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Towards a Healing Curriculum: Addressing Cultural Inclusion for the Indigenous Sadri Community in Bangladesh

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Towards a Healing Curriculum: Addressing Cultural Inclusion for the Indigenous Sadri Community in Bangladesh

Abstract

Bangladesh is a Southeast Asian country where the indigenous people of the northern and southeastern region speak a variety of native languages. But none of their languages is included in the main curriculum for teaching or learning. As a result, these people are often not motivated to send their children to school. The language policy of the country does not include these indigenous languages in the core curriculum. Though the government of Bangladesh has started an initial plan to introduce education in mother tongues of five major indigenous languages in the country, they are not yet implemented. A large number of studies have emphasized the need of curriculum inclusion through using the indigenous/minority languages to improve literacy for the deprived people, but no step has been officially taken to include any of these languages as a mode of classroom instruction in Bangladesh. Thus my paper investigates the impact of a mother-tongue based intervention adopted in a research study to expand possibilities of the cultural inclusion approach for the indigenous Sadri community in Bangladesh. While working with the research participants I felt the need of a healing curriculum that will help the indigenous people to cope with learning struggles. My paper proposes a healing curriculum to reduce cultural differences and maintain a cultural ecology (Cajete, 2000; Cardoso & Jimenez, 2015) within communities through cultural inclusion. I also advocate for a healing curriculum concept to foster cultural inclusion (Richardson, 2011) to counter identify dysfunction of curriculum design in a settler-colony context.

Keywords

indigenous people of Bangladesh, learning struggles, language policy, cultural inclusion, healing curriculum.

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Diving More Deeply: Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a study of an indigenous community in Bangladesh named Sadri. The Sadri people live in the Naogaon district of the country and usually suffer from multilingual issues imposed in the mainstream curriculum. Bangladesh is a country of cultural diversity with over 54 groups of indigenous people speaking at least 35 indigenous languages. However, the National Committee recommends 50 indigenous communities to be enlisted on the gazette of "*Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institutes Act of 2010*." Previous research has claimed that the language policy of a country should serve the interests of all communities to ensure linguistic identity (May, 2000). Pennycook (1998) also emphasizes that language rights should be and are appropriately concerned with empowerment and marginalization. But in Bangladesh the language policy seems to exclude the minority languages from the core curriculum.

Interested in cultural inclusion, I investigated how one's mother tongue can be used as a successful tool to incorporate second language learning for the indigenous community. The Language Education Policy of Bangladesh (LEP) focuses on Bengali as the mother tongue and English as a second language compulsory from grades 1 to 12 in the core curriculum. But, unfortunately, the policy does not state any option for the minority indigenous people whose mother tongues are neither Bengali nor English (Zaman, 2004). As a result, indigenous cultures and traditions are not reflected in the core curriculum. By accepting English as a second language the state is offering a western epistemological stance and practicing this in the curriculum policy to improve literacy. Bangladesh has had several education policy reports since 1972 but no policy report included the indigenous languages to the core curriculum. My central concern is addressing cultural inclusion in the curriculum for the indigenous community of Bangladesh existing in the language educational policy. The epistemologies reflect multilingualism but the ontology reflects a different scenario. While working with the Sadri people at the Naogaon district of the country, I investigated the gaps within existing curriculum in an indigenous educational context and argue to embrace an idea of cultural inclusion.

The core curriculum of the country did not offer any scope to the Sadri children to speak in their own mother tongue while participating in the language classroom. As a result, the indigenous Sadri children did not attend school for a long time. After identifying this problem a German based NGO, NETZ Bangladesh, started to investigate this issue and began a study on the Sadri in 2016. This NGO initiated an intervention where they appointed one indigenous teacher selected from the Sadri community to continue the academic activities inside the classroom. I have tried to find the impact of this approach on the indigenous students. However, this teacher, who enacted the core part of this intervention, transcribed second language (L2) in their first language (L1) as classroom instruction. After this instructional change in the curriculum, the Sadri children from pre-primary to grade 3 started going to schools and attended classes regularly. Moreover, they began to participate in other classes also after breaking their inhibition to speak in a non-native language.

