

Challenges of indigenous children's primary education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: Insights from individuals working in education

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Abstract

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is a backward and culturally diverse region in Bangladesh where indigenous children face barriers to access quality primary education. To educate CHT indigenous children, their culture and context are often not taken into consideration. Hence, to inform policy decisions, this study explores the existing realities of Indigenous children's primary education through the eyes of individuals within the education system. The study employed a semi-structured interview method and applied phenomenological approach involving the development of crafted stories from the interviews. The study findings suggest that the centralized educational policies adversely impacting the Indigenous children's primary education. In addition, corruption, insufficient consideration of local contexts, language barriers, administrative limitations, teacher shortages, absenteeism, lack of modern teaching methods and materials, inadequate infrastructural facilities, poverty, limited parental and community engagement and the recruitment of underqualified teachers heighten the challenges in accessing equitable and quality primary education for CHT Indigenous children. The findings underscore the urgent need for tailored solutions to address the challenges. In formulating policies, paramount consideration should be given to local contexts and cultural issues, especially from the perspective of Indigenous children. This research mainly focuses on CHT remote schools and does not explain the challenges of urban and rural schools separately. Hence, the findings may not be generalised in urban schools and other parts of the country.

Keywords: *primary education, current realities, context, CHT, Indigenous children's education*

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1. Introduction

Education is one measure of societal progress; a nation can be secured when education is ensured for its citizens. According to Mary Anderson, “*education gives a child a better chance for a full, healthy and secure life*” (Novakova, 2010, p. 5). Hence, primary education plays the most crucial role in human life as it creates the ground and foundation for children’s future (Adams, 1993). Children are the most important asset for the future of any society, hence, providing them quality education at the primary level is of crucial importance (Ahmed & Nath, 2004).

Over the last few years, Bangladesh has achieved tremendous success in the access and enrolment of children in primary education (Kono et al., 2017; Nath & Chowdhury, 2009), but the situation is still deplorable in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The CHT is one of the underprivileged regions in Bangladesh where ten language-speaking eleven different indigenous communities live along with mainstream Bengali people (Barkat et al., 2009). In the CHT, the educational status of indigenous children is very concerning (Chakma & Maitrot, 2016) with a higher dropout rate (Begum et al., 2019). It has been found that sixty-five per cent of students drop out without completing primary education and nineteen per cent after completing primary education (Barkat et al., 2009). The UNDP (2009) reported that the progress of indigenous children in the CHT is much lower than that of mainstream children. The landscape of CHT primary education is marked by a distinct set of challenges, especially when it comes to the academic learning of indigenous children.

The CHT is renowned for its rich cultural diversity; presents a dynamic environment in which educational initiatives encounter several challenges. In this culturally diverse context, the education of indigenous children faces a variety of obstacles that range from inadequate infrastructure to socio-economic inequalities. However, these realities are often neglected in educational policies and planning due to the lack of proper understanding. Hence, to shed the light on the issues and challenges of CHT primary education, a deeper understanding is very urgent for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that shape the CHT educational landscape by highlighting the current realities of CHT indigenous children’s primary education based on the experiences and views of those actively engaged in primary education. Drawing on the insights of the individuals who work in CHT primary education,

this study tries to create a portrayal of the barriers faced by indigenous children in accessing quality primary education. By synthesizing the insights from education worker, it is expected that this research will assist to undertake evidence-based interventions and policy decisions to develop a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for the indigenous children in the CHT of Bangladesh. Although, there are some literatures on primary education in Bangladesh, they mostly focused on overall issues of Bangladesh primary education. Very few studies have been conducted on the educational situation of CHT children that focus on cultural diversity and equity issues (Islam, 2017), but there are no significant studies that can provide much information on the current realities of CHT primary education. Hence, this research certainly fills the gap in the existing literature and puts insights into the CHT primary education useful for education practitioners, policymakers, and all other stakeholders. To reflect on the difficulties of *current realities* of indigenous children's primary education, this study uses the lenses of individuals who are associated with CHT primary education through one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The structure of Bangladesh primary education

Bangladesh belongs to one of the largest primary education sectors in the world (Mollah, 2015) and has around 20 million students enrolled in primary level (BANBEIS, 2018), which is almost thirteen percent of the total population of the country (Nath & Chowdhury, 2008). In Bangladesh, primary education is considered to be from grade one to five and is offered by different providers: government, NGOs, community and private schools (Kono et al., 2017). The majority of the students (fifty-four per cent) are enrolled in government primary schools; followed by registered non-governmental primary schools (twenty-two per cent), madrasahs (six per cent), and the remainder of the students enrolled in kindergarten schools, NGO schools, community schools, and experimental schools (Kono et al., 2017). The medium of instruction and curricula are also different, including Bengali, the UK-based Cambridge GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), and Islamic religious-based madrasah education. Bangladesh's primary education system is also one of the largest centralised systems in the world which creates multiple complexities.

