



MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN AMONG THE MISING COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Recognising Mother tongues as a valid school subject or making it a medium of instruction is a very complex one in the context of multilingual North East India. Assam has recognized 14 languages in the **Ka –Sreni** (the first class of formal schooling/ a kind of preschool), including 7 scheduled languages. Primary Schools in Assam has 10 mediums which is reduced to 8 in Upper primary classes. 10 languages are taught either as Major Indian Language (MIL) or Elective subjects in the high schools. Though officially languages are recognized and expected to be taught, in true spirit mother tongue education in the state is not free from problems. The paper is based on a research conducted in Assam on the Attitude and Perception of Mother Tongue Education by various stakeholders. Data were collected from parents, community members, teachers and students. It is evident that the unclear policy on language, low functional load, and lack of resources -like teaching learning material, teachers, teacher training and the shrinking domain of usage of mother tongue are few issues that cause serious problems in the mother tongue education in the state.

Keywords: Mising, bilingualism, attitude, education, curriculum, minority language

Introduction:

Assam is a land of diversity in terms of language and the culture. Linguistically the state is diverse in not only in terms of the number of languages but also in terms of the language families available in the state, it has languages from Indo-Aryan Family, Tibeto-Burman family, Austro Asiatic Family and Tai Family are coexisting in harmony for years. Notable tribal languages of the state are - Bodo, Chakma, Deuri, Dimas Garo, Kachari, Khamti, Khasi, Koch, Maran, Mattak, Mech, Mishing, Jaintia, Hojai, Rabha, Sonowal, Tai, Tiwa (Ialung), and Tea Tribes etc. One of the dominant tribal languages of the state the Bodo is the first tribal language which has been included in the VIII schedule. The dominant population of the state is Assamese, spoken widely in the Brahmaputra valley and Bengali spoken mainly in Barak Valley. According to the 48th Report of the Commissioner of Linguistic Minorities in this state 14 languages are taught in the schools out of which 8 are tribal languages, the languages included in the report are - English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri, Nepali, Bodo, Deori, Garo, Hmar, Karbi, Mising, Tai, Tiwa (the latter 8 are tribal languages). As a general norm all the tribes speak their own language which is often named the same as the community/tribe.

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Despite India's stand for education in the mother tongue at least for the beginning years¹ the contextual reality of the inclusion of the minority languages in the larger school system is a wishful thinking rather than a reality. There are official records of inclusion of various tribal languages in the school system, introduced either as a subject of instruction or as the medium of instruction. The country while recognising the need to protect, conserve and preserve the linguistic interest of the minorities and the need to promote linguistic competencies in the languages of wider communication adopted Three Language Formula in 1956. All the educational policies till date is in favour of three language formula, however the policy does not spell out what is to be done for the minority languages, which could not become a regional language in the multilingual states. Moreover, education is a state concern therefore the state has authority to decide on which language to be included and not to be included. One silver lining visible in this context is the degree of awareness of the linguistic rights and the strong identity assertion phenomena happening in this part of the country. The Misings also have established their own language society 'Mising Agom Kebang' in April 1972.

The question of Minority languages in Assam: Like all other states in the country the state adopts Three Language Formula in the schools. The three language formula practiced in the state is:

First language (L1): Assamese*

Second Language (L2): English

Third language (L3): Hindi (48th Report on the Commissioner of Linguistic Minorities)

* It is highly possible that 9 other languages (Bengali, Bodo, Garo, Hmar, Manipuri, Nepali, English and Hindi) must also have assumed the status of the L1).

Unlike the other North Eastern states the textbook development of the tribal languages is also a responsibility of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and, Assam State Textbook Production and Publication Corporation. The prescribed list of the books for Ka –Shreni (a sort of preparatory class) shows that altogether there are 14 languages, out of which 9 are the medium of instruction and 5 are designated as other languages. The languages which are considered to be the medium of instruction also are – Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Garo, Nepali, Manipuri, Hmar, English and Hindi, the remaining languages- Bihupriya Manipuri, Tiwa, Mising, Tai, Rabha and Deori languages are designated as Other languages. From class I onwards the other languages are no more found. 9 languages continue to feature in the Primary Education as a medium of instruction which is further reduced to 8 in the Upper Primary Classes. Again in the high school level 10 languages do appear either as MIL (Major Indian Language) or as an Elective subject. Following is a table showing the details of the availability of the option to learn the languages in Assam:

