedagogical, and socio-cultural benefits of learning in one's mother tongue. The policy recommends that wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5 and preferably beyond should be the home language or mother tongue (Government of India, 2020). This recommendation aligns with broader research indicating that children learn more effectively when taught in familiar linguistic contexts and supports inclusive educational practices (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

Figure 1. Dynamic Interaction of Policy, Institution, Community & Technology



NEP 2020 highlights Institutional support, community engagement, digital integration and educational practices are the major components for the effective language use in classroom, further it also suggests there is need to preserve and promote Indian languages, including tribal and Indigenous languages, as part of the broader goal of cultural sustainability. It

calls for the development of teaching-learning materials in local languages, the recruitment of teachers proficient in these languages, and the integration of technology to support mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) (Government of India, 2020; Narkhede et al., 2025). By situating language within the framework of equity and inclusion, the policy acknowledges that linguistic diversity must be protected to ensure educational justice and meaningful participation of marginalized communities (Rangarajan et al., 2025).

2.2 Emphasis on Mother Tongue and Cultural Preservation

The emphasis on mother tongue-based education is not only pedagogically sound but also culturally significant. Tribal languages carry embedded knowledge systems related to ecology, medicine, agriculture, and social organization, making them essential for preserving Indigenous epistemologies. Integrating these languages into education helps sustain cultural knowledge while making learning more contextual and meaningful for students (Mehta, 2025). NEP 2020 aligns with this perspective by advocating culturally responsive pedagogy that respects local traditions, knowledge systems, and linguistic diversity (Nag, 2024)

However, the policy's aspirations often face practical challenges in implementation. While the framework is progressive, it requires systemic changes in curriculum design, teacher preparation, and institutional support. Studies indicate that mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policies in India often encounter barriers such as insufficient resources, lack of trained teachers, and weak institutional coordination (Singh, 2025; Yenugu, 2022). The gap between policy and practice becomes particularly evident in tribal regions, where infrastructural limitations, socio-economic disparities, and linguistic marginalization hinder effective execution. Addressing these challenges is therefore essential for translating policy commitments into meaningful educational outcomes.

2.3 Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Policy Implementation and Structural Realities

While NEP 2020 provides a strong conceptual foundation for mother-tongue based multilingual

education (MTB-MLE), its successful implementation depends on context-sensitive frameworks that address India's complex linguistic diversity. The policy builds upon earlier language-in-education approaches such as the Three Language Formula, yet scholars argue that these frameworks have historically reinforced linguistic hierarchies, often marginalizing minority and tribal languages in practice (Kandharaja & Vennela, 2025). As a result, there is a need to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful integration of local languages within educational systems.

However, implementing mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in India requires addressing structural constraints such as curriculum rigidity, limited availability of multilingual teaching resources, and insufficient institutional support. Additionally, socio-political factors, including societal preferences for dominant languages and the perceived economic value of English, often influence language choices in education (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024). These factors adversely affect the purpose of MTB-MLE. These factors can undermine the goals of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) by discouraging the use of tribal and minority languages in formal settings.

Therefore, effective implementation of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policies requires a shift toward decentralized and context-specific strategies that prioritize local linguistic realities. Strengthening institutional capacity, fostering community participation, and ensuring equitable resource distribution are essential for bridging the gap between policy vision and classroom practice.

III. THE POLICY–PRACTICE GAP

3.1 Lack of Trained Teachers

One of the most significant barriers to implementing mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in tribal contexts is the shortage of teachers proficient in local languages. Many teachers are recruited from non-tribal backgrounds and lack familiarity with the linguistic and cultural context of the students. This creates a disconnect between the language of instruction and the learner's home environment, leading to reduced comprehension and engagement (Raj, 2025; Singh, 2025). Teacher training programs often do not adequately prepare educators

for multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms, further widening the gap (Narkhede et al., 2025).

3.2 Limited Teaching-Learning Materials

Another critical challenge is the lack of quality teaching-learning materials in tribal languages. Textbooks, digital content, and supplementary resources are predominantly available in dominant languages, leaving tribal languages underrepresented. Even when materials are developed, they are often limited in scope and not systematically integrated into the curriculum. This scarcity restricts the effective use of tribal languages in formal education and undermines policy objectives (Government of India, 2020; Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

3.3 Weak Institutional Support

Institutional mechanisms required to support mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) remain underdeveloped in many regions. There is often a lack of coordination between policy frameworks and local implementation bodies, resulting in fragmented efforts. Schools may not have the resources or administrative support needed to adopt multilingual practices, and monitoring systems for evaluating policy implementation are often weak (Rangarajan et al., 2025; Narkhede et al., 2025).

