

From resistance to reform: Building momentum for policy change in contexts of political contestation

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Abstract

Educational policy scholars have devoted considerable attention to how policies are enacted and how reforms diffuse across contexts, but comparatively less attention has been paid to how politically contested reforms gain priority on national policy agendas. We address this question through a comparative, causal qualitative study of first language-based multilingual education (L1-based MLE), an evidence-based but historically contested reform that has gained political traction in some low- and middle-income countries while remaining marginal or experiencing reversal in others. Drawing on six country case studies analyzed through process tracing and cross-case comparison, we develop and assess a theorized model of political prioritization. Our findings support a sequential and cumulative mechanism in which political mobilization, demonstrated feasibility through locally grounded proofs of concept, and agenda salience sequentially and jointly generate political momentum that culminates in policy prioritization and enactment. The findings further suggest that political prioritization is best understood as a dynamic process rather than a discrete policy event: momentum builds cumulatively, remains contingent on the interaction of these conditions, and may erode when they weaken. The study contributes to education policy scholarship by specifying mechanisms through which politically contested reforms overcome structural resistance, extends agenda-setting theory by underscoring how reformers actively cultivate policy windows, and offers a comparative framework for understanding policy change in low-resource contexts.

Keywords

Education policy; multilingual education; agenda setting; reform; process tracing; politics

Introduction

Education policy scholars have long focused on how policies are interpreted, enacted, and institutionalized, often in contested and complex contexts (Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 2012).

Comparative education scholars have examined how global policy ideas are borrowed and translated across contexts and legitimized within national contexts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Verger et al., 2017). We ask a different and prior question: how do education reforms gain political traction on national agendas in the first place, especially in contexts of resistance? In doing so, we seek to contribute to the study of education reform by identifying the conditions under which contested reforms build, sustain, or lose political momentum (Grindle & Thomas, 1991; Grindle, 2018; Levy, 2014).

In this paper, we synthesize evidence from a cross-national empirical study exploring the processes by which political priority is generated and sustained or eroded for first language-based multilingual education policies (L1-based MLE) on national agendas in some contexts and not others. L1-based MLE provides an analytically revealing case because it enjoys a robust evidence base, is supported by sustained international advocacy, but faces persistent political resistance in most contexts.

L1-based MLE has been increasingly promoted by international institutions for more than seventy years (UNESCO, 1953; Sudoh, 2025). A substantial body of evidence now demonstrates that well-designed bilingual education improves learning and second-language acquisition (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Heugh, 2011; Evans & Acosta, 2021), yet adoption remains limited across many low-resource contexts (Trudell et al., 2023).

Existing scholarship offers several complementary explanations for this resistance. Applied linguists, adopting post-colonial and critical lenses, have emphasized the enduring influence of linguistic hierarchies and colonial legacies impeding L1 use in low-resource education systems (Bamgbose, 2000; Phillipson, 2013; Phyak, 2021). These accounts resonate with the theoretical contributions of policy scholars emphasizing barriers to reform. Political economy scholars emphasize how elite interests, institutional incentives, and political risks often constrain and impede reform (Grindle & Thomas, 1991; Levy, 2014; Hickey et al., 2015), while historical institutionalists point to path dependence and the tendencies for extant policies to create inertia and reinforcement dynamics that make change more difficult (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000).

Yet, a small but growing set of countries *have* begun to adopt and institutionalize L1-based MLE policies, while others have oscillated between L1-based MLE and second language (L2) immersion. These divergent policy trajectories raise questions about the evolving process through which struggles over influence, policy design, and implementation play out (Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 2012; Grindle, 2018) and how political support develops, consolidates, or erodes over time (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025). In short, divergent policy trajectories raise political, rather than pedagogical, questions, namely: How and why contested policies - such as L1-based MLE policies in LMICs - gain, sustain, or lose political priority?

To address this gap, this paper draws on agenda-setting scholarship, which conceptualizes policy agendas as bounded sets of issues that command the sustained attention and resources of political decision-makers (Hall et al., 1975; Kingdon, 1984; Grindle & Thomas, 1991; Sabatier, 1998; Shiffman & Smith, 2007; Zahariadis, 2016). We define the outcome of

interest as the political prioritization of L1-based MLE, namely, the extent to which national leaders speak in favor of, enact, and finance L1-based MLE policies (Shiffman & Smith, 2007).

Building on this scholarship and evidence from six country case studies, we develop a theorized model explaining how political priority for L1-based MLE is generated and sustained on national policy agendas in low-resource settings. Rather than treating political prioritization as a discrete policy outcome, we conceptualize it as a sequential and dynamic process through which reform advocates mobilize support, establish feasibility, and generate agenda salience. The resulting framework contributes to education policy scholarship by explaining how politically contested reforms generate and sustain political momentum, ultimately leading to policy prioritization and adoption.

Explanations of educational policy change

Comparative and international education scholars have devoted considerable attention to how education reforms travel across contexts, are translated by domestic actors, and become institutionalized within national education systems. Research on policy borrowing, transfer, and diffusion has highlighted the roles of international organizations, transnational networks, policy entrepreneurs, and processes of policy translation and legitimation in shaping national reform trajectories (Mundy et al., 2016; Steiner-Khamisi, 2014; Verger et al., 2017). This scholarship explains how reforms diffuse and are adapted across contexts, but is less concerned with the prior question of how politically contested reforms gain sufficient priority to become actionable within domestic policy agendas. That distinction is particularly salient for L1-based MLE, which has enjoyed decades of international advocacy yet remains infrequently adopted and implemented in post-colonial contexts (Sudoh, 2025; Trudell et al., 2023).