Sl. No.	Language	Taught either as Medium of instruction/ subject			
		Ka-shreni	Primary	Upper Primary	High school (MIL/Elective)
1.	Assamese	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Bengali	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	Bodo	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Garo	✓	✓	-	-

¹ Time and again educational policies reflect the importance to follow three language formula in letter and spirit (NPE-1986, NCFSE- 2000, NCF- 2005). The NEP 2020's stand to bring all the mother tongues as medium of instruction in school at least upto class V

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5.	Nepali	✓	✓	✓	✓
6.	Manipuri	✓	✓	✓	✓
7.	Hmar	✓	✓	-	-
8.	English	✓	✓	✓	✓
9.	Hindi	✓	✓	✓	✓
10.	Bishnupriya Manipuri	✓	-	-	-
11.	Tiwa	✓	-	-	-
12.	Mishing	✓	-	-	-
13.	Rabha	✓	-	-	-
14.	Deori	✓	-	-	-

In addition to the languages mentioned above Santhali, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian are also the Elective subjects in the high school.

It is worth appreciating that 14 languages are recognised and used in school education, this can be a sign of recognising the linguistic rights of the children belonging to the minority groups. How much it reaches to the masses and does this inclusion is a guarantee to the promotion, preservation and maintenance of India's linguistic diversity. Are children getting the benefits of multilingual education programmes as expected? These are the questions yet to answer. Complicating the problem is the question of the medium of instruction in the schools. In Assam according to UDISE data medium of instruction is mainly the larger languages namely the Assamese, the Bangla, the Bodo, Hindi and English, no other tribal/minority languages could become medium of instruction perhaps because of the population size². The following table shows the number of schools with different mediums of instruction.

Table no.1: Number of schools with different mediums of instruction

Sl. No.	Medium of instruction	Number of schools	Percentage
1.	Assamese	46,775	76.54
2.	Bangla	8310	13.6
3.	Bodo	2816	4.61
4.	Hindi	573	0.094
5.	English	2075	3.4
	Total	61,110	

Source: UDISE -2011-12

The Mising, its language and status in school education: Mising are the second numerous tribe in Assam, after the Bodos, according to a data by the missing autonomous council the population of the tribe is around 7 lacs (7,87,310 by 2011 census). They are found to be inhabited in the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh. (787436,2001, 787310,2011 census). They are recognised as Miri in the census of India. It is believed that the Misings migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh sometimes in 13th and 14th century AD when the area around Sadiya was ruled by the Chutia kings (Dole, 1978). The degree of bilingualism of Misings is quite high as they have a long history of language contact with the Assamese, the dominant language of the state. It is said that The Mising are officially known as Miri till the end of 20th century. According to Edward Gait the word 'Miri' means a go-between or an interpreter. The name Miri actually suggests

² Though Mising population is around 8 lakhs their habitations are not in compact areas.

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a middle-man between the Assamese of the plains and the Miris of the hills (Arunachal Pradesh) (Rupanjali 2017). Bilingualism in this tribe is a long phenomenon which is developed from the societal needs and recently from the educational needs. A recent data quoted by Rajeev Doley (2013) it is interesting that- according to Doley (2008), “while making an oral expression in the first language (L1), the Misings on an average use 35% Assamese words, 7% English words and 1.5% words from Hindi or other languages. This percentage increases to 57%, 18% and 3% respectively in case of the educated and the city/town dwellers leaving just 22% for their ethnic language, i.e., Mising. But this group constitutes just 13% of the total Mising population and the rest 87% uses their ethnic language which dominates their speech elements roughly by 78% on an average”. Therefore, bilingualism among the Misings is not a new phenomenon and the degree of bilingualism is ever increasing in the two languages, Assamese for the social requirement and English as a new trend of the educational demands of the globalised economy. The tribe as are mingling continuously with the dominant Assamese communities, beyond their locality they have to speak Assamese. The degree of bilingualism of Mising with Assamese is very high and is stable because of long contact situation.³ At present with the serious efforts by Mising Agom Kebang the literature in the language is developing at an appreciable degree.⁴