The centralised, top-down and autocratic system impedes innovative policy development and implementation (USAID, 2007, as cited in Rahman, 2010). The division of

school education under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) creates problems in articulation, coordination, and progression regarding teacher preparation and supervision, curriculum, student assessment, maintaining standards and quality, and delivery of services. Hence, these problems are impeding progress in the implementation of the National Education Policy 2010 (Ahmed & Rahaman, 2016). The allocation of the budget for the education sector of Bangladesh is also lower than the South Asian neighbouring countries. Only around two percent of GDP is allocated for education. Primary education receives a significant portion of it, but the amount is still insufficient (Kono et al., 2017). Studies have also found some operational issues which include ineffective teaching-learning assessment methods with too many public examinations, huge curriculum, and over emphasis on grades (Ahmed & Rahaman, 2016). Additionally, children based on ethnicity, geography and language, and with disabilities have inadequate access to education (Ahmed & Rahaman, 2016).

2.2. Current status of Bangladesh primary education

Bangladesh is one of the few countries which achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) No. 2 for universal primary education (Kono et al., 2017). Recently, Bangladesh achieved remarkable success in primary enrolment; the gross enrolment rate (GER) reached 114.23% (BANBEIS, 2018) and the net primary school enrolment rate (NER) reached from 62.9% in 2000 to 97.3% in 2013 (Directorate of Primary Education, 2014). The country has also reduced gender disparity in primary education where the NER for girls reached 98.4% in 2013. There are some government policies like the *Food for Education Program*, the *Free Education for Girls*, and the *Female Stipend Program* including free textbooks and compulsory education for school-going children helped the government to achieve these outstanding successes (Kono et al., 2017). However, there are still serious concerns about the quality of primary education and the rate of dropout and grade repetition. About twenty per cent of students still drop out before completing grade five and seven per cent of students repeat in the same grade/class. One-third of learners remain functionally illiterate although they complete primary education (Alam & Jahan, 2007). Around ten per cent of the primary school-age children of poor families are still not enrolled in school (Rahman et al., 2010). Although Bangladesh has achieved the universal target in enrollment at grade one, due to grade repetition and dropout rates, the school completion rate at the primary level was around sixty per cent in 2000 (Sabates et al., 2013).

A study conducted by Asadullah and Chaudhury (2013) on the ability of grade five completed students found that only forty-nine per cent of students can answer more than seventy-five percent of a simple arithmetic problem, which is only nine percent higher than children who did not go to school at all. Another study conducted by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) found that one-third of the basic competencies of the national curriculum for primary education such as languages (Bangla and English), mathematics, and life skills were not achieved (Nath & Chowdhury, 2008). Various issues like dropouts, low standards of teaching-learning, lack of infrastructural facilities, lack of proper training for teachers, and lack of student facilities are hampering, substantially, the likelihood of achieving education standards at primary level in Bangladesh (Kono et al., 2017). Around five million school-going children are still out of school. They have either dropped out or never been enrolled in school (Ahmed & Rahaman, 2016).

2.3. The realities of CHT primary education

The CHT is the most deprived and disadvantaged region in Bangladesh (Barkat et al., 2009) which always remains below the national average in most of the social development indices including primary and adult literacy in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2019). The CHT is located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh with one-tenth area of the country. It consists of three hill districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. The estimated population is around 1.6 million, half of whom are of indigenous background. Each ethnic group has a distinct culture, language, traditions, and justice system (Barkat et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2019). Considering the geography and demography, this region is very different from other parts of Bangladesh and is considered one of the most diversified regions in the world in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion (Tripura, 2020). Poverty in CHT is almost 1.6 times higher than in other parts of the country (Chakma & Maitrot, 2016). The rate of illiteracy in the CHT is very high. The educational status of CHT indigenous children is very deplorable where sixty-five percent student drop out before accomplishing primary education and nineteen per cent after completing primary schooling (Sabates et al., 2013).