The intervention is found to be successful in a longitudinal study from 2016 to 2020 where I investigated that the Sadri children were becoming successful in performing classroom activities. Also they were able to take part in community activities along with native speakers. This success rate signals a positive change in the field of indigenous literacy in a settler colony context where the core curriculum was designed to reflect western norms and ignore indigenous learners' needs.

Working on this research study as the lead researcher, I searched the wounds of the Sadri community in Bangladesh who were unable to speak their language in the classroom, unable to connect with the native learners in their locality. I am engulfed with agony to find their sufferings in using a language they did not understand as classroom instruction. I find that the folks were striving to speak their own language. In a qualitative study conducted in two sub-districts where the Sadri community lived, I found that the Sadri spoken children were struggling to attend classes taken in their second language. They could not understand the teachers' lessons unless they were introduced with an intervention by appointing one indigenous teacher for each class. These students came to the classroom with an ambiguity and did not know what to utter or even how to convince the native Bengali people about their own voices.

In the beginning, the interventions seemed to be ineffective to get these people back to their own culture. I assumed they would fail to continue classes among the dominant inhabitants due to no reflection of their cultural identity in the curriculum. I realized the authority of agency, intentionality and personhood or their negation in indigenous ways of knowing and more prominently colonial approach is the reason for this gap between the minority and the natives in our country. This gap discourages the policy makers to look at how a cultural ecology can be

sustainable in engaging the community members who are oppressed and ignored in the core curriculum. The frustrating part of my study is to see the agents who are dominating the dysfunctions in making a curriculum for the wounded (by the term wounded, I mean the Sadri indigenous people who are deprived of education due to exclusion in the core curriculum). Rather than considering indigenous people as subjects, the policy makers consider them as objects. So it is crucial to not just acknowledge, but facilitate the agency of indigenous people and to reestablish the interaction between them and mediating others as a subject-subject relationship (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

Background of the Study

Partnership for Development and Justice (NETZ) supported the project “Ensuring Quality Education for Children from Families Living in Ultra-Poverty and Indigenous Communities,” (EQUITY) in the districts of Naogaon from 1.2.2016 to 31.12.2020. The project steered the need of indigenous languages as a mode of classroom instruction to increase the literacy rate among the indigenous children of Naogaon district. The German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation (BMZ) supported this project financially. Approximately 6000 isolated children have been directly supported by the project. The children (with approximately 10% belonging to indigenous groups) come from families living in ultra-poverty and in the remote areas of Naogaon district (Aziz, 2021).

Rationale of the Study

The study was necessary to observe the impact of the interventions implemented in this approach for the ultra marginalized children of Bangladesh at Naogaon district. The study also suggests further actions and policies to include the indigenous languages in the core curriculum of the country. This study rationalizes the need for more contributions in this field where a scope could be created for supporting the indigenous children who are deprived of education due to lack of understanding classroom instruction followed by the traditional curriculum. The study’s significance aims to support the right of indigenous children to a meaningful and culturally appropriate education. The Sadri people live in two subdistricts: Mohadevpur and Dhamoirhat. The communities such as Santal, Munda and Oraon belong to this district. The literacy rate at Dhamoirhat is 47.9% and at Mohadevpur, 45.3% (Aziz, 2021).

The language of the indigenous people of this area is Sadri, but their target language is Bengali. The study explored the use of indigenous language as mother tongue in the early grade classes by providing an indigenous teacher in each school as an intervention. The purpose was to examine the effectiveness of the teachers who were appointed to support the children to understand their textbooks in their mother tongue.

These indigenous students used Bengali as the Target Language (TL) and Sadri language as their Mother Tongue (MT). The preschool children learned Bengali through using their mother language, sharing and communicating their own language with the teachers and peers. The core curriculum did not include the Sadri language in the language policy. This existing gap in the policy inspires the study to investigate the outcomes of changing the existing epistemology to include Sadri people’s own language as a mode of classroom instruction.