3.4 Socio-Economic and Linguistic Challenges

Socio-economic factors also play a significant role in shaping language use. Parents may prioritize dominant languages for economic mobility, leading to reduced use of tribal languages at home. Migration and urbanization further disrupt linguistic continuity, as children are exposed to environments where their mother tongue is not valued. These factors collectively contribute to language shift and decline, making preservation efforts more complex (Teja & Singh, 2025; Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024).

3.5 Digital Divide and Technological Constraints

The integration of digital tools in mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) presents both opportunities and challenges; however, in tribal regions, the digital divide remains a significant barrier. Limited access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and technological infrastructure restricts the use of e-learning platforms and digital language resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these disparities

became more evident, as many tribal students were unable to participate in online learning due to lack of access to technology (Teja & Singh, 2025). Furthermore, the development of digital content in tribal languages remains limited, reducing the potential of technology as a tool for language preservation and education (Shahid et al., 2026). Without addressing these technological inequalities, digital initiatives may fail to support mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) effectively.

3.6 Policy Implementation and Governance Gaps

Another critical challenge lies in the gap between policy formulation and its execution at the ground level. While NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), its implementation requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, educational institutions, and local communities. In practice, however, implementation often suffers from inadequate planning, limited funding, and lack of accountability mechanisms (Yenugu, 2022; Singh, 2025). Additionally, the absence of context-specific strategies for tribal regions further complicates execution, as uniform policy approaches may not address local linguistic and cultural realities. Strengthening governance structures and ensuring decentralized implementation are therefore essential for translating policy objectives into meaningful educational outcomes.

IV. ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

4.1 Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply embedded in tribal languages and reflect centuries of accumulated wisdom. These systems include ecological knowledge, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and social values. Integrating such knowledge into education not only enhances relevance but also fosters respect for cultural heritage (Mehta, 2025). Community participation is essential in documenting and transmitting this knowledge, especially as NEP 2020 emphasizes the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge within a holistic educational framework (Government of India, 2020).

4.2 Oral Traditions and Intergenerational Transfer

Tribal languages are often sustained through oral traditions such as storytelling, songs, rituals, and folklore. These practices serve as powerful tools for intergenerational learning and cultural continuity. However, modernization and formal education systems have marginalized these traditions, reducing opportunities for language transmission. Revitalizing oral practices within educational contexts can strengthen linguistic and cultural identity and support culturally responsive learning (Nag, 2024).

4.3 Community Participation

Community involvement is crucial for the success of language preservation initiatives. Local stakeholders, including elders, cultural practitioners, and community leaders, can contribute to curriculum development, teaching practices, and resource creation. Community-led initiatives ensure that preservation efforts are contextually grounded and culturally authentic. Collaborative partnerships between schools and communities can bridge the gap between formal education and lived experiences (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024; Singh, 2025).

4.4 Cultural Identity and Linguistic Empowerment

Language plays a central role in shaping cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging among tribal communities. The decline of tribal languages can lead to cultural disconnection and marginalization, particularly within formal education systems that prioritize dominant languages. Promoting tribal languages within educational settings can empower communities by validating their linguistic and cultural heritage, thereby enhancing participation and inclusion (Rangarajan et al., 2025; Raj, 2025).

4.5 Community-Based Educational Models

Community-based educational models offer an effective approach for integrating tribal languages and knowledge systems into formal education. Such models emphasize localized curriculum design, participatory teaching methods, and the involvement of community members in educational processes. Research suggests that bottom-up approaches are more effective than top-down policy interventions in addressing local linguistic realities and ensuring sustainable language preservation (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023; Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024).

V. INTEGRATING DIGITAL AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS

Recent studies advocate a multilingual approach that supports first-language learning while enabling cognitive development and academic engagement (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023). Such frameworks highlight the importance of translanguaging practices, where multiple languages are used dynamically in classroom interactions, thereby reflecting real linguistic environments rather than rigid language hierarchies.