A complementary strand of policy diffusion scholarship adopts a rationalist perspective, assuming that reforms supported by strong evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are more likely to diffuse (Crawford & Marin, 2021; GEEAP, 2025). L1-based MLE appears to satisfy these conditions. Decades of research demonstrate substantial improvements in learning outcomes, second-language acquisition, and cost-effectiveness under well-designed bilingual models (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Evans & Acosta, 2021; Heugh, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2021). As such, the effectiveness of well-designed and implemented L1-based MLE is no longer seriously disputed (Heugh, 2011), yet political uptake remains limited across low-resource contexts.

Neither policy borrowing nor evidence-based diffusion adequately explains why an evidence-supported but politically contested reform such as L1-based MLE remains rare despite decades of international advocacy and growing empirical support. Explaining this variation requires moving beyond how reforms travel to understanding how they gain, sustain, or lose political priority within domestic policy agendas.

Explaining political resistance—and its limits

Scholarship on language-in-education policy in postcolonial and resource-constrained contexts has largely explained the absence or fragility of L1-based MLE through resistance-based accounts. This literature emphasizes colonial linguistic hierarchies, dominant language ideologies, elite interests, and neoliberal discourses that privilege global languages (e.g., Bamgbose, 2000; Phillipson, 2013; Phyak, 2021). Recent work also highlights the technical and administrative complexity of implementing multilingual education, including challenges of teacher preparation, instructional materials, orthographic development, and system capacity (e.g.,

Iyamu & Ogiegbaen, 2007; Ssentanda et al., 2023). Collectively, these accounts explain why L1-based MLE often struggles to gain political traction.

However, they offer less leverage for explaining variation in policy trajectories. While many low-resource countries continue to rely on L2 immersion, others have adopted, institutionalized, or periodically used L1-based MLE policies over time (e.g. Cambodia, Mali, Senegal, the Philippines). Explaining this variation requires moving beyond resistance toward understanding the processes through which political support sometimes emerges, consolidates, remains elusive, or erodes.

Recent scholarship has begun to move beyond resistance narratives by examining the role of policy entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions, and institutional actors in enabling language-in-education policy change (Kosonen & Benson, 2021; 2026; Iwasaki, 2022). While this work moves beyond structural resistance toward agency and political processes, it has yet to produce a comparative causal framework explaining cross-case variation in political prioritization. Building on this emerging literature, we draw upon agenda-setting theory and education policy scholarship to explain how and why L1-based MLE gains, sustains, or loses political priority across contexts.

Background

This study synthesizes evidence from six country case studies conducted as part of the USAID-funded *Language of Instruction Transitions in Education Systems* (LITES) project (2022–2024) in Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, the Philippines, Rwanda, and Senegal. One component of LITES examined the political conditions shaping L1-based MLE prioritization. The first listed author served as principal investigator, the second author led

the political analyses in Senegal and Mali and contributed to comparative analysis across all six countries, and local research teams conducted fieldwork and collaborated in analysis and country reporting.

Scope conditions

The model applies under three scope conditions (Figure 1) (Goertz, 2017): (1) post-colonial multilingual contexts with constrained state capacity; (2) foundational legitimacy of L1-based education as a policy option; and (3) persistent structural headwinds, including dominant-language hierarchies, elite incentives, and implementation constraints. While influential, these conditions are shared rather than explanatory factors.

[Add Figure 1 near here]

In *post-colonial, linguistically plural contexts*, former colonial or dominant languages occupy privileged positions in education and administration and education systems operate under *constrained administrative and fiscal capacity*. These contextual conditions shape both the political meaning of language choice and the feasibility of reform. In terms of enablers, L1-based education enjoys *foundational legitimacy* in each case. It is recognized as a legitimate policy option, even if it is not prioritized or implemented (Ball, 1993; Trudell et al., 2023). Regarding barriers, each case faces common *structural headwinds to political prioritization of L1-based MLE*, including entrenched language prestige hierarchies, elite incentive structures favoring dominant L2s, prevailing education paradigms that privilege early L2 immersion, and the perceived technical difficulty of implementing L1-based MLE (Bamgbose, 2000; Alexander, 2010; Phillipson, 2013; Phyak, 2021).

The model

Drawing on agenda-setting theory (Kingdon, 1984; Hall et al., 1975; Shiffman & Smith, 2007), analyzing six bounded country cases, and using L1-based MLE as an illustrative educational policy issue, we posit a model of the conditions through which political priority is generated for politically contested, evidence-based reforms on national agendas. Considering within-case explanations and cross-case analysis, we propose a causal model of three jointly sufficient conditions for political prioritization of L1-based MLE: (1) political mobilization, (2) feasibility, and (3) agenda salience and attention.

Building on scholarship focused on policy entrepreneurship, actor power, and advocacy coalitions (Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Shiffman & Smith, 2007), the first condition, *political mobilization*, refers to the capacity of champions, institutions, and coalitions to advance a reform on the policy agenda through sustained advocacy and political engagement.

Secondly, *feasibility* refers to the perceived implementability of a policy, including its technical practicality, financial viability, and the administrative capacity of implementing agencies (Hall et al., 1975; Kingdon, 1984). In our cases, feasibility was primarily established through locally grounded proofs of concept supported by pilots with accompanying evaluation evidence (Shiffman & Smith, 2007).

Finally, *agenda salience and attention* is the degree to which an issue commands visibility and urgency on the national agenda. Drawing on concepts including focusing events and agenda competition (Birkland, 1998; Schenoni et al., 2020), we conceptualize agenda salience as the concentration of elite and public attention, generated through

events, reports, crises, or framing contests that elevate an issue's perceived urgency and importance to decision-makers.

Figure 2 presents the model. It distinguishes between three general causal conditions (Level 1) and the contextually contingent mechanisms through which they are generated (Level 2). This recognizes equifinality within the model, the awareness that multiple pathways or contingent causes may produce the same higher-order conditions.