Research Questions

The study examined three research questions to assess if the intervention of an indigenous teacher promoted literacy for the indigenous people of this area. For this purpose, each school received support from an indigenous teacher who helped the indigenous learners to transfer the content into their own mother tongue (Sadri language) and thus the children could easily understand the TL to continue education. The following basic research questions were designed to carry out the study:

- (1.) What was the impact of the cultural inclusion approach on the children in grades I, II and III supported by the indigenous teacher in the classroom?
- (2.) What behavioral changes did the students undergo while they received the intervention from the indigenous teacher?
- (3.) How did the parents and teachers view the outcomes, supports and resistance to the reform, and challenges to its implementation?

To explore these questions, we conducted the study among the indigenous teachers, students and communities including parents, non-indigenous students, and policy makers.

Methodological Approach and Instrumentation

The study employed a qualitative research approach using both focus group and in-depth individual interviews to evaluate data. The three forms of interview methods were selected based on the demand of the present study and their distinct data generation capabilities.

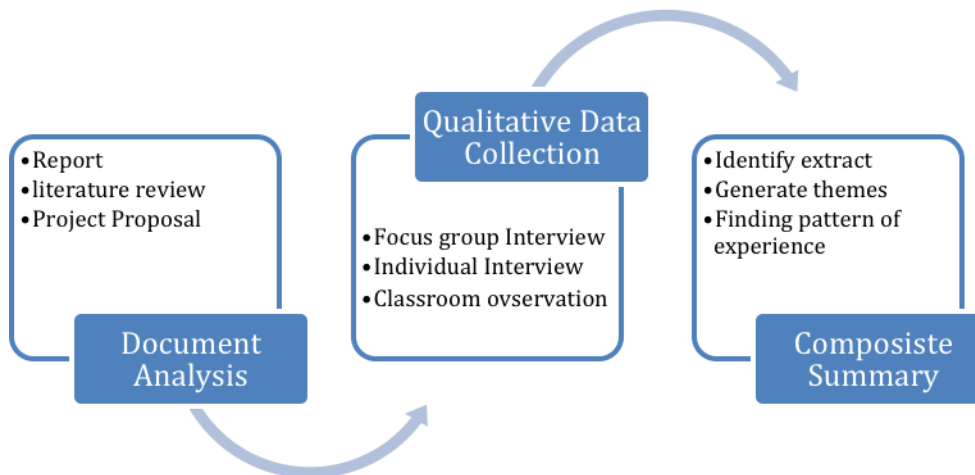


Figure 1: Study Approach and Data Collection Methods

First, project documents and literature reviews were analyzed to collect qualitative data of the study. Next, focus group and individual interviews as well as observations were conducted. Finally, a summary of findings from identifying extracts of the participants' interviews was composed to explore larger patterns.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

I conducted a total number of 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) from the study district. Two interviews were held with teachers at each of the two schools: one for indigenous teacher and another for the Head teacher. The teacher-student ratio at these schools was 1:26. The number was restricted for the world pandemic, ensuring the safety of the participants. The focus group included indigenous and non-indigenous students, School Management Committee (SMC), Education Development Committee (EDC), school community members and parents.

Teacher Participants

In one district the teachers were invited to participate in a 30-minute focus group that also included completion of an interview. The teachers' perception about appointing an indigenous teacher for the indigenous students is reflected as mentioned in the following statement of one of the assistant teachers at a primary school:

The indigenous teacher is an innovation of effective pedagogical approach inside the classroom. The teacher can help our indigenous students to attend classes regularly, make lessons clearly understandable to all the students and engage them in different activities. It promotes literacy and cultural inclusion in my school. (assistant teacher)

He added: "The indigenous students are motivated to attend school if they find someone talking in their own language."

Student Participants

For the COVID 19 situation the study was conducted in a highly restricted environment maintaining social distances with proper safety measures. One of the students in grade III who attended the focus group discussion mentioned that: "I enjoy school with our teacher when she speaks our own language. I feel free and I want her to stay with us forever."