The life of CHT children begins with significant disadvantages (UNICEF, 2019). They face different types of adversities and deprivation since their childhood (Durnnian, 2007). Being the medium of instruction and national curriculum in Bangla, the CHT indigenous children do not have the opportunity to learn through their mother tongue. Around 55.5% of indigenous children of 6-10 years old do not enroll in primary schools only for not having the

scope to learn through their mother language. The number of primary schools is also inadequate in the CHT. There is only one primary school for every five villages in the CHT, compared to two schools for every three villages in other parts of the country although the National Education Policy 2010 emphasises on equal opportunity. Subsequently, there is less opportunity for education for the children in the CHT compared to the rest of the country (Chakma & Chakma, 2014). Various issues like language barrier, lack of sufficient schools, big class size, lack of skilled and culturally sensitive teachers, and different livelihood practices affect the learning opportunity of CHT indigenous children (Chakma & Soren, 2014). Although the CHT is a culturally and geographically diverse region in the country, very little attention has been paid to these issues, especially in education. The majority of the people working in the education sector do not know about the importance or how to address the issue of ensuring education for all based on equity. Hence, indigenous children in the CHT experience deeply rooted institutional discrimination that hampers their learning at the primary level (Islam & Wadham, 2016). Even in the national arena, the complexity and diversity issue of the CHT has not received much importance in the education policies and strategies, although the culture of the indigenous community is considered as a part of the national culture and heritage of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010). Although the government of Bangladesh has proposed the provision of providing first-language-based education for the ethnic minority groups in the National Education Policy 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010), the policy is yet to be implemented due to a number of unresolved issues and obstacles (Rahman, 2010).

Unlike in other parts of Bangladesh, the CHT's primary education has been decentralised to the district level through the three Hill District Councils, but it is still controlled by the national education policy. The education budget, curricula, and textbooks for the CHT are still managed centrally by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) (Rahman, 2010). The centralised national education policy does not fit the local needs as there is no adjustment and inclusion of the local context and cultural diversity of the CHT people in the policy which arises from a lack of proper assessment and understanding of the conditions of the CHT. Undertaking education policies and programs for the CHT depending on national priorities that are based on a one-size-fits-all approach cannot fulfil the needs of the local population (Novakova, 2010). Hence, to understand the current realities and challenges of CHT primary education, this study explores the opinions of individuals who are involved in CHT primary education.

3. Methodology

The research used qualitative exploratory approach to reflect the realities of CHT indigenous children's primary education. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol. Before conducting interviews, this research obtained ethics approval from the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee. To analyse data, an interpretative (hermeneutic) phenomenological analysis (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) was used as this research obtained the views from participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Five participants from five different categories such as one Upazila Education Officer (Interviewee 1), one Head Teacher of a primary school (Interviewee 2), one NGO staff who works for CHT primary education (Interviewee 3), one president of School Management Committee (SMC) (Interviewee 4) and a father of a primary school going children (Interviewee 5) were chosen as participants. The national language (Bangla) was used to interview the participants which allowed both the participants and the researcher to express opinions and experiences freely (Mears, 2009). A purposive sampling was used to identify the research participants and sites based on places and people that were best suited to develop an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). The research participants were approached through email and interviewed over the phone. A semi-structured interview method was applied as it provides more flexibility to adjust research questions in qualitative research along with giving opportunity to the research participants to express their experiences beyond the contexts of the researcher (Creswell, 2012; Mack et al., 2005). Telephone interviews were conducted because it helps obtain as good quality textual data as face-to-face interview method (Cachia & Millward, 2011). The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed in Bangla.

An interpretative phenomenological approach was used to analyse data as it focuses on gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of research participants (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Van Manen, 2016). Crafted stories were developed in Bangla with descriptions and interpretations from each interview transcript as the first step of data analysis in this phenomenological approach (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). After developing crafted stories in Bangla, each story was carefully translated into English to retain the exact meaning as much as possible. Important themes were drawn from the crafted stories in relation to the research question and literature from previous studies.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Recounts of education workers' lived experiences in the CHT

A range of issues such as lack of awareness and illiteracy among parents and community, ineffective SMC, underdeveloped infrastructure, poverty, corruption in teacher recruitment, lack of adequate and qualified teachers, language barriers, and lack of modern teaching methods and materials were identified from participants' interviews. There is also a lack of adequate facilities for teachers and monitoring officers, and centralisation of policies and administration which do not address actual local realities. In the findings, the important themes from the crafted stories that best represent the issues and realities of CHT primary education as understood by the education workers are described.

