Equity and Diversity in Bangladesh's Primary Education: Struggling Indigenous Children

Md Rabiul Islam, Ben Wadham

Abstract—This paper describes how indigenous students face challenges with various school activities due to inadequate equity and diversity principles in mainstream primary schools in Bangladesh. This study focuses on indigenous students' interactions with mainstream class teachers and students through teaching-learning activities at public primary schools. Ethnographic research methods guided data collection under a case study methodology in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) region where maximum indigenous peoples' inhabitants. The participants (class teachers) shared information through in-depth interviews about their experiences in the four selecting schools. The authors also observed the effects of school activities by use of equity and diversity lens for indigenous students' situations in those schools. The authors argue that the socio-economic situations of indigenous families are not supportive of the educational development of their children. Similarly, the Bangladesh government does not have enough initiative programs based on equity and diversity principles for fundamental education of indigenous children at rural schools level. Besides this, the conventional teaching system cannot improve the diversification among the students in classrooms. The principles of equity and diversity are not well embedded in professional development of teachers, and using teaching materials in classrooms. The findings suggest that implementing equitable education; there are needed to arrange teachers' education with equitable knowledge and introducing diversified teaching materials, and implementing teaching through students centered activities that promote the diversification among the multicultural students.

Keywords—Case study research, equity and diversity, Indigenous children.

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE is rising apprehension that the educational status of indigenous children lags behind the mainstream children in Bangladesh. The largest concentration of indigenous peoples in the country is found in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) where are 11 distinct groups of indigenous peoples living. The education efficiency indicators showed that the CHTs are behind the national average; the enrolment rate of indigenous children in primary schools was 53 per cent of CHTs areas whereas the national level average was 77 per cent at that time [1]. The problem of lower literacy rates of CHTs is closely associated with limited access to education [2]. A study argued that primary education had never been equally accessible for all groups in the population, especially for ethnic minorities groups in the country [3]. Indigenous children have been struggling against inequity oppression at the primary education sub-sector various ways.

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The specific research question that guided this study was: What equity practices are evident in CHTs schools' teacher and students' interactions and relationships?

Even though national level policy documents demonstrate commitment to principles of equity and diversity for primary education, local teaching staffs, especially in rural CHTs, still have little awareness of these principles. As a result, there have been persistent inequities in schools educating indigenous students. As [4] described, inequities are created through oppressive attitudes and negative behaviors among groups, within a school community.

Bangladesh has never achieved equal access and opportunity in primary education [5]. Limited research has been undertaken on the educational situation of indigenous children in Bangladesh and it has noted inequities in educational access for indigenous children. A baseline survey reports that CHTs is one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable region in Bangladesh as a result of low employment, poverty, political instability, and poor communication system, and low level basic education in this area [5].

While the majority population of Bangladesh is Bengalese, roughly about 1.2 percent population is indigenous in the country [6]. Many cultural features differentiate indigenous communities in Bangladesh such as belief systems, economic activities, customary laws, and languages. They speak a variety of languages, have their own distinct cultures and are bound by their own customary laws. Barkat et al. [6] indicate that indigenous peoples are politically marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged in Bangladesh.

In relation to the context of the study, 'equity and diversity' are needed to understand for school staff and teachers. As Bennett [7] stated, equity is not only a matter of bettering the education system; it should be considered essential if we value our nation's democratic ideals: basic human rights, social justice, respect of alternative life choices, and autonomy to maintain one's language and culture. Socio-cultural equity in education refers to the opportunity provided to socio-culturally struggling groups [8].

In general, diversity is closely linked to standards of equity; equity is morally related in that every learner should be given access to fair, just and non-discriminatory education and attention [9]. Diversity in education is related to many factors such as an individual's identity, experiences with differences, awareness about differences, and cultural values. The issue of diversity education for children is universal importance because continuing social, political, economic and technological influences change and challenge children's lives

[10]. It is essential for students to learn about their peers and not to categorize people on the basis of multicultural groups [11].