The Mising mother tongue in school: The researcher had visited some Mising villages in the in the Dhemaji district of Assam which is considered to be the largest settlement of Misings as a part of a study conducted by North East Regional Institute of Education(NERIE,NCERT)⁵. Data from four group of stakeholders were collected by using a questionnaire. 4 sets of interview schedules were prepared, and focus group interview were conducted to the educational stakeholders, teacher, students and community members to ascertain (i) the status of language in school education, (ii) the available resources, (iii) preference/non-preference of the mother tongue in the education, (iv) the responsible stakeholders, (v) the attitude of the community members toward the present policy of language in education.

During the visit it was revealed that there are 4 textbooks and 2 rhyme books available in Mising and used in school education:

Sl.no.	Name of the book	Class	Writer/Publisher
1.	Posing Otsur-I	I	Rodnesor Perme, SCERT,Assam
2.	Posang Otsur -I	II	Indresor Pegu, SCERT Assam
3.	Ngoluk Po:tin-I	III	A group of writers, SCERT,Assam
4.	Ngoluk Po:tin-II	IV	A group of writers, SCERT,Assam
5.	Poman Moman(Rhymes)	--	Tabu Taid
6.	Missing Gomlan(Word list)	--	Norendra Pa:du

Two books **Ngoluk Po:tin – I & II** are developed in the line of NCF 2005. The books, though in black and white, are attractive and illustrations are in accordance with Mising culture. The books in general give ample scope for the child to get engaged in the language and develop linguistic skills. Regarding availability of teachers in around 120 Mising language teachers were appointed by the Government of Assam. Out of this number, many got retired and many are utilised as subject teacher other than Mising4 a few more sought transfer in places

³ They had education in Assamese language till its introduction in 1986 in the Primary schools of Mising dominated areas.

⁴ Mising Autonomous Council was established in 1995. Till date, there is no special programme taken up by Mising Autonomous Council for the promotion of Mising language.

⁵ A Study on the Attitude and Perception of Educational Stakeholders in Mother Tongue Education (2017-19)

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where Mising children are less and the question of teaching this particular language does not arise. But nothing has been seriously looked into by any stakeholders, Government in their end is proud to say that they have appointed teachers, and that they provide textbooks under SSA scheme. It seems that hardly any further step is taken up improving the teaching learning process happening in the particular language. They only have done bare minimum on their part; the rest is left to the system. Parents do consider that if their children get to study mother tongue, it is well and good, if not given opportunity the simple answer is what to do, our liking and disliking does not make any difference. *Mising Agom Kebang*, the literary organisation of Mising, is working for the introduction of Mising in Upper Primary level. The organisation is trying to open Mising medium schools at present; the efforts are yet to reap rewards. Only a handful of people are keen on this project and so the sustainability question in case of Mising is quite obvious.

For any tribal/small language to survive in the school system requires a positive attitude of the people towards the teaching learning of the language, it is not a status quo kind of recognition but the properly placed curriculum, the pedagogy, the availability of teaching learning material, the teachers and above all the attitude and motivation level of the parents and students. Understanding the attitudes and context of language teaching will help in developing an understanding the practice of Mother tongue teaching in general.

Attitude and Perception towards the study of Mising language:

Language is a social mechanism and any attitudinal study can only make sense against its actual context. The process of language learning whether it is L1 or L2 learning can be better understood if the social dimension is included. It plays a major role in developing in the teacher and the student a set of attitudes towards the language learned. It is the background which shapes most of the teachers and students' attitude and explains their reactions and options to different aspects of education in general and to the teaching of English in particular. According to Crystal, 'Language attitude are actually the feelings people have about their own language or the language of the others, and further defined, as an individual's psychological construction regarding their own and or the languages of the others, (Crystal, 1997).

Attitudes are therefore a vital force, which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all. They determine the effort and the time the learner puts in trying to learn the language. The learner approaches the language with certain attitudes – or in other words, learning is accompanied by emotional reactions which may sometimes leads to a constellation of likes and dislikes directed towards the language in question and to all languages in general. Because of this it can be assumed that an understanding of how attitude facilitates or hinders language learning will reveal how much they can be controlled or manipulated to enable the learner to be more confident in language learning.

