

Beyond Inclusion: Exploring Sense of Belonging as a Pathway to Sustainable Indigenous Education in India

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Abstract

Indigenous education in India is deeply connected with the preservation of cultural identities, traditional knowledge systems, languages, and community-based ways of learning. However, educational inclusion cannot be achieved merely through access and participation; it requires learning environments where Indigenous learners experience recognition, respect, and meaningful belonging. This study examines the role of sense of belonging as a connecting mechanism between culturally responsive inclusion and sustainable Indigenous education in India. An integrative literature review approach was adopted to synthesize empirical studies, conceptual works, and policy documents related to Indigenous education, inclusion, cultural recognition, language, and sustainability. Following the framework of Whitemore and Knafl's integrative review methodology, the study analysed existing literature to identify key factors shaping Indigenous learners' educational experiences. The synthesis highlights that cultural recognition, multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, supportive teacher-student relationships, and meaningful school-community partnerships are central to developing a strong sense of belonging. The findings suggest that belonging functions not merely as an emotional outcome but as a relational and educational process that transforms formal inclusion into meaningful participation and long-term educational sustainability. The study argues that sustainable Indigenous education requires moving beyond access-oriented approaches towards culturally affirming educational practices that recognise Indigenous learners as active contributors to knowledge creation. The review provides a conceptual foundation for strengthening inclusive educational policies, teacher preparation, and future research on Indigenous education in India.

Keywords: Indigenous Education, Sense of Belonging, Sustainable Education, Cultural Recognition, Integrative Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Indigenous Education in the Context of Sustainable Development

In India, Indigenous education is closely connected with the preservation and transmission of the knowledge, cultural practices, and ways of living developed within tribal communities. Indigenous knowledge is largely experiential and intergenerational, transmitted through oral traditions, observation, demonstration, and community practices, and is closely associated with local environments and livelihoods. India's tribal communities possess substantial knowledge relating to agriculture, biodiversity, water and natural-resource management, health, and responses to environmental change. Such knowledge can therefore contribute to context-specific approaches to biodiversity conservation, sustainable livelihoods, climate adaptation, and community resilience (Priyadarshini & Abhilash, 2019).

The educational significance of Indigenous knowledge extends beyond its preservation as cultural heritage. NEP 2020 recognizes Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge and Indigenous and traditional ways of learning, and emphasizes the importance of grounding education in Indian and local contexts, cultures, languages, and knowledge traditions (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). This orientation is relevant to sustainable development because meaningful education can support both cultural continuity and the transmission of knowledge needed to respond to local social and environmental challenges. Moreover, Indigenous communities should be understood not merely as beneficiaries of development but as knowledge holders and active contributors to sustainable development (Priyadarshini & Abhilash, 2019).

Thus, sustainable Indigenous education in India requires attention to knowledge continuity, cultural recognition, contextual relevance, and meaningful participation. This creates the basis for examining whether inclusion within educational institutions is sufficient, or whether Indigenous learners must also experience a genuine sense of belonging.

1.2 From Educational Inclusion to a Sense of Belonging

Educational inclusion has increasingly moved beyond the question of providing access to learners from diverse and marginalized backgrounds. In the Indian context, inclusion also requires educational institutions to create conditions in which learners are recognized, respected, able to participate meaningfully, and able to retain a connection with their identities and communities. This distinction is important because physical presence or formal access does not necessarily ensure that learners experience acceptance or membership within an educational environment. Recent Indian scholarship reinforces this broader understanding of inclusion. According to Chakravarty & Satpathy, 2026, sustainable inclusion and student belonging depend not only on institutional provisions for student diversity but also on the conditions created by educators and institutions. Their framework positions inclusive belonging as a systemic responsibility rather than an outcome that individual teachers or students must achieve alone (Chakravarty & Satpathy, 2026). This perspective is particularly relevant to Indigenous education, where institutional practices, cultural recognition, relationships, and the responsiveness of educational environments may shape whether inclusion is experienced as meaningful.

For Indigenous learners, therefore, inclusion and belonging should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. Inclusion concerns participation within educational structures, whereas belonging concerns the learner's perceived connection, recognition, acceptance, and meaningful membership within those structures. Research on Indigenous students further suggests that belonging can be culturally situated, incorporating identity, family, community, and self-empowerment rather than requiring assimilation into dominant educational norms (Fong et al., 2019). Thus, the movement from inclusion to belonging

represents a shift from asking “Who has access to education?” to ask “Whose identities, relationships, and ways of knowing are genuinely recognized within education?”

1.3 Why Sense of Belonging Matters in Indigenous Education

Sense of belonging matters in Indigenous education because educational participation is not determined by access alone. A learner may be formally included within an institution while still experiencing distance from its curriculum, relationships, cultural environment, or dominant ways of knowing. Belonging addresses this deeper dimension of educational experience: whether learners perceive themselves as accepted, valued, recognized, and meaningfully connected to the educational community. Research on school belonging identifies relationships, acceptance, recognition, and participation as important conditions through which students develop this connection (Amand et al., 2017).