Community Participants

The community participants included the Education Support Officers (ESO), Education Development Committee (EDC) members, non-indigenous parents and indigenous parents. They advocated positively for the indigenous teacher intervention system in the schools and highly appreciated it if it fostered the idea of inclusion. The parents were invited at focused group discussions and they were spontaneous to attend. As one of the parents mentioned:

We know our children need better lives and so we encourage the appointment of indigenous teachers for our children. She speaks of our culture and so we are happy. We are much aware of our position and now we can realize this teacher can help their children to overcome fear of schools. (parent of student)

The above findings demonstrate responses from the three research questions employed to carry out this study.

Individual Interview

In addition to FGD I interviewed a total 14 individuals during the evaluation procedure. Among them four were head teachers, four were indigenous teachers and six were community members.

Participant	Numbers		Location
Head Teachers	4	Muslim	Kalna, Safipur, Dadanpur and Kokil
Indigenous Teachers	4	Santals	As above
Community Members	6	Muslim, Santals, Hindu	As above
Total=14			

Table 1: Number of Individual Interviews and Participants

The interviews were conducted in an informal way to explore the participants' perceptions about the culturally inclusion approach and indigenous teacher intervention. The participants were asked questions like what is their opinion about this intervention approach, if they want this approach to continue in future, and what do they recommend to sustain this kind of interventions as pedagogical approach for the indigenous children.

Classroom observation

Along with interview and focus group discussions a total of four project-supported schools were visited for the study. For the COVID safety protection adequate child safety management was ensured. The behavioral changes of the indigenous students were observed through monitoring their attitudinal changes while talking with their indigenous teacher. The indigenous teacher engaged them into activities like music, singing, dancing and recitation. The students were fully engaged and felt free to use the target language in the presence of the researcher while conducting the study. It proved their positive conceptualization of the intervention context and they were adapted with that.

Findings and the Analysis of Data from Qualitative Study

I focus on the responses recorded while conducting the study. It is found that the Sadri people advocated using their mother language as a mode of classroom instruction to improve literacy for their community.

The subsequent findings are organized by research question in order to present the themes that emerged within each category. These categories include teachers' and parents' knowledge about the use of the mother tongue in classrooms as a pedagogical practice, beliefs about its outcomes, support and resistance to the reform, and challenges for implementation. The first research question was; what was the impact of the cultural inclusion approach on the children in grades I, II and III supported by an indigenous teacher in the classroom?

As indicated below, teachers and parents discussed their awareness of this intervention in terms of what they needed to know for immediate implementation. Most of the parents and

teachers believed that using Sadri language as the key of instruction to the indigenous children would increase the rate of literacy. One teacher reported:

We are grateful to the NGOs for implementing this wonderful venture of appointing an indigenous teacher to each school but we are much worried about what would happen to these children when the teacher would have left them. The government can arrange some incentives to sustain this system to help the indigenous learners by encouraging them to go to schools. (teacher)

The second research question stated: What behavioral changes did the students undergo while they received the cultural inclusion intervention? I investigated it through analysis of the behavioral changes occurring while the students, teachers and parents encountered the multilingual intervention. The participants reported that their children performed better when they were getting the assistance of the indigenous teacher in the classroom. As one of the parents stated:

Our children are no longer scared of collaborating with their non-indigenous peers; rather, they can speak Bengali more fluently at home. Even they feel free to speak in Bengali than Sadri. They can feel now that if they can speak Bangla they will be valued amongst community. (teacher)

Discussion and Implications

From the study it was found that the Sadri community highly recommended this approach of inclusion and suggested that a curriculum of cultural inclusion is required in the future to improve literacy for their children. The study informed the policy makers to adopt this approach to decolonize the curriculum.

Teachers at the Center of Maintaining Cultural Inclusion

The current study examines ways in which teachers acted in the midst of a policy that supported the use of the mother tongue. Greater understanding for the perspectives and actions of community members amidst this reform can provide guidance for the next steps in this study. In fact, there are plenty of opportunities to learn from the experiences to inform future decisions regarding Mother Tongue Based (MTB) language education in locations like Naogaon District. I would like to highlight the following significant points related to this study.