4.1.1. Centralisation of policies

The decentralization of the CHT primary education to the three Hill District Councils, as per the CHT Peace Accord in 1997, contrasts with the centralized decision-making authority, particularly in matters like curriculum, finance, and teacher promotion, impacting the region's educational effectiveness—highlighted further during the COVID-19 pandemic when the central online learning policy failed to address the unique challenges faced by CHT children. Except for teachers' recruitment and transfer, most of the important decisions such as curriculum, finance, and promotion of teachers and office staff are determined centrally by the Department of Primary Education (DPE) and Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME). The central authority reduced the power of the local authority by taking back the power of giving promotion from assistant to head teacher. The perception is that deserving teachers are not promoted on time or never and consequently, they do not feel inspired to work with dedication. The centrality of the education system also hampered the CHT primary education more during the COVID-19 pandemic where the government ordered schools to conduct classes online despite most families not having access to the internet, necessary technical devices, and appropriate guidance. Unlike most other areas, the centrally formulated online learning policy was unable to benefit CHT children during the pandemic. Given the actual circumstances at home in the CHT, it was also impossible for children to study at home or be supported by parents as was the case in many countries. As a result, the children of the CHT remain completely out of education during the pandemic.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, the government gives various directions to teachers like giving classes to students using online platforms such as

Google Meet, Zoom Meeting, etc. But in most of the remote areas in the CHT, there is no electricity, mobile network, and internet facilities to implement such types of government direction. As a result, the children of the CHT remain completely out of education during the pandemic. (Interview 2: Story 2)

4.1.2. Language barrier

In the CHT, where ten language-speaking communities reside, the national curriculum and medium of instruction in Bangla poses challenge for indigenous children, leading to communication difficulties with teachers and hindering effective education in their mother tongue. Children who come from indigenous communities whose first language is not Bangla face language problems. When the teachers and children are from different language communities, it creates problems in communication between teachers and students as both do not understand each other's language. Children neither can express what they want to say nor understand teachers. Depending on the family and socio-economic status, some children can overcome the language barrier gradually, but some cannot, even after completing primary education. In the CHT, there are many remote areas where people are only from the same community, children do not have the opportunity to listen or speak other languages except their mother tongue.

“in the CHT there are some regions, where the community people do not have scope to speak other languages except their mother tongue. If I consider the Tripura ethnic community, there are some Tripura villages in remote areas, where children neither listen to Bangla nor can speak Bangla.” (Interview 3: Story 3)

The government recently provided books in three ethnic languages (Chakma, Marma, and Tripura) to provide education to ethnic children in their mother tongue. However, due to lack of skills in those languages, teachers cannot use these books. Language training or language issues are not considered nationally in the teachers' training program. There are still other ethnic groups whose languages have not been included in the books yet.

4.1.3. Corruption involved in teacher's recruitment

The three Hill District Councils (Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari) are the authorities for recruiting primary school teachers in their respective district. Teacher recruitment in the CHT via the District Councils is marred by corruption, favouring candidates with political affiliations or higher bribes, creating a notable difference in the qualifications of transparently appointed and corruptly arranged teachers. As participants indicated, teacher

recruitment in the CHT through the District Councils is highly corrupt; qualified people are often not recruited as teachers. Candidates who give more money as bribes and have political affiliations with the ruling party receive appointments as teachers.

Corruption in teachers' recruitment has become an open secret in the CHT. Due to lack of transparency in the recruitment process, the CHT is depriving of having qualified teachers for primary schools. (Interview 5: Story 3)

The basic educational qualification for teacher recruitment in the CHT is also lower than in other parts of the country. In the CHT, the basic educational requirement for the teachers is only a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) for men and a Secondary School Certificate (SSC) for women, whereas it is a minimum bachelor's degree outside the CHT.

4.1.4. Limitations of local education administration

Education administration at Upazila level faces constraints with limited staff, administrative power, and budget, hampering effective school monitoring and supervision, while scarce promotion opportunities discourage qualified individuals from pursuing roles in primary education. The Education Officers perform the role of education administrator for primary education at the local level. But they work with various limitations. They do not have adequate staff to properly monitor and inspect primary schools. The local Education Office does not have the administrative and financial power to provide decisions tailored to the local needs but is directed to perform tasks according to procedures outlined by the higher authorities. For every decision, the Upazila Education Officer (UEO) has to rely on higher authorities' approval. Due to the remoteness of the area, and insufficient human resources, visits to every school are not possible for the inspection officers. Most of the schools do not have internet access or mobile networks, which makes the supervision and inspection process more difficult. The allocation of the budget for monitoring and supervision is also inadequate. Opportunity for promotion is very limited and, in many cases, there is no scope for promotion for both education officers and teachers in their entire service life. Hence, qualified people often do not feel interested in working in primary education, especially as a teacher.