For Indigenous learners, however, belonging cannot be understood only as attachment to an institution. It may also involve cultural identity, community, language, relationships, and the recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing. Research with Indigenous students has consequently emphasized the importance of creating educational environments in which students can participate in ways that affirm rather than marginalize their identities and experiences (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2025). This is particularly significant in India, where the recognition of tribal knowledge and local cultural contexts has been incorporated into the educational vision of NEP 2020. Thus, belonging provides a critical lens for asking whether Indigenous education merely accommodates learners within existing structures or enables them to see themselves, their communities, and their knowledge as legitimate parts of educational life.

1.4 Research Gap and Rationale

Research on tribal education in India has extensively documented barriers to educational participation, including geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, language difficulties, socio-economic disadvantage, and culturally incongruent educational practices. However, the problem extends beyond access and participation. Sucharita (2023) observes that tribal learners have often been addressed within generalized categories of disadvantage, while educational policies and interventions have not consistently aligned with the socio-cultural diversity of tribal communities (Sucharita, 2023). Similarly, research on tribal education in Odisha demonstrates how the dominance of the state language and limited recognition of learners’ linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds can create discontinuity between home and school experiences. At the higher-education level, lived accounts of Adivasi students further reveal experiences of discrimination, alienation, and exclusion despite institutional mechanisms intended to promote inclusion (Kumar, 2021).

These studies indicate that formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into a meaningful experience of being included. Yet, within Indian literature, these concerns are more commonly examined through access, achievement, disadvantage, exclusion, or cultural responsiveness than through the specific conceptual lens of sense of belonging. The gap, therefore, is not an absence of research on tribal education, but a lack of an integrated understanding of how cultural recognition, identity, language, relationships, participation, and institutional inclusion collectively shape Indigenous learners’ sense of belonging.

The present integrative review addresses this gap by bringing these dispersed strands together and examining belonging as a psychological, relational, and culturally situated dimension of sustainable Indigenous education in India. This perspective is particularly important because sustainable inclusion requires more than placing Indigenous learners within existing educational structures; it requires educational environments in which their identities, knowledge, relationships, and participation are meaningfully recognized.

1.5 Objectives and Research Questions

Objectives

- *Objective 1:* To synthesize how cultural recognition, language, interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and community connections shape Indigenous learners' experiences of belonging within the Indian educational context.
- *Objective 2:* To examine how sense of belonging can function as a connecting mechanism between culturally responsive inclusion and the sustainability of Indigenous education in India.

Research Questions

- *RQ1:* How do cultural recognition and language influence Indigenous learners' experiences of belonging in Indian educational contexts?
- *RQ2:* How do interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and community connections shape Indigenous learners' sense of belonging?
- *RQ3:* What does the literature suggest about the role of sense of belonging in transforming formal inclusion into meaningful educational participation for Indigenous learners?
- *RQ4:* How can sense of belonging be conceptualized as a pathway towards culturally responsive and sustainable Indigenous education in India?

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Indigenous Education and Cultural Recognition in India

Indigenous education in India is best understood not merely as a question of expanding access to formal schooling but as a process of recognising the cultural identities, languages, and knowledge systems of indigenous communities within educational policy and practice. Although constitutional safeguards and affirmative measures have improved school participation among Scheduled Tribe (ST) children, educational inclusion remains uneven because mainstream schooling largely reflects dominant socio-cultural norms. Consequently, indigenous learners are often required to negotiate academic success within institutional environments that inadequately acknowledge their cultural realities. Evidence from qualitative research among the Santal, Birhor, Kharia, and Lodha communities in West Bengal illustrates that this disconnect produces cultural dissonance, weakens students' sense of identity, and limits meaningful participation in schooling. These challenges are reinforced by hidden educational costs, unequal access to academic support, and deficit-oriented perceptions among teachers, which together reproduce educational disadvantages despite formal policy commitments to equity. From Ogbu's (1981) cultural-ecological perspective, educational outcomes emerge from the interaction between schooling and the broader historical, social, and cultural context of communities rather than from economic conditions alone (Ogbu, 1981). Therefore, meaningful indigenous education requires more than increased enrolment; it demands culturally responsive curricula, multilingual pedagogies, and institutional recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as integral to educational justice, identity formation, and equitable learning opportunities.

Collectively, these conditions create the educational foundation through which Indigenous learners develop a meaningful sense of belonging, enabling them to participate in schooling while maintaining their cultural identities, languages, and knowledge systems.

2.2 Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging (SB) is widely recognised as a fundamental psychological and educational construct that reflects students' perceptions of being accepted, respected, valued, and included within their school

community. Grounded in Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation, belonging represents a basic human need that supports both personal development and meaningful engagement in learning. In educational settings, SB extends beyond social acceptance to encompass students' emotional connection to their school, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and opportunities for active participation in academic and social life (Goodenow, 1993). A strong sense of belonging has consistently been associated with higher academic motivation, improved well-being, greater school engagement, and lower levels of absenteeism and dropout.