[Add Figure 2 near here]

Methods

We utilize a small-N comparative, causal qualitative approach that combines in-depth case studies with cross-case comparative analysis (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Such methods and analysis are grounded in a realist ontology, which posits that social outcomes are generated by underlying causal mechanisms that are real even if not directly observable (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 2000). These methods are well-suited to rigorously address our research question by deductively testing theorized mechanisms within each case using process tracing, then inductively synthesizing the cross-case evidence into a theorized model, and finally comparatively assessing how consistently the model explains the variable political prioritization of L1-based MLE policies across a bounded set of cases (Schenoni et al., 2020).

Case selection

The sample includes six country cases, five from sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Mozambique, Mali, Rwanda, Senegal) and the Philippines, with variation in our outcome of interest, political

prioritization of L1-based MLE. Following Schenoni et al. (2020), the case studies include documentation of approximately 15-years of language in education policy history in each country. Two countries, Rwanda and the Philippines, experienced policy reversals during the study period, so are treated as distinct temporal cases within those country cases.

The level of political priority in a given case is determined by the following criteria: 1) sustained supportive speech from national decision-makers; 2) the enactment of policies or strategies to address the issue; and 3) the allocation of financial resources commensurate with the issue's scale (Shiffman, 2007) (see Table 2 and D'Agostino et al., 2025; Metila et al., 2025; Iwasaki et al., 2026; Manuel et al., 2025; Tusiime et al., 2025). These cases are analytically useful for their varied political outcomes, geographic spread, and linguistic and colonial historical diversity, while sharing scope conditions.

Data

Data in each case was derived from three sources: interviews, a stakeholder workshop, and document reviews, all focused on generating evidence of the political decision-making processes and influences within the system. In each country, a set of 10 to 15 key informant interviews were conducted with senior government officials and influential policy actors with knowledge of the political decision-making processes around language-in-education policy over the last 15 years. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Additionally, a participatory, systems-thinking workshop was hosted in each country with approximately 50 purposefully selected national stakeholders involved in language-in-education policy, where key artifacts and notes were recorded from breakout groups and plenary sessions. Finally, a document/literature review of relevant research, reports, and policies was conducted for each country. Data was

collected between 2022 and 2024 in accordance with ethical norms of human subjects research and with accompanying IRB approvals.

Analytic strategy

Our analytic approach proceeded in four stages: 1) within-case outcome explaining process tracing, 2) cross case set theoretic analysis, 3) model consolidation, and 4) comparative theory testing.

1. Deductive within-case process tracing

We conducted in-depth qualitative case studies with local researchers using outcome explaining process tracing to examine how a theorized set of causal factors facilitated or constrained political prioritization of L1-based MLE. In each case, we developed detailed policy timelines and assessed the causal salience of factors adapted from Shiffman and Smith's (2007) framework (as described in D'Agostino et al., 2025). Process tracing allowed us to examine sequences of events linking causes to outcomes, evaluating the strength of evidence for its probative value regarding the presence and salience of underlying mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2016; Verger et al., 2025).

2. Inductive cross-case analysis

We then conducted a cross-case comparison using simple 2x2 tables and set-theoretic reasoning to examine relationships between the 18 theorized factors and the varied political outcomes across cases. Using binary judgments of the presence or absence of conditions and high or low political priority for L1-based MLE, we assessed whether patterns across cases were consistent with necessary and/or sufficient relationships to contrasting political outcomes (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). With eight cases, these initial

cross-case findings were interpreted cautiously and used to identify plausible cross-case patterns rather than definitive causal claims (Schenoni et al., 2020).

3. Model consolidation

We synthesized within- and cross-case findings to develop a parsimonious causal model by consolidating related mechanisms, moving invariant conditions into the scope conditions, and excluding factors that were inconsistent or secondary across cases.

4. Comparative theory testing

In a final step, we compared positive and negative cases against the refined model, a form of cross-case theory testing. We first repeated the 2x2 set theoretic analysis for each condition in the model (see Appendix Tables A1, A2, and A3). We then analyzed individual cases, assessing positive cases for alignment with the model and negative cases to explore how missing conditions explained lower priority. In reporting findings, we briefly summarize the comparative results and use Senegal as an illustrative positive case. Finally, we briefly describe deviations from the model among low priority cases to illustrate how the model functions with and without the posited necessary conditions.

Results

In Table 1 below, we present a synthesis of the cross-case evidence from the second round of 2x2 table testing. A check-mark under the mechanism column indicates the presence of that condition, and the absence of a check-mark indicates its absence. Cases are organized from high to low political priority with a brief summary of the policy action or inaction describing each case.

[add Table 1 near here]

This cross-case comparison reveals a consistent pattern: all high- and moderately high-priority cases exhibit political mobilization, agenda salience, and feasibility, while at least one of these conditions is absent in each low-priority case. This pattern is consistent with the model's claim that the three conditions are plausibly individually necessary and jointly sufficient. To draw inferences about why these patterns occur, we examine the within-case evidence from the process tracing inquiries in comparison to this model in greater depth. By combining rich within-case evidence with the cross-case *prima facie* evidence, we offer substantive support for the model.

Political mobilization

Across the cases of high prioritization, political mobilization played a critical role in generating political support for L1-based MLE. In contexts where L1-based MLE achieved high or moderately high priority (Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, The Philippines 1, Rwanda 1), political support was actively constructed through sustained advocacy, often spanning decades, by influential domestic champions or policy entrepreneurs who brokered coalitions, maintained attention on the issue, and advanced viable reform alternatives to the *status quo*.