Literacy Development

In the long term this approach was highly encouraging for students in the early grades to develop literacy skills. Though the children could not write Bangla well, they could speak their TL very well. Also their school attendance increased and their dropout rate decreased. The focus group discussions revealed that students were more attracted to schools after the indigenous teachers were appointed as a support to teach them in their own language. As one of the Sadri (indigenous) parents mentioned:

Our children were not interested in attending classes before but after we got the teacher we sent our children to schools. The teacher [indigenous] visits our home, motivates us to send our kids to schools and if we do not send she again visits. It is very important for our children. We want that this teacher would always extend her hands to support our children to continue education. (parent)

Motivating indigenous Children to Attend Schools

The intervention motivated the indigenous children at Naogaon district to attend schools. By providing an indigenous teacher, the district promoted the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to embrace the school curriculum, decreasing their fear of speaking in their TL. They can speak better at home and they changed their perception of school. As one of the Head teacher explained:

My utter surprise is that they come from so remote places to my school you cannot even imagine. They have to come across a deep forest and three miles each day but they do it

happily and they do not keep silent now. They can share their thoughts with us, participate with us and they are no more afraid of speaking in Bengali. It is a success of the indigenous teacher who helped them to speak up. In this way we do not feel excluded. (head teacher)

Increasing a Sense of Belongingness

This study found that the indigenous children need a sense of belonging to feel cultural inclusion, which was facilitated by this intervention. The sense of ownership is very significant to practice this intervention even after the project's completion. As the indigenous teachers helped them to break their inhibition in learning, the young students overcame initial fears and developed a sense of belonging which helped them to be empowered in their own community. As one of the parents told:

Earlier my child could not speak Bangla so she could not talk with others. Now the indigenous teacher helps her to overcome this challenge and she can speak Bengali fluently. Now she can talk to the Bangla speaking community and we feel we share the same community. (parent of student)

From the study I found that the Sadri community highly recommended this approach of inclusion and suggested that a curriculum of cultural inclusion is needed in the future.

Need for a Curriculum of Inclusion to Address Oppression

Cultural inclusion is not present in most cases of the Bangladeshi curriculum especially for these indigenous communities. The policies have been conceptualized and adopted through a lens of western epistemic traditions, norms and problems (Medin et al., 2010; Ojalehto & Medin, 2015) that fail to see these indigenous languages as a central component to include in the mainstream education. While conducting the study, I realized that they are seen as an ethnic settler-colonized group. This perception identifies them within education as a primitive group in need of a settler-colonialism (Bang, 2015). But if we need social change to maintain a cultural inclusion we should reimagine human relationships constructed around the idea of freedom for those who previously have been dominated (Bang, 2015). We need to consider the agency of those who have been treated as objects instead of as subjects. I feel a strong urge to do that as human-nature relations have shaped our theories of learning and development. The study on the Sadri community clearly emphasized building a cultural ecology between the indigenous and the non-indigenous communities. For this, we first need to set up a framework where human-nature relationships will be perceived through the lives of subject-subject relations. From the previous studies I advocate for a framework that will include the following theories into practice.

Proposed framework	Study reference
Including an indigenous context into core curriculum	Paulo Freire (1970)
Understanding a third-space for interaction	Gutiérrez et al. (1997)
Using cultural complexities as resources	Doll (2008)
Absorbing indigenous knowledge into core curriculum	Ojalehto & Medin (2014)

Table 2. Proposed framework for indigenous study to address a curriculum of inclusion

I found that policy makers of my country - being representatives of a settler colony context - try to overlook the needs of the minorities in curriculum design. There is no provision for helping these wounded communities voice their feelings and concerns. They are wounded because they want to carry their tradition through languages they belong to. In a country where all should live under the same umbrella of democracy, a few communities are left behind based on racial issues. We know that race, with respect to cognition and development, reflects how people are positioned through processes and practices of racialization in a wide range of social and institutional practices (Nasir, 2011). When these communities are not given entrance to our mainstream education policies, how can they develop a voice and be heard to the rest of the

world? In curriculum design, decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999) can be incorporated to engage community members of oppressed groups in a broader range by improving their positions. This can be done by creating an indigenous identity by accepting their natural world, by knowing their shadows (Vizenor, 1999), and by including their traditional cultures into the main curriculum. They need to be heard by the people who do not know their culture. Interaction between the native and non-natives can create a third space that views difference as an asset and not a deficit in humans.