Within the Indian educational context, the concept of belonging assumes particular significance because schools serve learners from diverse linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds. For many Indigenous and other marginalised students, educational participation is influenced not only by access to schooling but also by whether their identities, languages, and cultural knowledge are recognised and respected within the learning environment. Consequently, belonging should be understood as a socially and culturally situated process rather than merely an individual psychological experience. Building inclusive schools in India therefore requires educational environments that foster respectful relationships, affirm cultural diversity, and enable every learner to participate with dignity, thereby advancing both educational equity and meaningful inclusion.

Thus, a sense of belonging should be understood not only as a desirable educational outcome but also as a foundational condition through which inclusive educational practices can contribute to sustainable and equitable learning environments.

2.3 Inclusion, Belonging and Sustainable Education

The concepts of inclusion, belonging, and sustainable education are increasingly understood as interdependent rather than discrete dimensions of educational development. Contemporary scholarship argues that educational sustainability cannot be achieved solely through expanding access or improving learning outcomes; it depends equally on whether all learners experience meaningful participation, recognition, and a sense of belonging within their educational communities. Inclusion, therefore, extends beyond the placement of diverse learners in mainstream settings to encompass the transformation of educational cultures, policies, and practices that enable every student to participate on equitable terms. However, participation alone does not guarantee inclusion. Belonging represents its experiential dimension, reflecting the extent to which learners feel accepted, respected, valued, and able to contribute authentically to the life of the school (Goodenow, 1993). Without such experiences, inclusion risks remaining procedural rather than transformative.

This conceptual relationship has become increasingly significant within the global sustainability agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4, frame education as a driver of equity, social cohesion, and sustainable societies (United Nations, 2015). Emerging evidence further suggests that inclusive educational systems contribute not only to academic achievement but also to democratic participation, cultural recognition, resilience, and social well-being. In culturally plural societies such as India, where educational experiences are shaped by linguistic, Indigenous, socio-economic, gender, and regional diversity, sustainable education requires more than equitable provision of schooling (UNESCO, 2020). It demands learning environments that value diverse identities, foster authentic belonging, and cultivate inclusive communities capable of advancing both educational justice and long-term societal sustainability.

Within the context of Indigenous education in India, these principles suggest that sustainable inclusion is achieved not merely through educational access but through learning environments in which Indigenous learners experience cultural recognition, meaningful participation, and a genuine sense of belonging.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Review Design

This study adopted an Integrative Literature Review (ILR) to examine the role of sense of belonging in fostering sustainable Indigenous education in India. An integrative review was considered appropriate because it enables the synthesis of diverse forms of evidence, including empirical, qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and policy literature, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of complex educational issues (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The review followed the five stages proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005): problem identification, literature search, quality appraisal, data analysis, and synthesis of findings. To enhance transparency and reproducibility in reporting the literature search and study selection process, the review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting guideline.

3.2 Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was designed to identify studies relevant to Indigenous education, sense of belonging, educational inclusion, cultural recognition, and sustainable education within the Indian context. Search terms were developed from the key concepts of the review and adapted to reflect the terminology commonly used in Indian educational research. Boolean operators (AND and OR) were used to combine search terms, and search strategies were modified where necessary according to the indexing requirements of individual databases. To maximise the retrieval of relevant literature, studies addressing related concepts such as language, identity, cultural recognition, participation, and community engagement were also considered, even when the term *sense of belonging* was not explicitly used.

Table 1. Search Concepts and Indicative Search Terms

Concept	Indicative Search Terms
Indigenous education	Indigenous education; tribal education; Adivasi education; tribal students; Scheduled Tribe education
Sense of belonging	sense of belonging; school belonging; student belonging; educational belonging
Culture and identity	cultural identity; cultural recognition; Indigenous knowledge; traditional knowledge; mother tongue; language
Inclusion	educational inclusion; participation; exclusion; culturally responsive education
Sustainability	sustainable education; educational sustainability; sustainable development

The search focused on studies conducted within the Indian educational context. Recognising the diversity of terminology used in the literature, search strategies incorporated terms such as *Indigenous*, *tribal*, *Adivasi*, *Scheduled Tribe (ST)*, and *tribal communities* to ensure comprehensive retrieval. In addition to database searches, the reference lists of relevant publications were manually screened to identify further eligible studies.

3.3 Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were established before study selection to ensure consistency throughout the review.

Table 2. Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies focusing on Indigenous, tribal, Adivasi, or Scheduled Tribe learners in India	Studies focusing exclusively on Indigenous populations outside India
Studies examining sense of belonging or related concepts, including identity, cultural recognition, language, relationships, participation, inclusion, exclusion, or community connectedness	Studies unrelated to educational contexts
Studies contributing to culturally responsive, inclusive, or sustainable Indigenous education	Studies with no substantive relevance to the review objectives
Empirical (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method), conceptual, theoretical, and relevant policy literature	Duplicate publications
Studies providing sufficient methodological and conceptual information for meaningful synthesis	Studies lacking sufficient information for analysis

Only studies meeting the inclusion criteria and demonstrating clear relevance to the review objectives were included in the final synthesis.