These actors were often academics, linguists, local NGO leaders, and at times government officials, who dedicated their careers to the development, teaching, and promotion of local languages. Working as professionals, in institutions, and through local advocacy networks, they used their social influence to push L1-based MLE onto the agenda, despite entrenched language ideologies, elite resistance, and institutional inertia. They often worked in universities, local NGOs, or reform-oriented government units that served as guiding institutions

that spearheaded and sustained efforts, bringing to bear technical expertise on programs, research, and advocacy. Collectively, these national leaders and institutions maintained L1-based MLE as a legitimate object of policy action. While transnational actors and donors were often important contributors to the broader reform ecology, they rarely drove political prioritization directly, but rather amplified existing domestic priorities through technical assistance and resource provision, sometimes with modest norm setting influence (Shiffman & Smith, 2007).

Senegal provides a clear illustrative case of the role of sustained political mobilization by local leaders and institutions (Iwasaki et al., 2026). Over multiple decades, Senegalese academics, linguists, and civil society organizations played a central role in legitimizing national languages as languages of instruction and championing bilingual education reform (Iwasaki, 2022). Their efforts were instrumental in convincing government leaders to pilot bilingual education, and many supported the design and implementation of pilot programs. Though the initial government-led bilingual education pilots faced implementation challenges (1977-1984; 2002-2008), many of the local experts and linguists involved in the pilot projects remained engaged in supporting bilingual education over the ensuing years. They did so through ongoing work in language development, subsequent NGO-led bilingual education pilot programs that built upon the lessons of the earlier attempts, and political brokering of coalitions in support of bilingual education, often with technical and resource support from transnational actors. The sequence of events and interview evidence in Senegal indicate that sustained advocacy by policy entrepreneurs was necessary for bilingual education to remain a viable policy option on the national agenda (Iwasaki et al., 2026).

The other cases similarly provide clear within-case evidence of the necessary role of political mobilization by national leaders, though with variation in actor power configuration,

coalition breadth, and contextual conditions. For example, in Mali, mobilization emerged largely from within the government, which assumed a leading role in bilingual education and established Mali as a leader in the region in the early 1980s. Mozambique and Philippines (1), like Senegal, garnered support for L1-based MLE largely through the contributions of a coalition of linguists and academics, some of whom had been advocating for decades.

The low priority and negative cases serve as further confirmatory evidence that underscores the importance of political mobilization by illustrating how its absence, fragmentation, or suppression constrains prioritization. In Kenya, advocacy networks remained weak, characterized by too few powerful champions and limited institutional buy-in within guiding institutions capable of bringing attention to the issue or sustaining reform pressure (D’Agostino et al., 2025). In the Philippines, political mobilization remained narrow, largely confined to academics and a small set of bureaucratic personnel, who largely discontinued their vocal advocacy for the policy after the 2013 law led to the adoption of L1-based MLE nationally, leaving the reform vulnerable to English-only counter-advocacy and eventual policy reversal (Metila et al., 2025). In Rwanda (2) the autocratic political environment chills speech, which has tended to mute opposition to the English-immersion policy and advocacy for L1-based MLE (Ansoms et al., 2022; Williams, 2017).

Feasibility

Across all four cases of high or emerging political prioritization of L1-based MLE, local language policies had previously been demonstrated to be feasible, suggesting feasibility as a necessary condition for political prioritization. Feasibility tended to be established through clear proofs of concept—typically pilot programs with evaluations demonstrating implementability

and improved learning outcomes relative to L2 immersion. These proofs were most decisive when they addressed long-standing concerns regarding the technical and administrative complexity of L1-based MLE and when results showed gains in both academic skills (e.g. reading and math) *and* second language acquisition compared to L2 immersion. Notably, examples or evidence from other countries had limited influence. Proofs that yielded political traction needed to demonstrate that such models work “here.”

Common perceived implementation challenges include linguistic diversity and the underdevelopment of particular L1s, cost, complexity, and educator skill gaps, among others. Successful pilots reduced uncertainty and concern about these technical and design challenges by showing that they could be managed adequately in practice. Additionally, strong outcomes compared to L2 immersion demonstrated the counterintuitive result that bilingual approaches, when well-designed and implemented, produce stronger L2 outcomes than L2-only models (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Schroeder et al., 2021). Conversely, poorly designed or implemented pilots and unresolved implementation challenges deepened skepticism and reinforced feasibility concerns. Transnational actors often played key support roles with funding, technical support, and program evaluation, and appear to typically be key contributors to effective proofs of concept.

Senegal provides the clearest illustration of the role of feasibility in generating political priority (Iwasaki et al., 2026). Earlier government pilots (1977–1984; 2002–2008) generated technical learning and may have created important foundations for future success, but were widely perceived as administratively difficult, reinforcing elite skepticism. Political support consolidated only after a series of more successful L1-based MLE pilots between 2008 and

2021² that were led by national and international NGOs with support from international donors. Most prominent among these was the concurrent bilingual program designed and implemented by the Senegalese NGO, *Associates in Research and Education for Development* (ARED), in collaboration with local linguists, with funding from the Hewlett Foundation and Dubai CARES, and evaluated by MWAI, an international development consulting firm. Collectively, these pilots demonstrated improved learning outcomes, including in French language and reading, compared with L2 immersion classes, and catalyzed strong community enthusiasm and interest in expansion (Benson, 2020).

Within-case evidence from Senegal (Iwasaki et al., 2026) indicates that only after feasibility and efficacy concerns were credibly addressed through these pilot programs did long-term advocacy efforts translate into political traction. In the absence of clear proofs of concept, decades of mobilization had yielded little progress towards reform on the national agenda. Once feasibility was established, which overcame critical concerns about implementation difficulty, momentum built and a process leading to political prioritization ensued. This within case evidence contributes substantive inferential leverage that demonstrations of feasibility were a necessary condition for generating political prioritization for a complex and contested reform.