Cultural experiences and languages are issues that affect many students including indigenous students for achieving proper education. Moreover, many minority culture and language groups have been threatened by the force of globalization. McCarty et al. [12] cited that 90 percent of the world's population speaks less than about 100 languages; and 10 percent of population speaks more than 6000 languages including indigenous languages. Therefore, major languages are enough developed as well as large participations.

Ultimately, indigenous children have been negatively impacted on by their minority culture and language in any mainstream education system. As [13] argued, traditional forms of schooling are not enough for the challenges of the twenty first century. There are a number of causes for this threat: centralized education curriculums, most teaching materials used are in the mainstream language, and focus on the demands of national language and culture.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Historically, after World War II, the waves of decolonization have occurred in many independent states all over the world. At the same time, international Intellectual Property (IP) framework started to advertise many human rights issues through media including the issue indigenous educational development [14]. The issue of development of indigenous children education is still flourishing academic area in both of developed and developing countries.

The issues of human development for indigenous children have been impacted by the globalization process. Truly, global forces create a mix of opportunities and threats to pressures on national education systems for many countries. On one hand, global education arrangements have been contributing to the building of the global community in order to address the challenges facing humanity in the modern social system. At the same time, more attention is being given to global issues in national curricula and educational practices with new technology. On the other hand, globalization has had a negative impact on education system by its emphasis on homogenization that tends to reduce diversity [14]. However, UN agencies have been functioning to build up various organizational structures for dealing with global challenges and empowering struggling people [15]. Therefore, educational policies and practices, and educational development of developing countries have been modeling their efforts on globalization forces as well as on UN agreements. This dimension also includes expression of people's beliefs, behaviors, and cultural tolerances demonstrated in activities at the schools. Under the cluster of equity practices related to equity pedagogy, as Bennett [6] points out that equitable intergroup relations have a positive link with attitudes, values, beliefs of teachers, and administrators at schools; similarly, there are links with positive teacher-student and student– student interactions built on kindness, respect, trust and assistance among the learning systems.

This aspect focuses on teacher and students' roles in classrooms particularly encouragement, using body language, cooperativeness, personal space, setting class rules, and attitudes, norms, values and mutual respect towards each other.

III. METHODS

The ethical approval for this study was granted by the Social and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) of Flinders University (Approval number 6213 date 16 Sep.2013). Interviews and observations were conducted within the case study methodology adopted for this research. The semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage relaxed interaction and provide opportunities for clarification and discussion.

Following purposive sampling procedure, four government primary schools (GPS) from two districts in the CHT region were selected based on their location and enrolment mix of indigenous and mainstream students. The codes of schools are School A, School B, School C and School D. The schools represented a combination of urban, rural and remote locations and socio-economic profiles. School A and School D were rural and low socioeconomic status; school B was urban and medium socioeconomic status, and school C was remote and very low socioeconomic status areas for locations. Ten classrooms were observed through non-participants technique and nine class teachers were taken participants for interviewing from the list of researchers' non-participant classrooms observations class teachers into those four schools. The codes of class teachers for semi-structure interviews are BCI, ACI, MMI, SKI, LRM, SUM, KTI, LTI and ASM.

IV. DATA DESCRIPTION

Although the country has a largely uniform culture and there is a small proportion of indigenous people, our principle finding is that indigenous children experience deep institutionally rooted discrimination that degrades their teaching and learning environment at primary schools. The authors have considered mainly equity and diversity principles based on social science and pedagogical context for the analysis the data. In this paper, they have selected two thematic areas grounded of their research question: student-teacher and student-student interactions and relationships.

A. Student-Teacher Interactions and relationships

Primarily, the authors obtained the information on the teachers' behavior and attitude to students through observing encouragement, cooperativeness, and mutual respect towards each other. The authors noticed that most of observed classrooms dealt on conventional ways; pedagogically, it can be described as teacher centered methods.

