Reversing language loss through identity-based education planning: the case of Torwali language in Pakistan

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Torwali is an Indo-Aryan definitely endangered language spoken by about 900,000 people in the idyllic valley of Bahrain in the Swat district in Pakistan.

In 2006, a local civil society organization Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) or “Institute for Education and Development” started revitalization work on the Torwali language. This paper is a case study of how the work of IBT reversed and prevented further loss of language and reestablished the identity of this endangered linguistic community.

The organization adopted a holistic approach. First, it developed the orthography of the language; designed a course and established a mother tongue-based multilingual education program for the school children in the community. Second, the researchers of the organization carried out research on the ethnic identity of the Torwali community and tried to raise awareness among the youth, women, and men of the community. Before 2006 nobody called himself Torwali. Now, more than 1,200 youth proudly write their names in Torwali.

The children at IBT’s schools can now read and write Torwali. Thanks to IBT’s informal adult literacy programs, many adults can now write and read their language. They also now assert their identity among the dominant community and take pride in it.