Mali and Mozambique exhibit similar patterns. In Mali, bilingual education expanded gradually through government pilots and voluntary adoption by schools, with a series of evaluations and studies demonstrating the effectiveness of BE and helping to reduce elite

² From 2007 onward, Senegal saw a dense accumulation of bilingual and national language-based pilot initiatives, including ADLAS (2007–2014), EMiLe (2009–2013), ARED’s concurrent bilingual model (2009–2019), and ELAN-Afrique (2012–2019). Parallel national language literacy programs, such as Lecture Pour Tous (LPT), USAID’s Early Grade Reading (2016–2021), and its extension RELIT (2021–2025), further expanded the reform landscape and the legitimation and demonstrations of feasibility and efficacy of L1-based programs. The cumulative effect was a saturation of pilot experiences across actors, funders, and regions, helping to normalize national language instruction.

resistance. This eventually culminated in the decision to scale BE nationally in Mali in 2024, seemingly once both local evidence and national adoption (around 50% of schools) reached a tipping point. In Mozambique, voluntary expansion and evidence generation incrementally grew institutional support. Frustration over lack of L1 materials in the 4th grade in Mozambique, however, illustrates how implementation gaps undermine confidence in the model (Manuel et al., 2025).

In Rwanda, feasibility already favored L1-based MLE. Kinyarwandan is the local language spoken by the vast majority of Rwanda's population, and French was historically the second language used in education. English immersion—which emerged as a competing policy alternative—was widely regarded as less feasible given Rwanda's acute scarcity of English-speakers. Thus, uniquely in our data, it was the infeasibility of English immersion (rather than the typical concerns about L1-use) that catalyzed the return to L1-based MLE in 2013 (Tusiime et al., 2025).

These negative cases further clarify the role of feasibility as a key mechanism influencing political trajectories. In Kenya, feasibility concerns were explicitly cited by decision-makers as barriers to prioritization (D'Agostino et al., 2025). The Philippines also powerfully illustrates the key role of feasibility, not only in generating, but in sustaining political support. Although L1-based MLE was implemented nationally for a decade, persistent implementation challenges and the lack of clear counterfactual evidence eroded political confidence, ultimately catalyzing policy reversal (Metila et al., 2025) .

Agenda salience and attention

A third plausibly necessary condition for political prioritization is agenda salience and attention. In each high- and moderately high-priority case, language-in-education issues attained visibility and urgency as a lever for improving learning outcomes. Elite and public attention was often catalyzed by focusing events, including the dissemination of research reports and via workshops that elevated evidence of the effectiveness of L1-based MLE or problems with L2 immersion, thus creating pressure for a policy response.

This mechanism was evident in Senegal (Iwasaki et al., 2026), where a series of evaluation reports, workshops, and media coverage drew attention from senior leaders in the Ministry of Education and the public to bilingual education. Over time, the proliferation of effective pilot programs,³ the sharing of evaluation results documenting the impact of bilingual education, and growing public and elite attention generated interest in consolidating a single national bilingual education model to be endorsed by the government. A sequence of national workshops between 2015 and 2021 further focused the attention of decision-makers on the issue and built consensus on policy parameters, pushing the issue past a threshold of attention and support, which culminated in the validation of the national bilingual education reform policy, MOHEBS (Modèle Harmonisé de l'Enseignement Bilingue au Sénégal) by the Ministry of Education in April 2021.

While more muted due to the centralized nature of its government, agenda salience and attention towards L1-based MLE in Mali has nevertheless grown since the mid-1980s. Early evaluations of its bilingual education model were widely disseminated and attracted international recognition (e.g. a UNESCO Comenius Medal in 1998), spotlighting the benefits of bilingual

³ *ibid.*

education in Mali (Traoré, 2001). More recently, national workshops focusing on bilingual education garnered high-level government attention, which coincided with Mali's renewed interest in national languages as geo-political relations became strained with the French in 2022. In Mozambique, growing institutional support and accumulating evidence have gradually elevated attention towards bilingual education as a policy solution to the learning crisis and a response to high dropout rates, contributing to BE's recognition in the 2018 National Education Act and its subsequent gradual expansion (Manuel et al., 2025). In Rwanda (1), negative attention towards the challenges of the rapid transition to English-immersion in 2008, through research, media reports, and the feedback of donors and technocrats, helped affect the reversal back to L1-based MLE in 2013 (Tusiime et al., 2025).

By contrast, agenda salience and attention were notably weaker in Kenya and politically contested in the Philippines (2), illustrating how the absence of attention or negative attention limits prioritization. In Kenya, though formal policy documents recognize the use of local languages in early grades, the issue has rarely commanded sustained elite urgency relative to competing education priorities, resulting in no implementation or enforcement (D'Agostino et al., 2025). The Philippines represents a distinct trajectory of reversal, in which agenda salience and attention shifted away from L1-based MLE over time, and negative attention eventually catalyzed policy reversal. Although the country initially adopted MTB-MLE with considerable international visibility, ensuing implementation challenges led to growing public criticism and declining elite support. Negative attention increasingly amplified skepticism and mobilized pro-English counter coalitions, contributing to the 2024 policy change that overturned the law mandating L1-based MLE nationally (Metila et al., 2025).

The convergence of factors

Taken together, the within case evidence indicates that the *push* provided by political mobilization (local leadership), the *path* presented by demonstrations of feasibility (proofs of concept), and the *heat* raised by agenda salience and attention (focusing events), operate jointly to generate political momentum until a threshold of political priority is reached and action ensues. Senegal and the Philippines offer perhaps the clearest positive and negative confirmatory cases of this pattern.