3.4 Study Selection, Quality Appraisal and Data Extraction

Study selection followed a systematic screening process to ensure that only relevant and methodologically appropriate studies were included in the review. The process comprised identification, duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, full-text assessment, quality appraisal, and final inclusion.

The methodological quality and relevance of the included studies were critically appraised according to their respective research designs. Rather than excluding studies solely on methodological grounds, the appraisal informed the interpretation of findings by distinguishing stronger evidence from studies with important methodological limitations.

To ensure consistency throughout the review, relevant information from each included study was extracted using a structured data extraction matrix.

Table 3. Data Extraction Framework Used in the Review

Extraction Domain	Information Extracted	Purpose in the Review
Bibliographic information	Author(s), year of publication	To identify and organise the included studies

Educational context	State/region, educational level, and study setting	To understand the educational contexts represented across the literature
Study characteristics	Research design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, or policy)	To examine methodological diversity across the included studies
Participants	Indigenous/tribal community or learner characteristics (where applicable)	To identify the populations represented in the evidence base
Research focus	Main objective or research question	To determine the relevance of each study to the review objectives
Key findings	Principal findings related to Indigenous education	To synthesise evidence across the reviewed literature
Belonging-related evidence	Cultural recognition, identity, language, relationships, participation, inclusion, and community engagement	To identify factors influencing Indigenous learners' sense of belonging
Sustainability-related evidence	Cultural continuity, multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, community participation, and sustainable educational practices	To examine how educational practices contribute to sustainable Indigenous education
Conceptual contribution	Authors' theoretical or conceptual insights relevant to belonging, inclusion, and sustainability	To support the development of the integrative conceptual framework
Quality appraisal	Methodological strengths, limitations, and overall relevance	To support critical interpretation of the evidence

The selection process followed identification, duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, full-text assessment, quality appraisal, and final inclusion.

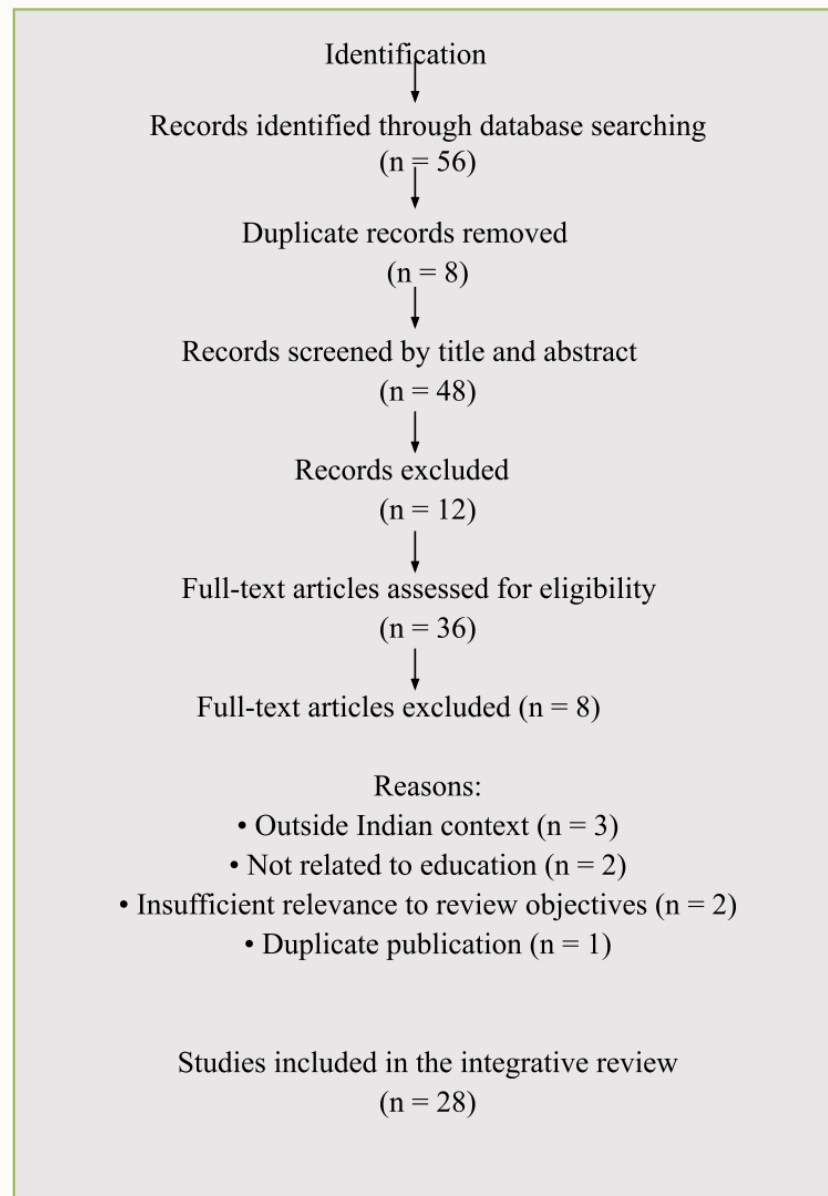
Figure 1**PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Literature Selection Process**

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and study selection process.