However, the Sadri people are struggling with their own selves and learning to ignore their own cultures. This is having a great impact on their lives. They feel oppressed. They want to express their words but they soon get demoralized and isolated from classroom interaction and curriculum. Such education fails to solve their problems both at practical and conceptual levels (Sleeter, 2005), as the official curriculum never transferred between teacher and student: classroom spaces became sites of struggle, rebellion and tension (Hermes & Dyke, 2017). Due to colonial erasure (Bang, 2015) we need to go beyond the colonized setting of curriculum where we can offer cultural inclusion.

Inclusion is Necessary to Decolonize Curriculum

Today we talk about the indigenous communities' inclusion because they represent our roots and these roots are taken away in the curriculum. Thus the aim of this paper was to focus on the urgency of representing them by interacting the two cultural groups (the natives and the non-natives in all cultures) in a third space (Gutierrez, 1997) where we all perceive more diverse cultural practices.

In a culture that has been fragmented and oppressed through colonization for years, it is a difficult task to revitalize communities and cultures and put all the pieces back together. But taking the decentered trends as a source of great potential might create a change in abolishing the colonial setting of education practiced through ages. Unless the policy makers (the direct agents in curriculum design) feel the need to include a healing curriculum within the organization of the school, language instructions, content, and pedagogy, there can be no transformation. I strongly believe that we need to take care of healing by abolishing the colonial propaganda that dehumanizes souls, as engage in as societal transformation and empowerment of marginalized communities.

Tracing an indigenous Shadow to Address Oppression in Curriculum

Theorists have been working on eliminating the gaps between the oppressed and the oppressor and they suggest how to assimilate the dysfunctions by neutralizing the cultural complexities that derive from diversities. But we forget that complexities are important for intersectional education and survival of the indigenous communities (Vizenor, 2000). The epistemologies are only talking about imagining their shadows in a curriculum but we need to address the shadows of indigenous identity and narratives. Reworking mainstream education invites more options for inclusion of the oppressed into the core curriculum where we can address indigenous voices.

However, a total abolition in the practice of racial capitalism (de Roock, 2021) can heal the wounds by accepting the individual human as a source of diversity. The abolition of oppressive institutions imprisons the indigenous identity by imagining them as outside the realms of humanity (Cole, 2016). To me, the institutions seem oppressive if they fail to echo the indigenous voices in the mainstream curriculum. So we have to create schools for these minorities where they are free, free of social restrictions to use a different language other than their mother tongue. We need to interconnect their identities to foster more equal participation in a decolonized learning context.

Diving Deeply: Conclusion

This paper urges teachers to start seeding the plants of a meaningful, transformative curriculum by including the diverse communities in a classroom by embracing cultural complexities. The agents who are responsible for making the subjects the objects will be diminished by creating a liberal multicultural conversation between the native and non-natives, between the powerful and powerless to develop the capacity for expression (Freire, 1970). This expression is for the silenced who were dehumanized within a decolonized setting long ago. The indigenous should be engaged in literacy in order to take control over their ownership. Without addressing the deep-seated racism inherent in institutional structures, the culture-based movement has been

limited. In this scenario, a decolonized pedagogy is needed to ensure this inclusion of cultural differences where we will not only align with already articulated voices in the classroom but also give voice to the unheard and unspoken. Our perceptions about knowledge epistemologies of indigenous people, minorities, and the oppressed are fragments of our imagination if we are not able to include them in mainstream curriculum. As we advocate for the voice of those who have been silenced, we need to include interaction within the natural world. We seek a natural world where all humans are free of oppression of their language or systems, punishment and/or fear-- where we all find a world to become agents of our own identities.

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