In these techniques, most classroom times are dominated by teachers' talking time, using teaching materials that are unmodified from textbooks, and the students adopt the position of listeners who occasionally demonstrate their grasp

of the knowledge in individual writing work. On average, teachers spent most lessons time lecturing to the whole class or directing student's writing and sometimes working with students one-by-one (checking the notebooks). Clearly, these types of classrooms activities are not helpful to develop the relationships between students and teachers.

During semi-structured interview discussion, a question was asked to an indigenous class teacher about what type of behaviors he had anticipation for students. As he (SKI) said, "I think primary school teachers should be joyful and friendly with their students and this attitude makes them popular among their students." When asked the question about his observations in those schools he (SKI) explained: "I have observed; most of teachers either from mainstream or indigenous are not cheerful in the classroom; I see that when students ask something; some teachers are rude towards their students."

During the researchers' classroom observations, they noticed that most class teachers had no overall control for all the students; a large number of students did not listen to them and their attention varied across different subject matter. Teachers of large classes did not know all students in their classrooms in person and they had no any encouragement or extra time for the support of struggling students.

As other researchers reported, indigenous students had low level achievement in learning and most of the indigenous students in those classrooms were considered weak students [16]. These authors also found various worse situations in those classrooms. In fact, most of indigenous students had fewer interactions with both mainstream class teachers and mainstream students. A mainstream class teacher explained why the relationship between mainstream teachers and indigenous students is poor in those schools. As she (LRM) explained, "Indigenous children who come from remote areas; they feel shy and afraid at mainstream teachers in the school. They cannot speak Bangla so that they just sit in classroom silently." Similarly, another mainstream class teacher (SUM) claimed that "The mainstream teachers and the indigenous students do not talk much with each other." When we asked the teacher why they did not talk much with mainstream teachers, he explained, "when teachers say something in Bengali language; indigenous students cannot understand the full meaning of the subject matter. Therefore, indigenous students face a struggling for understandable communications with mainstream teachers." On the other hand, the authors perceived some positive attitudes into classrooms observations. For instance, an indigenous teacher (MMI) mostly communicated with students by using Bangla language; sometimes she used indigenous language for communicate with the indigenous students in the classroom. During her communication with students, she achieved positive consequences, for example, she called most of students by their names. She maintained a balance attitude in this case for both of indigenous and mainstream children.

An indigenous class teacher (KTI) indicated a way of relationship development between teachers and students in the schools. As she (KTI) suggested, "Every class teachers should

call the students by their name." At same time, he (KTI) claimed, "Some main stream class teachers do not call them by their names. In fact, the names of indigenous children are also hard to pronunciation." Likewise, one mainstream teacher (LRM) stated that she sensed to hard the names of Indigenous students and she could not remember all students' names in her classroom.

Through observations, it became clear that mainstream teachers of large classes found it hard to pronounce the names of indigenous students. While class teachers led the whole class together, they had no special care for weak students or the thought to encourage questions from the indigenous students. Less individual interactions and a large number of students in a classroom was also barrier for development of relationships among them. However, the authors observed that because of some limitations in the classroom teachers also could not control the classroom well. One of important limitations was engagement of a large number of students in classrooms. Learner centered classrooms activities, more encouragement for weak students highly considered the manageable number of students.

B. Student-Student Interactions and Relationships

In CHTs' primary school, concerns have been raised by several relevant bodies about the poor relationship between indigenous children and non-indigenous children. The authors also observed the same issue. The authors observed maximum students sat together based on their own ethnicity students particularly mainstream and indigenous students took separate positions in the observed classrooms. A class teacher (LRM) also agreed with authors and commented: "I have also observed that mostly indigenous and mainstream students sit on separate benches (every bench had two seats)." Even though informal situations such as corridor, playground at the schools, the authors also observed that the students always maintained a visible separate positions by the indigenous and mainstream students.

Throughout the interviews, the authors preferred to know what about class teachers' role to bring diversification into seating positions. A class teacher (KTI) described, "I have an observation that only six students came from Bowm group (an indigenous group); they always try stay together in my classroom. They have no any interaction with other groups' students. I have tried to sit them separately in my classroom but I failed to do this." In the same way, an indigenous class teacher (MMI) claimed, "I feel that there are some problems in our classrooms regarding relationships among the students particularly between indigenous students and mainstream students; they are rigid, not joyful environment. A communication language is main barrier for solving this problem."