3.5 Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic synthesis, consistent with the integrative review methodology proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005). Rather than presenting studies individually, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, relationships, and concepts across the body of literature.

The analytical process involved six stages: (1) familiarisation with the included studies through repeated reading; (2) initial coding of relevant findings and concepts; (3) categorisation of related codes into broader analytical categories; (4) cross-study comparison to identify convergences, divergences, and gaps; (5) theme development through refinement of categories into overarching themes; and (6) interpretive synthesis to explain how the identified themes collectively illuminate the relationship between sense of belonging, culturally responsive inclusion, and sustainable Indigenous education.

The analysis paid particular attention to cultural recognition, language, interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and community connections while remaining open to additional themes emerging from the evidence. Consequently, the final thematic framework was evidence-led rather than predetermined, ensuring that the synthesis reflected the collective findings of the reviewed literature.

4. FINDINGS AND INTEGRATIVE SYNTHESIS

The integrative synthesis generated eight interrelated themes that explain how a sense of belonging is developed and sustained within Indigenous education in India. Rather than functioning as independent factors, these themes reveal the interconnected cultural, linguistic, pedagogical, relational, institutional, and community dimensions through which Indigenous learners experience recognition, participation, and inclusion. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of belonging as a dynamic educational process that supports culturally responsive and sustainable Indigenous education.

4.1 Overview of the Reviewed Literature

The final review included studies representing diverse educational contexts across India. The selected literature comprised qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and policy-based sources that examined Indigenous education from multiple perspectives, including cultural recognition, language, educational participation, school experiences, and community engagement. Although the studies differed in their geographical focus, participant characteristics, and methodological approaches, they collectively contributed to understanding the educational conditions that shape Indigenous learners' sense of belonging. Thematic synthesis of the included literature generated six interrelated themes, providing an integrated understanding of how belonging is constructed through cultural, linguistic, pedagogical, relational, institutional, and community processes within Indigenous education.

4.2 Theme 1. Cultural Recognition as the Foundation of Belonging

The reviewed scholarship consistently positions cultural recognition as the foundation upon which Indigenous learners develop a meaningful sense of belonging within educational settings. Across contemporary Indian educational discourse, belonging is shaped not simply by access to schooling but by whether Indigenous identities, knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices are recognised as legitimate components of learning. When schools acknowledge learners' cultural backgrounds through curriculum, pedagogy, and everyday classroom interactions, education becomes a space of affirmation rather than assimilation, strengthening learners' engagement, confidence, and continuity with schooling. Conversely, educational environments that privilege dominant cultural narratives often distance Indigenous learners from their lived realities, reducing participation and weakening their emotional connection to school (Padhi et al., 2021). Recent policy and scholarly literature further suggest that cultural recognition is not an additive element of inclusive education but a prerequisite for it. The National Education Policy 2020 advocates integrating Indian Knowledge Systems, local traditions, and culturally contextualised learning to create educational experiences that are relevant to diverse communities (Ojha, 2021). Similarly, recent analyses argue that meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond symbolic representation towards pedagogical practices that value Indigenous epistemologies, local histories, and community knowledge as educational resources rather than peripheral cultural content (Pujar, 2026).

Taken together, the available evidence indicates that cultural recognition establishes the conditions through which Indigenous learners experience respect, legitimacy, and educational participation. Rather than functioning as an isolated cultural intervention, it provides the foundation upon which language inclusion, supportive relationships, institutional responsiveness, and long-term educational sustainability are subsequently built.

4.3 Theme 2. Language as a Bridge Between Identity and Educational Participation

The synthesis indicates that language is central to how Indigenous learners experience belonging within formal education. Across the reviewed literature, the use of learners' home languages and multilingual pedagogies consistently strengthens classroom participation, confidence, and engagement by reducing the cultural and linguistic distance between home and school. Rather than serving only as a medium of instruction, Indigenous languages preserve cultural identity, facilitate knowledge transmission, and enable learners to participate without distancing themselves from their community identities. Conversely, language barriers often restrict classroom interaction, reduce learning confidence, and weaken learners' emotional connection to school, particularly during the early years of education (UNESCO, 2025).

Recent policy developments in India reinforce this evidence. The National Education Policy (2020) promotes mother tongue-based multilingual education and recognises tribal and local languages as essential for equitable and inclusive learning. Collectively, the reviewed evidence suggests that language is not merely an instructional resource but a critical pathway through which Indigenous learners experience recognition, participation, and a sustained sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

4.4 Theme 3. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Inclusive School Climate

Creating a sense of belonging requires more than recognising Indigenous cultures within educational policies; it depends on how schools translate that recognition into everyday learning experiences. Across the reviewed literature, culturally responsive pedagogy consistently emerges as the mechanism through which Indigenous learners experience acceptance, participation, and respect. Classrooms that acknowledge learners' cultural backgrounds, incorporate local knowledge, encourage dialogue, and value diverse ways of learning foster stronger engagement and more positive educational experiences. These practices enable Indigenous learners to participate without distancing themselves from their cultural identities, thereby strengthening both academic confidence and emotional attachment to school (Florian, 2019).