I am working as a UEO for 17 years but have not got any promotion, and I do not know whether I will get a promotion or not in future. Some of my colleagues and similar age who work in other department got the promotion and posted in higher position. Hence, promotion is important at all levels from teachers to officers. (Interview 1: Story 4)

4.1.5. Lack of modern teaching methods and materials

In the CHT, remote schools lack modern teaching resources. The reliance on traditional materials and deficient infrastructure hampers effective teaching practices, leading to a conventional, one-way teaching method. As a result, academically uneducated students do not get adequate support for academic learning and developing necessary skills for higher classes. In remote schools, teachers still use chalk, duster, and blackboard in teaching students. They do not have the scope to use modern teaching materials such as computers and multimedia due to the lack of electricity and internet facilities. Hence, students do not often feel interested in learning with traditional materials. Most of the remote primary schools do not have good academic buildings, adequate benches and chairs/desks, playgrounds, sports and playing materials, proper sitting arrangements, pure drinking water and toilet facilities. In this environment, teachers do not apply their training skills in teaching students, but follow the conventional and one-way teaching method which involves just giving lectures and guidelines to students and huge amounts of homework to memorise at home which is neither interactive nor effective. Students who have academically educated parents receive support in doing homework, otherwise, most of the students do not have support at home.

... in schools, teachers just supervise and provide guidelines to students what should they read and give huge homework, then students come back home, and the rest is on parents. Hence, if the parents are not educated, they cannot help their children with homework. (Interview 3: Story 1)

Interviewees also commented that teachers, in most of the cases, help students to write correct answers in the examination and use flexible marking when they are given the responsibility to mark the answer scripts. As a result, after completing primary school without achieving the necessary skills, students face problems in the upper classes and fail to continue their studies.

4.1.6. Teacher's shortage and teacher's absenteeism

Teacher shortage and chronic absenteeism in remote schools, exacerbated by a lack of monitoring and accountability, undermine the delivery of quality primary education in the CHT, creating challenges in maintaining routine classes and fostering a culture of unaccountability among educators. In remote areas, it is a common practice for teachers to come to school late and leave early as there is no monitoring from authorities or parents. It is also because they do not live near the schools and come from distant places.

... although the schooling time is from 9.00 am to 4.30 pm, most of the time teachers come to school at around 10.00 am and leave at around 2 to 3 pm and the majority of the teachers come from distance places. (Interview 4: Story 1)

There are also some teachers who do not attend the school at all and use their family or political power. According to the national guidelines, a primary school should have a minimum of 5-6 teachers, but most of the primary schools in the CHT only have two to three teachers appointed, most of whom also remain partially or fully absent. Hence, it is not possible to ensure all the classes operate according to routine for five classes with just two or three teachers. Participants also commented that many teachers willingly choose to post in remote schools so that they can avoid attending school. These teachers appoint a 'proxy teacher' instead of them, paying some portion of their salary while they live in the town or at home engaging in other activities.

In some remote schools, teachers appoint proxy teachers instead of them. Even, teachers willingly take the posting in remote schools for not to go to schools at all due to the lack of proper supervision in remote areas. (Interview 3: Story 3)

Sometimes, head teachers themselves are involved in teachers' absenteeism. Due to communication problems, and lack of other necessary facilities, teachers do not want to stay in remote schools. When they are posted to remote schools, they try to transfer to a better location by giving bribes or using political power. Hence, schools located in remote areas do not have sufficient teachers but schools located in town areas are overflowed by additional teachers. Since there is no administrative staff in primary schools, teachers need to stay busy doing administrative work which takes away most of their time, which they could have spent in the classroom. Teachers also need to have regular visits to the Upazila Education Office or District Education Office for one or two hours on a monthly or quarterly basis for meetings or other administrative support. With schools being located in distant remote areas, the teachers need to spend the whole day or even need to hold overnight for meeting purposes. Participants also indicated that despite many teachers having more academic qualifications, they lack professionalism, moral human values, and passion for teaching. Some teachers' lack of accountability and commitment to their roles and duties hamper quality primary education. Moreover, administrative punishment is not seen for the negligence of their duties. When teachers face an administrative procedure for being absent from their duties, they try to

influence the investigation officers through the political leader or by giving bribes to the high officials. Teacher's Federations also create barriers by taking stands on behalf of the teachers who are convicted for neglecting their duties. Sometimes, they take money from the convicted teachers and act as barriers to the disciplinary action.

4.1.7. Lack of parental and community involvement in educational process

The profound impact of poverty and illiteracy in rural areas is evident in parents' struggles to engage in their children's education, leading to irregular school attendance and a preference for work over learning in the CHT. Parents do not attend parent meetings or if they attend meetings, they do not talk or talk very little. For many parents, sending their children to school is itself a big sacrifice for them. They do not have the capability or interest to work in the School Management Committee (SMC). They even do not know their roles and responsibilities in the SMC.