The process of acquiring a language involves various conditions. However, the acquisition of the L1 and L2/L3 involved different situations. The common condition for acquisition of both the L1 and L2/L3 is the learner's attitude and perception towards the language. It is the status of the mother tongue that determines the attitude and perception of the speakers and in turn the attitude and perception also determine the status of the particular language. In the case of mother tongue, tribal and minority languages suffer from negative attitude and perception about the language as absence of its representative scripts, poor scientific and technological terminologies and vocabularies and future opportunity and scope for providing job in the particular language. All these conditions and opportunities determine the attitude and perception of speakers, schools, and educational stake holders which in turn determine the status of the language.

In this connection the data has been collected from the four stakeholders in education, the parents, the community members, the students and the teachers.

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The following Table: 1, 2, 3 and 4 highlight the status and its associated perceptions and attitudes toward mother tongue and its place in formal education in Assam with reference to the Mising speakers.

The Data

With the intention of studying the attitude and perception of the various stake holders towards mother tongue education data was collected from the two communities of Assam residing was collected. The Data has been collected both from the primary sources and the secondary sources. Primary data are drawn from questionnaire administration, focus group discussions and in-depth (individual) interviews with (i) community members (ii) parents (iii) teachers and (iv) students. Questionnaires constructed by using Likert's scale were administered to the four groups of people:

- Parents (48 statements)
- Community members (48 statements)
- Students (50 statements) and
- Teachers (51 statements)

In addition to the questionnaires, focus group discussion and in-depth (individual) interviews were conducted with the Educational stake holders like literature society members and state educational functionaries. The statement based answers were grouped into 4 issues as:

- Status of Mother tongues
- Support and promotion of Mother tongue
- Extent of use of Mother tongue (for students).

Results and Findings

1. Status of Mother Tongue: Majority of the parents and student disagree with the equality of languages (47.6 % and 42%), whereas Community members, teachers and Educational stakeholders feel that all the languages are of equal status (81.7% 19.9% and 80%). The reason perhaps is because of shrinking functional load of the minority language and ever-expanding globalisation and need for the dominant language⁶. There is a mixed kind of response towards the opportunities provided by the school to learn mother tongues for the Mising community while 50.0%, 64.8% of the parents and educational stakeholders stated that schools give equal opportunity for study of mother tongue whereas community members, teachers and students with a percentage of 93.8%, 79.9% and 52.6% respectively feel that different languages have different statuses reflected in the overall school system. All the stakeholders approached felt the necessity and show confidence in Mising becoming a language which could be used not only in primary and secondary education but also are positive about their language's potential to become a language of higher studies, however the students are not confident about having Mising as a language of higher education only 30% of them agree on this statement. (Ref. Appendix: Table -I).

2. Support required for Mother Tongue Education: All the stakeholders of both the communities agree to the statement that mother tongues need to be promoted and supported in the community level 95.8% & 90.4%; 66.6% & 93.7% the data shows that the people are very much concern and aware of their roles as a speaker of the language in promoting their language, may be they have seen the works by the literary organisation Mising Agom Kebang. At the same time, they all think that some support with regard to the promotion of mother

⁶ While interacting with the parents during the fieldwork, one of the parents expressed her concern that there is no opportunity/jobs available by learning Mising. It also happened so that the Mising language certificate course offered in Gauhati university is discontinued from June 12, 2020

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tongue is required and expected both from the central and state government. This implies the need for spreading awareness in this regard. Nearly 90% by all the groups opined that one of the most important aspects which need serious attention in the present day is the development of appropriate technology and teaching learning material for the promotion of MTE. The people felt that there is a lot of socio political and economic constraints in the implementation of mother tongue education programmes percentages being 60.9%, 55.0%, 50.5 % and 89.7 % respectively for the parents, community members, teachers and students respectively. (Ref. Appendix: Table -II)