In Senegal, sustained mobilization from champions and support through guiding institutions generated a foothold on the agenda, enough to catalyze a series of pilots that eventually succeeded in demonstrating feasibility, and so garnering increased interest. These pilots and evaluation outcomes were used by reformers as proofs of concept in a series of focusing events that augmented elite and public attention. While each sequence built political momentum over time, the interaction of the three conditions accumulated to produce sufficient political prioritization to expand coalitions and codify bilingual education into the MOHEBS framework, which in turn led to a national enactment (Iwasaki et al., 2026). The temporal ordering appears consequential: mobilization enabled pilots; pilots established feasibility; and feasibility provided the evidentiary basis for attention-generating events that consolidated support.

In the Philippines, by contrast, the erosion of key conditions disrupted the prior joint mechanism that had enabled earlier prioritization. A narrow and fragile advocacy coalition combined with growing feasibility concerns stemming from implementation challenges, resulted in weakened mobilization and declining confidence in the reform. The sustained implementation challenges drew negative attention and allowed opposing political entrepreneurs to capitalize on dissatisfaction, ultimately contributing to policy reversal (Metila et al., 2025).

Discussion

This study provides evidence that political mobilization, feasibility, and agenda salience operate jointly to generate political momentum and priority within the bounded set of cases examined here. The evidence is consistent with all three conditions being individually necessary and jointly sufficient to produce high political priority in contexts sharing the defined scope conditions. Here we will discuss a few key theoretical contributions that extend and contribute to prior insights on educational reform and agenda setting, with a particular emphasis on the processes and mechanisms that catalyze reform in contexts of resistance. In particular, we will discuss the sequential and cumulative dimensions of the mechanism that creates political momentum and the critical role of feasibility within the mechanism and its characteristics.

Sequential and cumulative activation of political prioritization

Across our cases of high prioritization, the model unfolds through the sequential activation of three conditions: mobilization, feasibility, and attention. We refer to this as a *sequential and cumulative activation mechanism* of political prioritization. First, we note the sequential and conditional nature of the mechanism. The efforts of national leaders to mobilize support for the issue initiates reform momentum, *pushing* L1-based MLE onto the national agenda. This initial attention and foothold on the agenda allows for pilot programs to be funded and supported (generally by international actors), enabling proofs of concept to credibly establish the feasibility and efficacy of the reform, and in so doing to reduce the perceived political risks by presenting a *path* forward. These proofs of concept and confirmed feasibility, in turn, can be leveraged to drive attention to the policy solution through focusing events, dissemination, press, and broadened coalition building. These actions, enabled in a stepwise fashion building upon the

prior condition, support the consolidation of political consensus once a threshold of visibility and credibility are reached, *heating* up support for the issue. In doing so, we conceive that the mechanism is not only sequential and contingent, but also cumulative. Here the metaphor of momentum is particularly useful. We understand political momentum, in this mechanism, to be a cumulative process of growing political prioritization by reducing political uncertainty and expanding political support. As the sequential mechanism progresses, momentum builds through increasing confidence and support until it has the force to overcome resistance linked to the structural headwinds impeding L1-based MLE reforms, and ultimately enabling policy action.

This understanding complements but extends existing educational policy, agenda-setting, and historical institutional scholarship in a number of ways. First, it reflects prior work in emphasizing policies' evolving dynamism (Ball, 1993) and temporal structure (e.g., timing, sequence, duration, and trajectories), rather than ahistorical variable-based models (Howlett & Goetz, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2025). Within the broader tradition of historical policy analysis, our findings diverge from a strict path-dependent, self-reinforcing logic in which early events lock-in policy trajectories (Pierson, 2000), and reflect what Mahoney (2000) describes as reactive sequential path dependency, where each step in a causal chain of events is dependent on prior steps, is contingent, inherently sequential, and subject to regression. Our evidence reflects this sequential path dependent model, but extends it by emphasizing the cumulative nature of the joint mechanism in reaching thresholds that lead to change (Howlett & Goetz, 2014; Howlett, 2019).

As illustrated by the case of the Philippines, however, this temporally contingent mechanism is also fragile and subject to reactive sequences and reversion (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000), such that the erosion of mobilization, evidence of infeasibility, or negative

attention can stall or reverse prioritization before the policy becomes institutionalized. The Philippines case suggests that political prioritization possesses a temporal lifespan—that momentum may wane—and so weaken when earlier gains in feasibility and attention fail to be sustained, echoing recent scholarship on the aging and erosion of policy reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025). We hypothesize that sustained prioritization requires the continued presence of all three conditions over a sufficient duration for reform to become institutionalized and gain stability within the broader political system.

Our model also resonates in certain respects with both Kingdon and Hall's agenda setting work. Our model corresponds in some respects with Hall's framework of legitimacy, feasibility, and support explaining policy adoption. While legitimacy is presupposed as a scope condition in our cases, feasibility is mirrored in Hall's model. Perhaps the most notable difference is our separation of support into two temporally sequenced conditions, the early mobilization efforts of policy entrepreneurs that garner initial interest on the policy agenda, and the final broadening of attention to a wider set of elites and the public that is the final step before activation. This gives greater specificity to different aspects and phases of support, and underscores the cumulative, momentum-like characteristics of the mechanism.

Our three conditions also resemble aspects of Kingdon's politics, policy, and problem streams, while specifying mechanisms through which reformers actively cultivate their convergence. Our findings, however, suggest an important refinement. Whereas Kingdon typically portrays policy windows as emerging through exogenous developments, such as elections, crises, or shifts in the national mood, which policy entrepreneurs subsequently exploit, the reform trajectories in our cases indicate that opportunities for policy change were actively orchestrated. Through sustained coalition building, iterative pilot programs, evidence generation,

dissemination, and strategically organized focusing events, reform advocates gradually cultivated the conditions under which political prioritization became possible. Policy windows were less encountered and more generated. This shifts the emphasis from opportunistic responses to contingent events toward the cumulative and strategic work through which reformers generate political momentum while remaining adaptive to changing political contexts. Our findings therefore complement Kingdon's framework by specifying mechanisms through which the "convergence of streams" - or the accumulation of necessary conditions - can itself be intentionally fostered over time.