The communities ... are happy if their children just go to school. In the CHT, the SMCs are not effective, "outside the CHT, I observed that there is huge competition among the interested individuals to get the post in the SMC, even they have to go through the electoral process to select the members, but in the remote CHT, especially in the indigenous areas it is hard to find people to take the responsibility in the SMC." (Interview 3: Story 3)

Most of the poor parents in the remote CHT prefer to engage their children in earning rather than education. Some families cannot afford three meals a day, school uniforms, and learning materials for their children. Because of poverty, many children help their parents in earning activities and do not come to school regularly. Parents who are comparatively wealthy and educated send their children to the town schools in order to have a better environment for education.

4.2 . Challenges facing CHT primary education

This study identified the current issues and realities prevailing in the CHT primary education in Bangladesh through the eyes of respondents who are currently working with primary education in the CHT region. This research suggests that the primary education of CHT is impacted by so many barriers. One of the major challenges for the CHT primary education is the highly centralised education system. Most of the government programs do not focus on the contexts and realities of the CHT, hence, centrally planned government initiatives

cannot result in effective outcomes. Islam and Wadham (2016) argued that the Bangladesh government does not undertake programs for indigenous children's fundamental education. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect a positive outcome from a 'one-size-fits-all' education system. Chowdhury et al. (2003) claim that colonial attitudes regarding ethnic minorities still exist among Bengalis, although it is changing slowly. Islam (2017) notes that this condition persists despite national policies aimed at addressing issues like inequity and lack of diversity. An example of the limitations of the 'one size fits all' approach of the government is the directions given during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers to conduct classes using online platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom Meeting, while CHT had a lack of electricity, internet, mobile network, and technology, leaving majority of the CHT's children from education during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted by Bleie (2005) contended that primary education has never been equitably available to all groups of the population in Bangladesh, particularly to the indigenous children. Islam and Wadham (2016) argued that the centralised education curriculum and teaching materials in Bangla language focus on the needs of national culture and language. Indigenous children are negatively affected by this as they have different cultures and languages. Currently, the centrally planned Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-4) is running all over the country for the development of primary education to improve school infrastructure and train teachers. Sadly, special training needs for teachers in multi-lingual education are not incorporated into it. The government published books in Chakma, Marma, and Tripura languages, but the lack of proper training in using these books in the classroom, mother tongue-based education has not been implemented yet. Although the primary education of the CHT is officially handed over to the district councils, most important decisions like finance, curricula, and teachers' promotion come from the central administration. The power of district councils is limited to teacher recruitment, transfer, and coordination. Additionally, there is a lack of proper coordination among central administration, district councils, district primary education offices, and upazila education offices. The UEO as a local-level authority has very limited or no power to solve any problem independently.

Recognition and acknowledgement of diversity in education is a fundamental aspect of quality education (UNESCO, 2008 as cited in Pinnock, 2008). According to *Save the Children*, the language of teaching is a key obstacle to education for children who do not speak the school language (Pinnock, 2008). Jackson (2000) reported that after the introduction of French as the

teaching language for two years by the government of Burundi, the rate of children's repetition in the same grade increased from 28% to 40%. It indicates that children are unable to achieve the necessary learning requirements in other languages. Similarly, in a household survey on students 12-19 years in Paraguay, Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1995) found that "*language strongly influences school attainment and performance*" (p. 47) and students who are used to only Guarani language at home have lower academic performance than that of Spanish-only and bilingual students. Educational institutions that use both first language and local language as the medium of instruction to teach young children have been linked to decrease repeat and dropout rates (World Bank, 2002 as cited in Kane, 2004), and higher achievement levels (Hunt, 2008). Although bilingual education is frequently viewed as a way of improving children's educational achievement (Hunt, 2008), the CHT children do not have the opportunity to learn through their mother tongue other than Bangla. Hence, as indicated by Pinnock (2008), in the CHT where indigenous students are required to learn Bangla, the rate of dropout is twice the national average at sixty per cent. Children whose first language is not Bangla face difficulties communicating with teachers as they do not understand what is being taught by teachers. In the same way, teachers also face problems communicating with students who do not understand Bangla which impacts the overall teaching-learning environment. Moreover, the curricula do not reflect the local culture and context, hence, the CHT children do not find the meaning of life in education. Children who have educated parents and have the environment to interact with mainstream people can overcome the language barriers, but children who come from poor and uneducated families cannot overcome the language barriers easily, even after completing their primary education. As a result, children from poor socio-economic backgrounds often lose their interest in studying. Although the government and other education providers are taking some steps to overcome this situation, no remarkable progress has been made that can properly address the issues.