5.1 Digital Archives and Local Content

Digital technologies offer new opportunities for documenting and preserving tribal languages. Digital archives can store audio recordings, texts, and cultural artifacts, making them accessible to wider audiences. Local language content, including videos, stories, and educational materials, can be created and disseminated through digital platforms. These tools enable communities to take ownership of preservation efforts while reaching younger generations (Shahid et al., 2026). Additionally, NEP 2020 emphasizes the integration of technology in education to promote equitable access and support multilingual learning (Government of India, 2020).

5.2 AI and Language Tools

Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have opened new possibilities for language preservation. Tools such as speech recognition, machine translation, and language learning applications can support the development and dissemination of tribal languages. While challenges related to data availability, linguistic standardization, and ethical considerations remain, AI-driven technologies (e.g. BHASHINI, Adi-Vaani, Anuvadini AI, AI4Bharat, Google Translate) can significantly enhance language documentation and accessibility (Shahid et al., 2026; Narkhede et al., 2025). These tools can also support MTB-MLE by enabling adaptive and personalized learning experiences.

5.3 Mobile-Based Learning

Mobile technology is particularly relevant in tribal contexts, where access to traditional infrastructure may be limited. Mobile-based learning platforms can provide educational content in local languages, enabling flexible and accessible learning. Such

platforms can help bridge the digital divide by delivering culturally relevant content directly to learners, particularly in remote areas (Teja & Singh, 2025). The increasing penetration of mobile devices offers an opportunity to expand mother-tongue based multilingual (MTB-MLE) education beyond formal classroom settings.

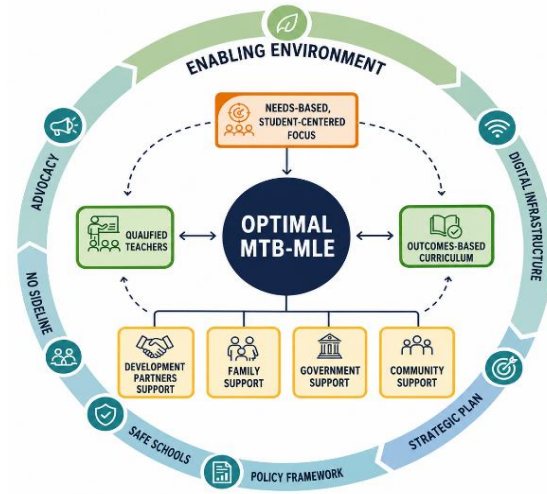
5.4 Digital Inclusion and Infrastructure Development
 Despite the potential of digital innovations, their effectiveness depends on the availability of infrastructure and equitable access. Many tribal regions continue to face challenges such as poor internet connectivity, lack of digital devices, and limited digital literacy. These barriers restrict the adoption of technology-based educational solutions and may widen existing inequalities if not addressed (Teja & Singh, 2025; Shahid et al., 2026; Perez, 2019). Therefore, strengthening digital infrastructure and ensuring inclusive access are essential for leveraging technology in language preservation and education.

5.5 Integration of Technology with Pedagogy
 The successful use of digital tools in mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) requires their integration with pedagogical practices. Technology should not be viewed merely as an add-on but as an integral component of teaching and learning processes. NEP 2020 advocates the use of digital platforms, online education, and innovative teaching methods to enhance learning outcomes and accessibility (Government of India, 2020; Yenugu, 2022). When combined with culturally responsive pedagogy, digital innovations can support both language preservation and educational inclusion.

VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MTB-MLE INTEGRATION

The proposed conceptual framework presents MTB-MLE as a dynamic and interconnected system aimed at achieving optimal educational outcomes through the integration of tribal languages into formal education. At the core of the framework lies “Optimal MTB-MLE,” which represents the effective implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education that enhances learning, inclusion, and cultural preservation.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)