The evidence further suggests that these pedagogical efforts are most effective when supported by an inclusive school climate. Respectful teachers–student relationships, equitable classroom practices, institutional sensitivity towards cultural diversity, and opportunities for meaningful participation collectively shape learners' perceptions of whether they genuinely belong within the school community (OECD, 2019). Conversely, culturally insensitive teaching, stereotypical assumptions, and exclusionary school practices continue to reinforce educational disengagement among Indigenous learners. Together, the findings indicate that belonging is sustained not through isolated classroom practices but through a school culture where inclusion is experienced consistently in everyday interactions.

4.5 Theme 4. Relational Connectedness Across School, Family, and Community

The reviewed literature consistently identifies relational connectedness as a defining feature of Indigenous learners' sense of belonging. Belonging is strengthened when learners experience supportive relationships not only within schools but also across their families and communities. Rather than functioning as isolated institutions, schools that establish meaningful partnerships with parents, Elders, and community members create learning environments where Indigenous identities are recognised across multiple contexts (Garcia, 2018). This continuity reduces the cultural divide between home and school, enabling learners to engage in education without distancing themselves from their cultural values and lived experiences. Such relational networks reinforce trust, encourage regular participation, and foster a stronger commitment to learning (UNICEF India, 2024).

The literature further suggests that these relationships contribute to educational sustainability by

positioning Indigenous communities as active participants in the educational process rather than passive beneficiaries. Community participation in school activities, local knowledge sharing, and collaborative decision-making strengthens learners' confidence while enhancing the cultural relevance of education. The findings therefore indicate that belonging is sustained through interconnected relationships that extend beyond the classroom, making relational connectedness a critical pathway linking inclusive education with the long-term sustainability of Indigenous education.

4.6 Theme 5. Sense of Belonging as a Driver of Educational Engagement and Well-being

The reviewed evidence consistently positions a sense of belonging as a critical educational resource that shapes learners' engagement, persistence, and overall educational experience. Rather than functioning solely as an emotional outcome of inclusion, belonging influences how Indigenous learners participate in learning, respond to academic challenges, and sustain their educational aspirations. Learners who perceive themselves as accepted, respected, and valued within their school communities demonstrate greater classroom engagement, stronger academic motivation, and increased willingness to seek support from teachers and peers. These experiences not only strengthen participation but also encourage learners to view education as personally relevant and socially meaningful.

The literature further suggests that belonging contributes to learners' psychological well-being by fostering confidence, resilience, and positive self-perceptions, particularly among Indigenous students who often encounter cultural marginalisation and educational disadvantage. Rather than reducing belonging to an individual feeling, recent scholarship conceptualises it as a dynamic educational process that strengthens relationships, supports learner agency, and promotes continued participation in school. Consequently, belonging emerges as both an educational and developmental resource, creating the conditions through which Indigenous learners are more likely to remain engaged, succeed academically, and envision education as a pathway for individual and community development (Allen et al., 2021).

4.7 Theme 6. Sense of Belonging as the Connecting Mechanism for Sustainable Indigenous Education

The reviewed literature converges on one central insight: inclusive educational practices become sustainable only when they cultivate learners' sense of belonging. Cultural recognition, multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and strong school–community relationships create the conditions for inclusion, but their educational value is realised only when Indigenous learners experience themselves as accepted, respected, and connected within the learning environment. Belonging therefore functions not merely as an outcome of inclusion but as the process through which inclusion is translated into sustained educational participation and continuity (United Nations, 2015). Within the Indian context, this synthesis suggests that the sustainability of Indigenous education depends not only on expanding educational access but also on creating culturally affirming environments where learners can participate without compromising their identities, languages, and community ties. Viewed collectively, the evidence positions a sense of belonging as the relational bridge that links culturally responsive inclusion with equitable and sustainable Indigenous education, offering a coherent framework for future educational policy, research, and practice.

Taken together, the six themes indicate that a sense of belonging is shaped through the interaction of cultural, linguistic, pedagogical, and relational dimensions rather than through any single educational practice. The synthesis further demonstrates that belonging functions as the mechanism through which culturally responsive inclusion is translated into sustained educational engagement and continuity for Indigenous learners. These findings provide the conceptual basis for the following discussion, which interprets the thematic evidence in relation to Indigenous education, educational inclusion, and sustainable

development in India.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpreting Sense of Belonging as the Connecting Mechanism

The present review demonstrates that sense of belonging is the mechanism through which culturally responsive inclusion is translated into sustainable Indigenous education. The thematic synthesis indicates that cultural recognition, Indigenous languages, inclusive pedagogy, and meaningful school–community relationships should not be viewed as isolated educational strategies. Rather, they operate collectively to create conditions in which Indigenous learners experience acceptance, recognition, and meaningful participation. Within this interconnected process, belonging emerges as the educational pathway that transforms inclusive practices into sustained learner engagement and continuity.