Theoretical contributions on feasibility

This study also underscores the particularly important role of establishing feasibility through domestic proofs of concept with robust evaluation evidence to generate political prioritization for complex, politically contested reforms. Feasibility supports prioritization primarily by reducing political risks. As a technically demanding policy faced with historical resistance, decision-makers viewed L1-based MLE as politically fraught. Clear proofs of concept that showed improved learning, better L2 acquisition, and local support, substantively addressed the perceived risks and clarified the political benefits to decision-makers of embracing the policy, enabling mobilization efforts to gain traction (Benson, 2020; Iwasaki, 2022; Iwasaki et al., 2026).

Our evidence also suggests, however, that perceptions of feasibility are not only technical, but are politically mediated social constructions subject to framing contests (Fischer, 2003). Judgments concerning the feasibility (or success or failure) of a policy are often ambiguous and open to interpretation, making determinations of feasibility both technical

appraisals of goal achievement and acts of shared sensemaking (McConnell, 2010). As Bovens and 't Hart (2016) note, “success” and “failure” are not inherent attributes of a policy but rather reputational outcomes shaped through framing contests between advocates and critics. This resonates with Ball’s distinction between text and discourse, and a dynamic and complex view of policy enactment (Ball, 1993).

Such framing contests were observed frequently in our data. A striking example from the Philippines involved a Senator publicly reframing more successful MTB-MLE implementation in donor-supported regions as a sign of government failure and infeasibility rather than a legitimate proof of concept. Without credible localized evidence, perceptions of feasibility were more vulnerable to framing contests, though evidence is also politically refracted in policy contests (Parkhurst, 2016). Some of our evidence suggests that more rigorous evaluations (e.g., RCTs), the presence of multiple proof points, and evaluations by external actors may have garnered more political traction.

The role of transnational actors is also worth underscoring. Across the cases, international actors frequently contributed to establishing proofs of concept by providing technical expertise and financial resources for piloting, experimentation, and broader implementation (Chimbutane, 2017; Kosonen & Benson, 2021). In each of the positive cases, international financial and technical support contributed to pilot programs that demonstrated the feasibility and efficacy of L1-based MLE. We find limited evidence, however, that transnational actors directly drove political mobilization through norm promotion or advocacy, suggesting limits of policy diffusion through this mechanism in contexts of structural resistance (Shiffman & Smith, 2007; Verger, et al, 2017). Instead, donors often behaved cautiously and were responsive to domestic political dynamics, reflecting the need to maintain standing with national

decision-makers (Dietrich, 2013; Whitfield, 2008; Whitfield & Fraser, 2010). In our cases, mobilization was primarily driven by domestic leaders and institutions with transnational actors playing a support role. This pattern suggests that for politically contested and technically complex reforms tied to national identity—such as L1-based MLE—transnational actors optimally contribute by enabling proofs of concept, supporting local champions, and helping to generate attention, rather than by directly shaping political agendas.

A final key element of the political perception of feasibility involved whether stakeholders were convinced that the policy would adequately or more effectively produce politically desirable outcomes (i.e. L2 acquisition). Our evidence suggests that, beyond implementation effectiveness, the particular design of L1-based MLE policies were of both political and pedagogic relevance. Namely, concurrent bilingual models, which offer sustained L2 exposure across the curriculum alongside L1, appeared to be both more intuitively appealing to parents and political leaders, while also showing more promise in the research base as optimal for learning and L2 acquisition (Benson, 2020; Collier & Thomas, 2017; Heugh, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2021). In contrast, transitional models (early- or late-exit), appear to produce less robust outcomes (Gersalia & Estremera, 2025), likely due to less robust exposure to L1 and L2 instruction across the curriculum before students must switch to learning exclusively in the L2 (Cummins, 2000). Such models appear to be both less effective in fostering learning, but also less effective in facilitating L2 acquisition, and so threaten perceived feasibility of L1-based MLE in delivering on its policy goals.

Finally, our analysis suggests that perceptions of feasibility are dynamic and subject to regression, reflective of a reactive path dependent model (Mahoney, 2000). This is particularly evident in the erosion of perceived feasibility in the Philippines, where a decade of national

implementation efforts faced persistent implementation challenges, which overshadowed confidence from earlier successful pilot programs. This underscores the fragility of perceived feasibility, where signs of infeasibility erode confidence by creating negative policy feedback within systems (Pierson, 1993; 2000).

Broader implications, limitations, and future research

We posit that the findings, particularly as they relate to the Level 1 conditions, are potentially generalizable to the political prioritization of L1-based MLE in contexts that share the study's specified scope conditions. The model may also apply to evidence-aligned but normatively contested reforms that are perceived as technically demanding, politically risky, and characterized by delayed payoffs, often characteristic of complex education reforms. While not claiming universal generalizability, the study offers analytically portable, mechanism-focused insights into how agenda-setting dynamics shape the political adoption of such policies in comparable contexts.