Seating position of students observed in a classroom
T- class teacher, I- Indigenous student, M- Mainstream student

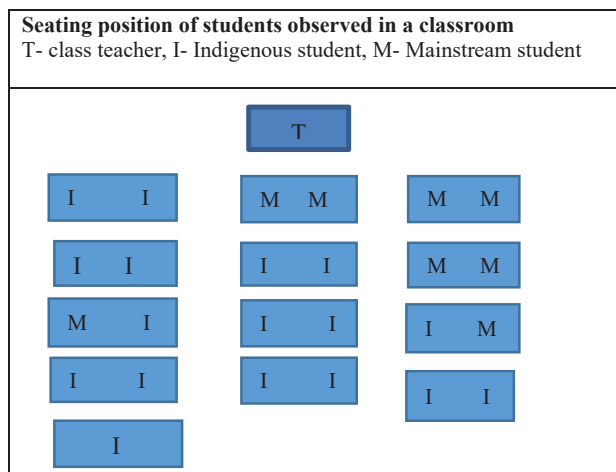|		
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Fig. 1 Seating position of the students in an observed classroom

The authors tried to find the causes why indigenous students are rigid in classrooms. They got an important clue regarding the issue. While undertaking the classroom observation, they witnessed that while one indigenous student was presenting their work he had some problems pronouncing a few Bengali words. Many mainstream students laughed at the modified pronunciation. However, it can be considered as a serious issue for indigenous students and their future activities. When most of the mainstream students laugh at the pronunciation of Bengali words, there are two types of bad effects are shown. One effect is that these types of reactions from their mates, most indigenous students feel shy to pronounce maximum long Bangla words. Another effect is on prestige. They felt that it is one type of insulting behavior for the indigenous peoples. Therefore, they decide to sit silently in classroom is better way to avoid insulting. Therefore, it is one of main reason why indigenous students do not speak as mainstream students do. Similarly, indigenous students do not like to take part as group leaders' responsibilities because group leader have to present of their group product. Even the authors did not observed any pair work or group work during their non-participants classrooms observations.

An indigenous class teacher noted that (KTI) that "I do not see any different among students' behaviors. They are not jealousy for each other but their interactions are still poor." It was asked them how teachers can develop the relationships between indigenous and mainstream students particularly based on equity and diversity principles. One mainstream class teacher (ASM) suggested, "It is needed to start from their families. In school, we have been growing awareness to build up mutual relationship among the various groups students but families are not enough motivated."

V. Results

There are a number of findings regarding the equity and diversity practices of teachers and indigenous students in primary education in CHTs. At a glance, throughout the classroom observations the authors noticed that the most of classrooms situation were shaped by the conformity of teachers to a teacher centered and non-participatory teaching and learning environment. Secondly, it is clear that there remains a lack of awareness about equity and diversity principles especially constraint with class teachers' lesson planning. The class teachers did not arrange any pair work or group work as classroom activities as well as they did used any innovative teaching aids for supporting students' interactions in their classrooms. Thirdly, rural indigenous children have been struggling for communication with mainstream teachers because the teachers only use mainstream language in classrooms. Besides these, indigenous children sometimes face insulting situations in schools. Finally, indigenous children and mainstream students have been being fewer interactions for maintaining distance relationships.

VI. Conclusion

Implementation of multicultural teaching is important for the development of indigenous primary education in the country; still it has questioned issue for primary schools in CHTs. Especially, in what ways can relationships between indigenous students with mainstream teachers and students in those schools be better developed. The authors strongly agreed with some research participants that conventional teaching cannot fill up gaps on the issue. There is more needed from the government to drive initiatives to increase awareness and understanding of how practices defined by terms related to equity, diversity principles for pedagogical development at school level. Moreover, development programs, including infrastructure, training, teaching materials development based on multicultural principles should be encouraged and advanced.

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