3. Extent of Use of Mother Tongue: The survivability and sustainability question of smaller tribal languages is determined mainly by the extent of use of the language by its speakers in different domains. This also will show the path for further advancement of the language. A language shrinks when its functional load is diminished, and people do not feel any worth of the language and it remained in the status of one of the many traditions followed by the group of people. It is revealed from the data that mother tongues are still visible in the private and public domains the students/youths use their mother tongues to their grandparents, parents and to their siblings. There is no constraining in using mother tongues in public domain with the mentioned groups of people. It is only in the school and related domains. Misings rarely use their mother tongue with the teacher (21.1% and 15.6% respectively in school and outside school). As Misings are habituated alongside with Assamese people and not actually isolated from the larger Assamese society they use the dominant language freely with their friends, more than 50% of the student do not use Mising with their friends in the school indicating that their bilingualism is quite high. At the same time they use Mising with friends outside school (50.9%) indicating their consciousness and retention of identity and indicates a strong solidarity among Mising friends and implies that they prefer friends from the same community. The data clearly shows that there is positive attitude of the use of mother tongue by the younger generation which is a healthy sign of sustainability. The reasons for which children do not use their mother tongue in school is probably because the school is either Assamese medium or an English medium school, or the teachers and classmates speak other languages. (Ref. Appendix: Table -III)

Conclusion

Assam has a lot of diversity of languages. All these languages do not occupy the same status perhaps because of the number of speakers, available literary traditions and also its takers in education. Despite of unequal position of all the languages in this state, the particular attitudes and perspective of various sections of the people like youths, parents, community, teachers and government are also a vital force, which determines the status and development of the particular language in various spheres. Though all the stakeholders in general agree on the equal status of languages, a few people disagree on this perhaps their view is influenced by the existing hierarchy of languages prevailing in India in general and Assam in particular. It shows the importance of mother tongue for completion of primary education as it reduces the dropout level, increase children's confidence, better interaction in teaching and learning. In higher classes (secondary onwards) studying MT is not considered important except by the teachers. There is a correlation between the promotion of the mother tongue and the preservation and promotion of identity and culture.

The survival and development of any language depend upon its support from various section of the society - the community including government and various stake holders. It is evident that, there is the need for proper policy for encouraging mother tongue education along with other L2 and L3 teaching and understanding and form of language teaching as a resource for lifelong learning in the languages studied. The unclear linguistic policy at state and national level coupled with the socio-political and economic constrain of the community affect strongly the successful implementation of mother tongue education in the state. Today the use of mother

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tongue at various places and context has a complex scenario. It is not uniform always in every sphere. Mother tongue therefore has its own context of usage and importance.

It is also observed that mother tongue is frequently used in the domestic sphere and to the kinsman. Attitude of the people towards the status of mother tongues are not so much negative. It is because of their strong ethnic identity consciousness in which language play important role for maintaining group identity and its ethnic boundary. Taking into consideration of all the benefits of mother tongue education as is evidences by the researches all around and the present study shows that we need to convince people for bringing a positive attitude and perspective towards the mother tongue education.

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Appendix

Table no. I: Status of the mother tongue as perceived by the Missing respondents

Questions	Parents				Community members				Teachers				Students				Educational Stakeholders			
	SA	A	UN	D	SD	SA	A	UN	D	SD	SA	A	UN	D	SD	SA	A	UN	D	SD
1. Equality of all languages	4.7	23.8	-	47.6	23.8	33.3	48.4	12.1	6.06	-	86.6	13.3	-	-	10.5	26.3	21.1	42.1	-	40
3. School does not provide equal opportunity for MT	-	20.8	20.8	50	8.3	45.4	48.4	3.03	3.03	-	26.6	53.3	20.0	-	-	10.5	42.1	36.8	10.5	-
4. No option to study MT in School	4.8	42.9	19	33.3	-	15.0	80.0	-	-	5.0	40.0	16.0	-	35.0	5.0	5.3	36.8	15.8	26.3	15.8
5. MT has no opportunity to complete primary education	13	73.9	8.7	4.3	-	54.5	24.2	15.1	6.06	-	28.6	59.9	6.0	5.5		1.3	98.7	-	-	60
6. MT facilitate the completion of primary education	4.5	68.2	22.7	4.5	-	12.1	27.2	18.1	42.4	-	60.6	40.0	-	-	-	43.7	56.2	-	-	60
7. MT and completion of primary/ secondary education	38.1	57.1	4.8	-	-	15.0	70.0	5.0	10.0	-	20.0	55.0	10.0	15.0	-	50.0	50.0	-	-	20
8. Mt and completion of higher education	13.6	77.3	9.1	-	-	36.3	48.4	12.1	3.03	-	40.0	33.3	20.0	6.6	-	12.1	27.2	18.1	42.4	-