While our analysis is limited to six countries, the combination of cross-case comparison and within-case analysis strengthens confidence in the proposed model. Additional testing of the transferability of the theorized mechanisms as explaining variation in the prioritization of L1-based MLE—and other policies—across temporal and country contexts would strengthen confidence in generalizability across similar contexts. Future research should examine a larger and more geographically diverse set of cases and analogous education reforms, and explore how contextual variation conditions the operation of the model.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are particularly significant for educational policy research and language-in-education policy debates, which are consequential for learning outcomes in linguistically diverse, low-resource countries. This study makes a distinctive contribution in explaining the variable policy trajectories of evidence-based, politically contested education reforms facing historical and structural resistance in resource constrained contexts. It offers a sequential, cumulative model of the causal conditions for change, informing scholarship on education reform and agenda setting, drawing particular attention to the agency of reformers in cultivating political momentum to advance even complex and politically difficult reforms and the conditions and historical processes that enable them to gain traction on national agendas.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

ChatGPT (OpenAI GPT-5.5) was used after the manuscript had been drafted by the authors: (1) as a tool for structured intellectual dialogue; (2) as an editorial writing assistant to improve organization, clarity, and concision; and (3) to support literature discovery, alongside other methods, by identifying potentially relevant scholarly literature.

AI was not used to generate data, conduct analyses, interpret primary evidence, or make substantive scholarly judgments. All conceptual development, interpretation of findings, judgments on the use of citations and references, and decisions regarding the manuscript's content were the responsibility of the authors.

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Appendix

[Add Tables A1, A2, and A3 near here]

Tables

Table 1. Cross-case synthesis summary

	Political Mobilization	Agenda Salience & Attention	Feasibility		Outcome level of political priority	Policy (in)action or key changes linked to political standing
Senegal	✓	✓	✓	→	High	MOHEBS 2021 adoption and start national scaling
Mali	✓	✓	✓	→	High	Decision to nationally scale BE in 2024
Philippines 1 (2009 - 2023)	✓	✓	✓	→	High	2009 DepEd launch of MTB-MLE, 2013 law and national scaling
Mozambique	✓	✓	✓	→	Moderately high	Institutionalization of BE through 2018 National Education Act
Rwanda 1 (2013 - 2019)	✓	✓	✓	→	Moderately high	2013 switched back to L1-based MLE in grades 1-3
Rwanda 2 (2019 -)			✓	→	Low	2019 reversal back to L2 English immersion
Philippines 2 (2023 -)		✓		→	Low	2024 partial overturn of the 2013 law instituting MTB-MLE
Kenya				→	Low	Nominal L1-based MLE policy, L1 literacy use in 2017 curriculum

Caption: A check-mark denotes the presence of the condition denoted at the top of the column, while the absence of a check-mark denotes its absence in the respective country cases. Political priority outcome ratings draw upon the following sources: D’Agostino et al., 2025; Metila et al., 2025; Iwasaki et al., 2026; Manuel et al., 2025; Tusiime et al., 2025. The final column of policy (in) action briefly summarizes key markers of L1-based MLE policy status in the respective country cases. BE refers to Bilingual Education, L1 to first language, L2 to second language, MLE to multilingual education, MTB-MLE to mother-tongue based multilingual education, and DepEd to the Department of Education, and MOHEBS to the acronym for the multilingual education policy framework in Senegal, *Modèle Harmonisé de l’Enseignement Bilingue au Sénégal*.

Table A1: Political mobilization 2x2 table

	Weak political mobilization	Political mobilization
High political prioritization of L1-based MLE		Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda (1), The Philippines (1)
Low political prioritization of L1-based MLE	Kenya, The Philippines (2), Rwanda (2)	

Table A2: Feasibility 2x2 table

	Absence of established feasibility	Established Feasibility
High political prioritization of L1-based MLE		Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda (1), The Philippines (1)
Low political prioritization of L1-based MLE	Kenya, The Philippines (2)	Rwanda (2)

Table A3: Agenda salience and attention 2x2 table

	Weak agenda salience or attention	Agenda salience and attention
High political prioritization of L1-based MLE		Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda (1), The Philippines (1)
Low political prioritization of L1-based MLE	Kenya, Rwanda (2)	The Philippines (2)

Figures

Figure 1. Scope Conditions

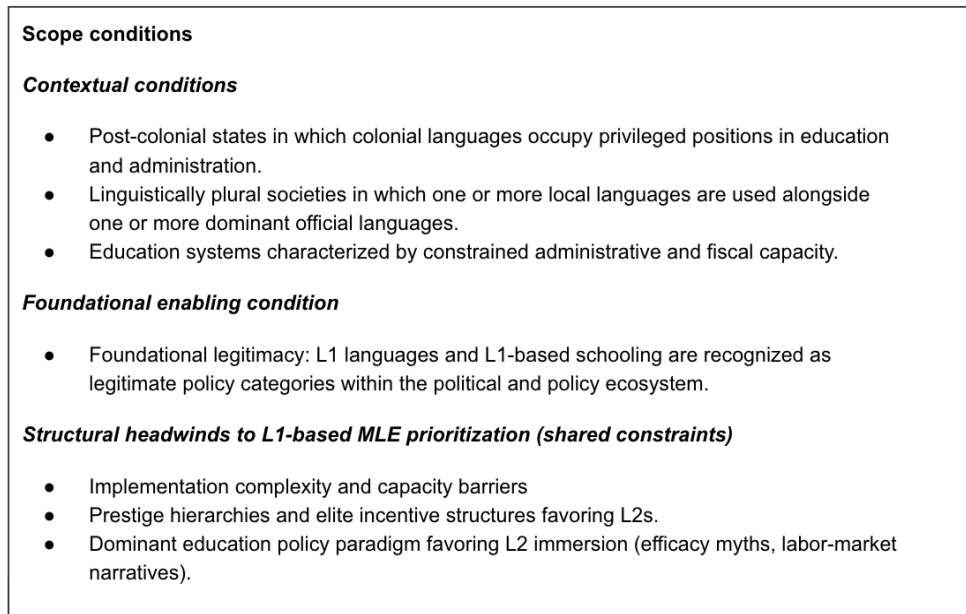


Figure 2. A model of the generation of political priority for L1-based MLE