Corruption is also one of the influencing factors in the CHT that hampers the quality of primary education. Corruption in education impacts a larger number of individuals than corruption in other areas. Particularly it has severe impacts on the poor, who have the limited possibility of escaping poverty due to a lack of access to school and no alternatives to low-quality education (Meier, 2004). Meier (2004) argues that a country's social, economic, and political destiny is threatened if its educational system is not founded on the principles of meritocracy, honesty, and fairness. However, the findings of this study suggest that corruption

such as bribery, lobbying, nepotism, and political affiliation in the teacher recruitment process deprives the CHT of employing qualified teachers for primary schools. The respondents complained that in most cases individuals gain appointments as teachers if they give higher bribes and have political affiliations with the ruling parties. Hence, although enthusiastic and qualified teachers are one of the preconditions for ensuring quality teaching (Meier, 2004), most of the CHT remote schools do not have qualified teachers. The educational qualification of teachers in the CHT is lower than that the teachers in other parts of the country. The findings of this study also indicate that there is corruption and lack of accountability in implementing the development activities such as procurements of facilities and equipment among the actors who work with primary education.

Lack of modern teaching methods and materials also create barriers for ensuring quality primary education in the CHT. Teaching and learning can have an impact on children's schooling experiences, motivations, and the likelihood of dropping out (Hunt, 2008). However, the teaching methods in Bangladesh are conventional and teacher-focused. As indicated by the participants, teachers do not apply their trained skills in teaching but tend to just supervise and provide guidelines to students about what they will read at home. Students with academically uneducated parents do not have study support at home which seriously impacts students learning. Islam and Wadham (2016) found that teachers in the CHT spent most of their classroom time delivering lectures where students play the role of listeners which is not conducive to developing the student-teacher relationship.

Teacher absenteeism is also one of the challenges that restricts teaching and learning (Hunt, 2008). The lack of adequate teachers in most remote primary schools is one of the prime causes that hinder the teaching-learning environment. The number of teachers varies depending on the communication facilities. Where communication is easy, schools have more teachers. On the other hand, schools in remote areas with difficult communication have only two or three teachers in one school. Due to the remoteness and lack of facilities for teachers like accommodation, electricity, mobile network, drinking water, and sanitation facilities, teachers do not want to stay in remote schools and try to transfer to convenient locations by giving bribes or using political power. In addition, teachers coming to school and leaving early has become a common practice. Some teachers intentionally manage posting in remote areas to stay away from their duties. As the teachers are involved in not playing their role properly, they support one another in absenteeism. As primary school teachers are employed by the

government and recruited as a permanent (lifelong) staff in Bangladesh, it is very difficult to remove them from their job once appointed. The same is also found in Pakistan by Ghuman and Lloyd (2010) in their study on the Pakistani primary education system. Alcázar et al. (2006) in their study on teachers' absenteeism in Peru had similar findings where teacher's absence was disproportionately concentrated in impoverished and rural areas. They claim that poor communities are less able to keep teachers accountable, and teachers do not feel motivated to work in bad conditions which reduces teacher motivation. Teachers in remote places may find it more difficult to arrive at school on time due to transportation issues, and therefore, remote posts may be less appealing to teachers, resulting in lower motivation. In addition, due to not having office staff such as clerks, most of the time teachers have to engage in various official tasks such as preparing reports and attending meetings in the Upazila Education Office and District Education Office which curtail their time for classroom teaching. Working in primary education in the CHT is also challenging. Individuals who work in primary education have a huge workload due to limited staff. With the shortage of investigation staff, the local education administration cannot properly monitor the schooling activities. The remoteness of the schools creates barriers to inspection due to a lack of internet access and mobile networks.

The resources and facilities of schools play a significant role in improving the quality of primary education (Hunt, 2008). However, the educational environment of CHT does not facilitate effective teaching and learning. Structural issues such as the lack of good school buildings, classrooms, chairs, benches, and playgrounds are not available in most primary schools. Molteno et al. (2000) found school infrastructure, as well as the availability of resources such as textbooks, chalkboards, and desks, have an impact on dropout rates. The presence of separate sanitary facilities contributes to the retention of female students, especially when they grow adults and begin menstruation (Colclough et al., 2000). Similarly, the absence of latrine facilities leads to the absence of female students and low performance in study or drop-out (Hunt, 2008). However, in the remote CHT, schools do not have separate toilets for boys and girls, even most of the schools do not have usable toilets.