At the centre of this framework is a needs-based, student-centered focus, emphasizing that educational practices must align with the linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural backgrounds of learners. This approach recognizes that tribal students learn more effectively when instruction begins in their mother tongue, thereby improving comprehension, engagement, and retention. Supporting this central goal are two key pedagogical pillars: qualified teachers and an outcomes-based curriculum. The presence of trained teachers proficient in both tribal and dominant languages is essential for implementing multilingual pedagogy effectively. Simultaneously, an outcomes-based curriculum ensures that learning objectives are clearly defined while incorporating local knowledge systems, cultural contexts, and linguistic diversity. Further strengthening the framework are multiple layers of support systems, including family support, government support, community support, and development partner support. Family and community involvement play a critical role in sustaining linguistic practices and ensuring cultural relevance in education. Government support, guided by policies such as National Education Policy 2020, provides institutional backing, funding, and curriculum frameworks. Development partners, including NGOs and research institutions, contribute through innovation, resource development, and capacity building. Encircling these components is the broader enabling environment, which ensures the sustainability and scalability of MTB-MLE initiatives. This environment

includes key elements such as policy frameworks, advocacy, digital infrastructure, strategic planning, safe and inclusive schools, and monitoring systems. These factors collectively address structural and systemic challenges, bridging the gap between policy intent and classroom practice.

Overall, the framework highlights that successful integration of tribal languages into formal education is not a linear process but a holistic and collaborative system, where policy, pedagogy, community engagement, and institutional support interact continuously. This integrated approach is essential for addressing existing challenges and creating sustainable pathways for the preservation and promotion of tribal languages through education.

VII. FUTURE PATHWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Teacher Training in Local Languages

Developing a cadre of teachers proficient in tribal languages is essential for effective implementation. Teacher education programs must incorporate multilingual pedagogy and cultural sensitivity, enabling educators to engage with diverse linguistic contexts (Singh, 2025; Narkhede et al., 2025).

7.2 Community-School Partnerships

Strengthening partnerships between schools and communities can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of language preservation efforts. Community members can contribute to curriculum design, teaching practices, and resource development (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024; Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

7.3 Development of Multilingual Resources

There is a need for systematic development of high-quality teaching-learning materials in tribal languages. This includes textbooks, digital content, and supplementary resources that reflect local contexts and knowledge systems (Government of India, 2020; Shahid et al., 2026).

7.4 Policy Monitoring and Evaluation

Robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating policy implementation are necessary to ensure accountability and effectiveness. Continuous assessment can help identify gaps and inform

improvements (Rangarajan et al., 2025; Yenugu, 2022).

7.5 Strengthening Digital Infrastructure and Access

Ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructure is essential for supporting mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and language preservation initiatives. Investments in internet connectivity, digital devices, and localized digital platforms can enhance learning opportunities in tribal regions (Teja & Singh, 2025; Shahid et al., 2026).

7.6 Context-Specific and Decentralized Implementation Strategies

Adopting decentralized and context-sensitive approaches to policy implementation can better address the linguistic and cultural diversity of tribal communities. Tailoring strategies to local needs ensures more effective integration of tribal languages within the education system (Kandharaja & Vennela, 2025; Singh, 2025).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The preservation of tribal languages in India is both a cultural imperative and an educational necessity. While policies such as NEP 2020 provide a strong foundation for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), their success depends on effective implementation. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires a holistic approach that integrates institutional support, community participation, and digital innovation. By embedding tribal languages within the education system, India can promote inclusive and equitable learning while safeguarding its linguistic heritage. The transition from policy to practice is not merely a technical challenge but a transformative process that redefines the relationship between language, education, and identity.

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that links policy directives with practical implementation through interconnected components. The framework begins with policy initiatives such as NEP 2020, which provide the foundation for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) (Government of India, 2020). These policies must be supported by strong institutional mechanisms, including teacher training, curriculum development, and resource

allocation (Narkhede et al., 2025; Singh, 2025). Community engagement plays a central role in ensuring cultural relevance and sustainability (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024; Mehta, 2025), while digital integration enhances accessibility and innovation (Shahid et al., 2026; Yenugu, 2022).

These elements collectively influence educational practices, leading to effective language use in classrooms and supporting multilingual learning environments (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023). Ultimately, this process contributes to language sustainability, ensuring the preservation and revitalization of tribal languages, particularly in marginalized contexts (Rangarajan et al., 2025; Raj, 2025). The framework emphasizes that integration is not a linear process but a dynamic interaction between policy, institutions, communities, and technology, requiring continuous adaptation and collaboration for effective implementation (Singh, 2025).

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