Appendix

II: Support and Promotion of Mother Tongue Education as perceived by the Missing respondents

Questions	Parents						Community members						Teachers						Students						Educational Stakeholders					
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		SA	A	UN	D	SD		SA	A	UN	D	SD		SA	A	UN	D	SD		SA	A	UN	D	SD	
1. Promote at community level	25	70.8	4.2	-	-		48.4	42.4	6.06	3.03	-		20.0	46.6	33.3	-	-		15.8	78.9	-	5.3	-		-	100	-	-	-	
2. Community support MTE	34.8	56.5	8.7	-	-		33.3	36.3	30.3	-	-		20.0	66.6	13.3	-	-		36.3	48.4	12.1	3.03	-		60	40	-	-	-	
3. Promote MT at state level	25	66.7	4.2	4.2	-		45.4	48.4	3.03	3.03	-		26.6	53.3	20.0	-	-		26.3	26.3	31.6	5.3	10.5		-	100	-	-	-	
4. State govt. support MTE	13.6	54.5	31.8	-	-		54.5	24.2	15.1	6.06	-		15.0	65.0	15.0	-	5.0		2.0	18.2	80.6	-	-		60	40	-	-	-	
5. Better facilities by state govt.	41.7	50	8.3	-	-		36.3	48.4	12.1	3.03	-		40.0	33.3	20.0	6.6	-		15.8	31.6	36.8	15.8	-		60	40	-	-	-	
6. Promote MT at national level	16.7	75	4.2	4.2	-		12.1	18.1	27.2	42.4	-		60.6	40.0	-	-	-		21.1	36.8	15.8	21.1	5.3		-	100	-	-	-	
7. Central govt. support MTE	9.5	28.6	47.6	14.3	-		12.1	37.2	18.1	32.4	-		40.6	40.0	10.0	9.8	-		9.5	28.6	47.6	14.3	-		60	20	20	-	-	
8. Better facilities by Central govt.	50	41.7	8.3	-	-		57.5	36.3	6.06	-	-		13.3	66.6	6.6	13.3	-		10.5	31.6	47.4	10.5	-		40	40	20	-	-	
9. Appropriate TLM for MTE	45.8	50	4.2	-	-		45.4	48.4	3.03	3.03	-		20.0	60.0	13.3	6.6	-		26.3	47.4	21.1	5.3	-		60	40	-	-	-	
10. Appropriate technology for MTE	41.7	50	8.3	-	-		48.4	42.4	9.09	-	-		33.3	46.6	20.0	-	-		43.8	25	31.3	-	-		20	40	-	40	-	
11. Present MT policy of state	13	26.1	43.5	17.4	-		30.0	35.0	10.0	25.0	-		10.0	50.0	10.0	25.0	-		5.3	36.8	52.6	5.3	-		80	20	-	-	-	

Appendix

Table III: Extent of use of Mother Tongue as perceived by Mising students

Sl. No	Questions	Degree of Perception and Opinion toward MT and Expression of Emotion better (frequency in %)				
		SA	A	UND	D	SD
		Mishng	Mishng	Mishng	Mishng	Mishng
1.	Use MT with the grand-parents	63.2	26.3	-	5.3	5.3
2.	Use MT with the parents at home	47.4	42.1	-	10.5	-
3.	Use MT with the siblings	47.4	26.3	10.5	15.8	-
4.	Use MT to Talk to parents in Public Places	47.4	31.6	-	5.3	15.8
5.	Use MT to talk to the Siblings at the Public Places	36.8	42.1	5.3	15.8	-
6.	Use MT to talk to the teachers in the School	5.3	21.1	-	63.2	10.5
7.	Use MT to talk to the teachers in Public Places	-	15.6	27.1	50.2	7.1
8.	Use MT to talk to friends in the School	15.8	21.1	10.5	42.1	10.5
9.	Use MT to talk to friends outside the School	36.8	21.1	5.3	21.1	10.5