Figure 2:

Conceptual Framework: Sense of Belonging as the Connecting Mechanism Between Culturally Responsive Inclusion and Sustainable Indigenous Education

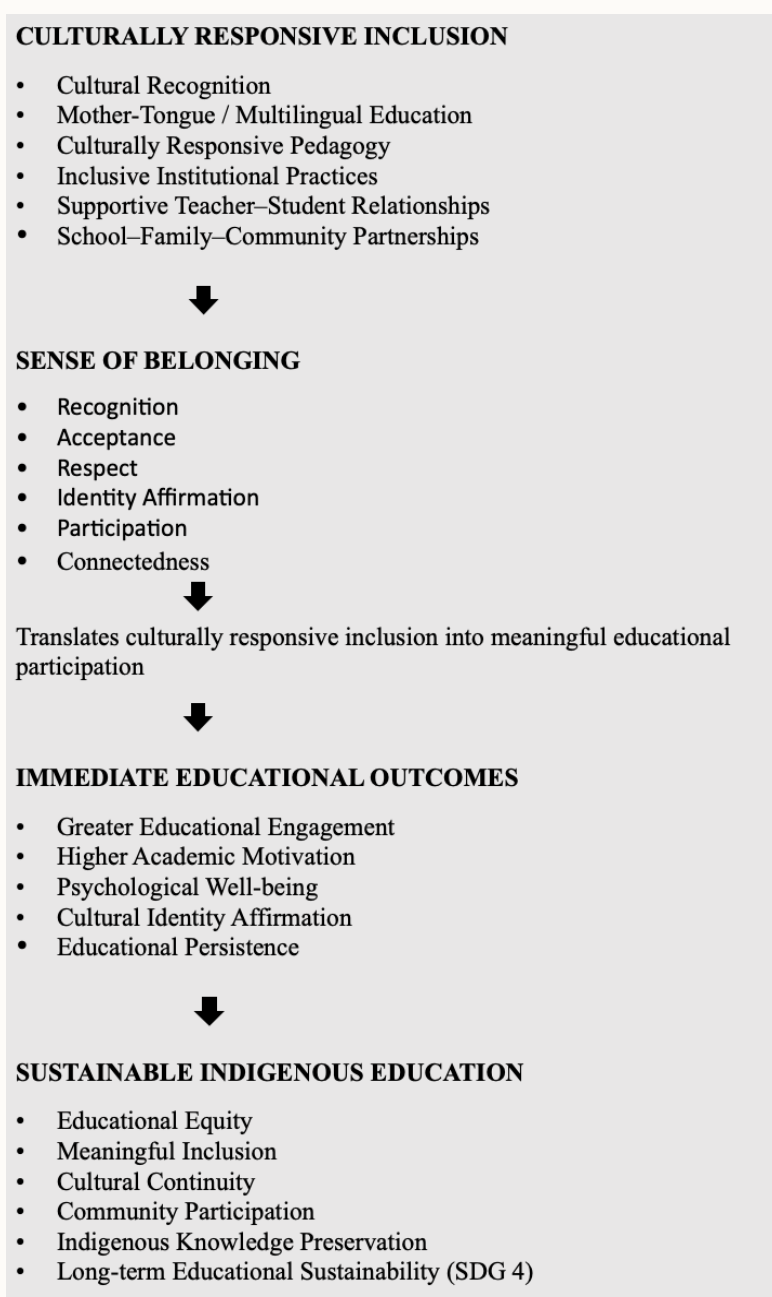


Figure 2. Conceptual framework developed from the integrative review illustrating how sense of belonging functions as the central connecting mechanism through which culturally responsive inclusion promotes sustainable Indigenous education in India.

This interpretation offers a broader perspective on Indigenous education in India. Although improving access to education remains essential, the review suggests that educational sustainability depends equally on the quality of learners' experiences within schools (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). When Indigenous identities, languages, and knowledge systems are recognised and respected, learners are more likely to participate confidently, remain engaged, and develop lasting connections with education. Thus, belonging should be understood not merely as a psychological outcome but as a relational educational process that links learners, schools, and communities (Sucharita, 2023).

The review therefore advances the proposition that sense of belonging is the critical bridge between educational inclusion and the long-term sustainability of Indigenous education. This perspective extends existing discussions by highlighting that sustainable education is achieved not only through equitable access but also through educational environments where Indigenous learners can succeed without distancing themselves from their cultural identities. Such an interpretation is consistent with the vision of culturally responsive education promoted in the National Education Policy 2020 and with the inclusive principles underpinning SDG 4, while offering a conceptual foundation for future research and educational practice in the Indian context.

5.2 Implications for Indigenous Education in India

The present synthesis suggests that reconceptualising educational inclusion through the lens of belonging has important implications for Indigenous education in India. The findings indicate that educational equity cannot be sustained through access-oriented interventions alone; rather, it requires learning environments where Indigenous learners experience cultural recognition, meaningful participation, and institutional respect. This shifts the focus of Indigenous education from ensuring school attendance to fostering educational experiences that enable learners to engage confidently without compromising their cultural identities.