In the CHT, poverty plays a significant barrier for children's education. Children who belong to lower socioeconomic status, socially disadvantaged groups and from rural areas are more likely to obtain lower-quality education (Hunt, 2008). According to Molteno et al. (2000) "*children with hard-pressed life conditions drop out, having learnt little. Vulnerable children get the worst of the school system, when they have most need of the best*" (p. 2). Hidden costs

such as school uniforms, exercise books, learning equipment, travel, and the opportunity costs of receiving education are found to be the significant determinants in deciding education access (Hunt, 2008; Rose & Al-Samarrai, 2001). In the CHT, most of the poor parents are incapable to afford these materials as they live from hand to mouth. Even some families cannot afford three meals a day. Although Bangladesh adopted the fee-free primary education system, school absenteeism among the CHT indigenous children continues as they have other expenses. As mentioned by Hunt (2008), poverty and children's education have a strong relationship as children also need to be engaged in earning. In the CHT, poor parents employ their children in income-generating activities, more specifically in agriculture farming instead of sending them to school. It results to student absenteeism in school (Ersado, 2005). Hence, due to the gap in schooling, children cannot cope with school workloads and are permanently withdrawn from education (Hunt, 2008).

Lack of parental and community engagement also contributes to the poor educational situation in the CHT. Research suggests that children's education is greatly influenced by the level of education of household members (Hunt, 2008). According to Ersado (2005), "*parental education is the most consistent determinant of child education*" (p. 69). The higher level of education among parents is connected to better access to school, higher rate of attendance, and lower rates of dropout (Duryea & Arends-Kuenning, 2003; Rose & Al-Samarrai, 2001). According to several studies, parents who are not educated are unable to assist or do not recognise the benefits of education (Juneja, 2001). The current study also has similar findings in the CHT where being academically uneducated, parents cannot help their children in studies at home, and even, parents and community are not aware of the benefit of education. As Al-Samarrai and Peasgood (1998) argued while the household head's education enhances the likelihood of completion, the household head's basic literacy does not; hence, it claims more research is needed in different contexts. In their research Boyle et al. (2002) found that "*teachers and community leaders often expressed the view that the poorest parents (who they believe to be uneducated) have little or no understanding of the benefits of education and many children do not attend school (or attend irregularly) because their parents do not value education (p. 45).*"

Parents and household members are hesitant and unsupportive of their children's education as they think children will not get a job after studying. Hence, they consider investing in their children's education to be a waste of money (Hunt, 2008). Similarly, most of the

parents think that their children will not get a job after study and as the quality of education is not good in remote areas, they cannot compete with the urban people in job hunting. Without a job, education is often useless to them. These parents also do not attend monthly parents' meetings in school. Few parents, who attend the meeting, do not speak; they just listen to the teachers. Similarly, the SMC members of the remote areas are not educated, and they do not have an effective involvement in the educational process. Being unaware of the benefits of education, the communities in remote areas do not show interest in working in SMC.

The long distance from home to school creates challenges for indigenous children's education. The short supply of schools increases the distance between locations and restricts educational access for children (Hunt, 2008). School distance for rural people is a significant factor for educational access (Boyle et al., 2002). This research also found a similar situation in the CHT. Due to the lack of adequate schools in remote areas, students have to walk 3 to 4 miles to go to school. Being a remote area and not having road transportation facilities, children have to cross hills, rivers, canals, and lakes to go to school. Hence, parents do not feel safe sending their children alone in case anything bad happens on their way. During rainy sessions, and also hot summer days, it is really difficult for children to commute to school. It contributes to their school absenteeism to a great extent. Therefore, some children come to school very rarely or stop coming completely. In their research in areas in Ethiopia and Guinea, Colclough et al. (2000) found that "*as elsewhere, the greater is the distance from home to school, the less likely it is that a child will attend*" (p. 21).

5. Conclusion

The study findings shed light on a wide range of intricate problems and difficulties impeding the state of primary education in the CHT of Bangladesh. These issues span across a number of areas that include governance, language barriers, cultural diversity, infrastructure, corruption, teacher quality, poverty and involvement of the local people in the educational process. To improve the situation of primary education in the CHT, it is essential to localise education policies, provide language support, combat corruption, develop infrastructure, increase teacher quality, improve accountability mechanisms, and encourage community engagement. Otherwise, the educational status of CHT indigenous children will remain poor and it will affect the country's overall educational achievement. For this, the study suggests that the government undertake education policy and planning based on the CHT contexts and

realities. However, the study has some limitations. This research considers only CHT context and does not explain the issues and challenges of urban and rural schools separately, the problems and barriers may vary in these two different types of schools. Hence, the findings may not generalise other parts of the country. Moreover, this research involved only five participants from different categories, which could be addressed by adding more participants in further research.

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