Challenges of Inclusive MLE for Ethnic Minority Children in Bangladesh

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Introduction..

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

- Nelson Mandela

- The mother language is an inalienable part for the development of intellectual, physical, and moral education.

- Development of the mother tongue is encouraged to promote cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language (Dutcher, 1995).
Introduction ...cont’d

- In Bangladesh, 98% people speak the national language “Bangla”. There are also 45 or more ethnic minority groups in the country who speak with more than 30 different languages that contain ethnolinguistically differences from the majority of the Bangla-speaking population.

- The literacy rate of Bangladesh is 52% (UNESCO, 2010), with a population of 160.99 million (UNDESA, 2015).

- Ethnic children of Bangladesh suffer from rapid dropout rate particularly due to the use of the state language Bangla and English instead of their mother tongue.

- The country’s educational policies have, until recently, ignored language issues in relation to the ethnolinguistic minorities.

- However, the National Education Policy 2010 adopted a first-language-based education policy for the ethnic minorities in the country.
Bangladesh in the 21st Century
Objective..

To examine the challenges of inclusive MLE for ethnic minority children in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The Case Study method was applied to examine the major challenges of inclusive MLE for ethnic minority children. This was examined through two large NGOs in Bangladesh, who are actively working on inclusive MLE for linguistic minorities. The study also searched for ways to overcome the challenges to ensure inclusive education and to meet the SDGs and EFA.
Challenges in Education of Ethnic Minority Students

- Lack of accessibility of education: both physical and culturally
- Low quality of teachers
- Language barrier
- High dropout rate, double the national rate
- Inconsistency of education system with local cultural and livelihood practices
- Absence of local control on education
- High level of poverty rate
Steps in developing MLE at preprimary and primary levels

- **Build confidence in mother tongue – oral preparation for literacy**
- **Begin reading & writing in mother tongue, Continue oral mother tongue**
- **Introduce oral Bangla, Continue to develop writing, reading, speaking in mother tongue**
- **Begin reading & writing in Bangla, Continue to develop writing, reading, speaking in mother tongue, oral Bangla**

Four stages of reading materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1 Materials</th>
<th>Stage 2 Materials</th>
<th>Stage 3 Materials</th>
<th>Stage 4 Materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For learning to read mother tongue</td>
<td>For gaining fluency in reading mother tongue</td>
<td>For transferring to Bangla (second language) from mother tongue</td>
<td>For life-long reading in mother tongue and Bangla</td>
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</tbody>
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Graded reading materials
Beginning simple and increasing in difficulty

(Malone, 2005:13)
I. The Case of Oxfam

✓ Oxfam initiated promotion of MLE at preprimary level using its own developed curriculum in Bangla alphabets.

✓ It was piloted with six preprimary schools in Noagaon and Chapinowabganj in 1999 and gradually expanded from 2004.

✓ However, by 2010 the number of preprimary schools and language centers reached to 186 and 8 respectively. The program covered 11 districts and curriculum was developed in 6 indigenous languages.

✓ The program was designed and implemented with a participatory and demand-driven approach that created ownership of the people and also broadened the scope of community participation in education management at preprimary level.

✓ However, initial resistance arose from school teachers of indigenous communities, community leaders, and local influential people, but visible positive results helped them understand and pushed them to come forward to support MLE system.
II. The Case of BRAC

✓ In 2001, BRAC Education Programme (BEP) established the Education for Ethnic Children unit in order to cater to the educational needs of children of indigenous communities, running 40 schools with 880 (approximately) ethnic children.

✓ On the basis of the research report "Feasibility study of Bilingual Education project for Chakma, Garo and Santal Communities".

✓ BEP launched MTB-MLE for Chakma children. The community has their own script and computer software, and the team members have expertise in these.

✓ Teaching and reading materials are produced locally and focus on the children's culture, heritage, and their everyday experiences. The draft materials are shared with community leaders and experts for input through individual meetings and workshops and are then finalized.

✓ BRAC-employed staff and teachers from indigenous communities have developed training modules accordingly. Educators with indigenous backgrounds have been recruited as co-trainers to help the school teachers during basic training and monthly refreshers.

✓ Refreshers concentrate mostly on problems faced by the teachers in previous months and prepare them for upcoming months. All teachers at the preprimary level are using mother tongue.

✓ For bridging, the language percentage is decreases as a second language, Bangla, and third language, English, are being introduced gradually.
Findings…cont’d

- The years of 2014-2015 are gone and 2016 has started. But still the indigenous children are waiting to have the Golden Books. Materials for publication were developed in 2015 through three workshops where representatives from five communities participated. Now, the reason of not publishing is common question lamenting in the mouth of indigenous peoples.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- Awareness building/knowledge sharing
- Scripts and orthography issues should be resolved through effective and meaningful participation of respective language speakers
- Expert accompaniment to the upcoming government initiatives is needed
- Clear action plan for implementing government commitment on MLE
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