Within this perspective, belonging emerges as an indicator of educational quality as well as a condition for sustainable learning (Mehta, 2025). It encourages educational systems to move beyond uniform models of inclusion towards context-responsive approaches that acknowledge India's linguistic, cultural, and Indigenous diversity. Such an orientation aligns with the National Education Policy 2020, which advocates the integration of Indian knowledge systems, multilingual education, and culturally rooted learning (Kumar, 2023). Consequently, strengthening belonging is not an additional educational objective but a strategic pathway for advancing inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustaining Indigenous education in India.

5.3 Advancing a Conceptual Perspective on Sustainable Indigenous Education

The present review advances a conceptual perspective that positions sense of belonging as the educational mechanism linking culturally responsive inclusion with the long-term sustainability of Indigenous education in India. Rather than treating belonging as an individual psychological outcome, the synthesis demonstrates that it emerges through the interaction of cultural recognition, linguistic inclusion, responsive pedagogy, and collaborative relationships between schools and Indigenous communities. This integrated understanding broadens existing discussions by showing that sustainable Indigenous education depends not only on expanding educational opportunities but also on creating learning environments where Indigenous learners experience recognition, participation, and cultural continuity.

This perspective contributes to contemporary educational discourse by reinforcing the view that educational sustainability should be evaluated not only through access and academic participation but also through learners' ability to remain connected to their cultural identities while engaging meaningfully with formal education (Jabbar et al., 2024). Consequently, the review provides a conceptual foundation for future research examining belonging as a central dimension of Indigenous education and offers a contextually relevant lens for strengthening inclusive and sustainable educational practices in India.

6. CONCLUSION

This integrative review set out to examine how a sense of belonging contributes to sustainable Indigenous education in India by bringing together literature on cultural recognition, inclusion, language, educational participation, and community engagement. The synthesis demonstrates that educational inclusion cannot be understood solely in terms of access to schooling or participation in formal educational structures. Rather, the quality of learners' educational experiences depends on whether they feel recognised, respected, and connected within their learning environments. Across the reviewed literature, cultural recognition, multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, supportive institutional practices, and meaningful school-community relationships consistently emerged as mutually reinforcing conditions that shape Indigenous learners' sense of belonging. These dimensions do not operate independently; instead, they interact to create educational environments in which learners can participate without disconnecting from their cultural identities, languages, and knowledge systems. In this sense, belonging represents the lived experience through which inclusive educational policies acquire practical meaning.

The review also contributes to the growing discourse on Indigenous education by proposing that sense of belonging serves as a conceptual bridge between culturally responsive inclusion and sustainable education. While previous studies have largely examined Indigenous education through issues of access, inequality, language, or cultural marginalisation, this review demonstrates that these factors converge in shaping whether learners experience education as a place where they genuinely belong. This perspective provides a more integrated understanding of educational sustainability, one that recognises Indigenous learners not merely as beneficiaries of educational provision but as active participants whose identities and knowledge are essential to inclusive learning. The findings have important implications for educational policy, teacher education, and institutional practice. Building sustainable Indigenous education requires more than expanding educational opportunities; it requires learning environments that recognise cultural diversity, strengthen respectful relationships, support multilingual learning, and encourage meaningful collaboration between schools and Indigenous communities. Such an approach is consistent with the broader vision of educational equity reflected in the National Education Policy (2020) and the commitment to inclusive and quality education under Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Although the proposed framework requires further empirical examination across diverse Indigenous contexts, the review offers a coherent conceptual foundation for future scholarship. It argues that strengthening Indigenous learners' sense of belonging is not simply an outcome of inclusive education but one of its essential conditions. Educational sustainability will ultimately depend on creating institutions where Indigenous learners are able to participate fully without sacrificing their identities, languages, cultural heritage, or community connections.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This review provides a conceptual synthesis of the literature on Indigenous education, sense of belonging, and sustainable education in India. However, several limitations should be noted. First, the review is based solely on published literature and policy documents rather than primary empirical data. Second, the available evidence does not fully represent the diversity of Indigenous communities across India, limiting

the generalisability of the findings. Third, the inclusion of qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and policy studies introduces methodological variation that makes direct comparison challenging. In addition, sense of belonging has rarely been examined as a distinct construct in Indian tribal education research, requiring its interpretation through related concepts such as identity, language, inclusion, and community engagement. Finally, as Indigenous education continues to evolve in response to changing policies and practices, particularly under the National Education Policy (2020), the conceptual framework presented in this review should be further examined and refined through future empirical research.

8. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this review suggest several directions for future research and educational practice. Future studies should examine Indigenous learners' sense of belonging through empirical research across different educational settings. Comparative studies involving diverse tribal communities and regions would help identify both shared and context-specific factors influencing belonging. There is also a need to develop culturally appropriate frameworks and research tools for examining belonging within Indigenous educational contexts. Future intervention studies should evaluate the impact of culturally responsive teaching, multilingual education, Indigenous knowledge integration, teacher preparation, and school–community partnerships on learners' educational experiences. From a policy perspective, educational evaluation should move beyond enrolment and retention to include indicators of cultural recognition, participation, and institutional support. Further research should also explore the relationship between belonging, educational equity, cultural sustainability, learner well-being, and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

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