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Strengthening Indigenous language education: Teacher perspectives from the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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This study investigated the role of Indigenous teachers in preserving and teaching the Chakma language in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Through interviews with 14 Chakma-speaking primary school teachers, the research examined their dual roles in (a) teaching the Chakma language as a subject and (b) using it as a medium of instruction for other curriculum content. The findings show that, while teachers are committed to promoting the language, shortages of trained, fluent educators and limited instructional resources constrain effectiveness. Participants also emphasised the need for stronger language specialists who can teach directly in Chakma and mentor other teachers to strengthen their first-language proficiency. The study highlights that comprehensive, continuous training, dedicated Indigenous language instructors, and expanded classroom time are critical to sustaining Indigenous languages and fostering cultural identity among students.

Keywords: Indigenous language education, teacher training, language preservation, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

Introduction

Indigenous teachers play a vital role in preserving their mother tongues by ensuring that Indigenous students have an opportunity to be educated in them. Shortages of teachers who are proficient in speaking, reading and writing in Indigenous languages, however, challenge the promotion and retention of these languages (Lingam, 2022). In addition to hindering language preservation efforts, the lack of educational resources exacerbates educational inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (Champagne, 2011). Partnerships between Indigenous communities, educational authorities and governments are essential in developing appropriate teaching methods, training programs and educational resources to address these issues (King & Schielmann, 2004).

Globally, Indigenous education is recognised as a fundamental right, as outlined in Article 14 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Champagne, 2011). However, the success of these initiatives largely depends on teachers' Indigenous language proficiency. Successful Indigenous education programs, such as those developed in Australia, Brazil, Canada and New Zealand, emphasise the centrality of teacher training in Indigenous languages to improve student learning outcomes (Bergier & Anderson, 2021; Han, 2022). While these initiatives provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of sustained language-focused teacher education, it is important to recognise that they are embedded in—and shaped by—the specific cultural, linguistic, social and historical contexts of their respective

countries. What is relevant and effective in Australia's Aboriginal teacher training programs, Brazil's intercultural bilingual initiatives or Canada's Indigenous language revitalisation projects may not be directly transferable to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. Instead, lessons from these contexts should be viewed as reference points, to be critically adapted in ways that respect the unique histories, community structures and linguistic ecologies of Bangladesh's Indigenous peoples.

Competency in Indigenous languages greatly enhances the ability of teachers to engage students and promote language learning. Thus, language proficiency training alongside teacher preparation in effective pedagogy is crucial for educators to be sufficiently prepared to deliver culturally relevant instruction and foster learning among Indigenous students (Burgess et al., 2019; Nakata, 2023). This can be achieved by incorporating skills teachers need to instruct in Indigenous languages into in-service training and ongoing professional development (Viviani et al., 2022). In Australia, several universities have partnered with state education authorities to strengthen teacher training for work in Indigenous contexts. For example, the University of Newcastle, Charles Darwin University and the University of Sydney have collaborated with the New South Wales Department of Education and the Northern Territory Department of Education to develop pre-service and in-service programs tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These programs, such as the Bachelor of Education (Primary) – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Specialisation at the University of Newcastle and the Growing Our Own initiative at Charles Darwin University, integrate sustained Indigenous community involvement through on-country learning, community-led workshops and mentorship by Indigenous educators. Cultural sharing activities—such as embedding local languages, histories and cultural protocols into lesson planning—are core components, with community elders and cultural knowledge holders contributing directly to course delivery and assessment design (Labone et al., 2014). Following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, many university teacher preparation programs in Canada now emphasise the importance of incorporating Indigenous language, culture and knowledge into school curricula (Belayet & Lamb, 2020). In Brazil, significant progress in the development of Indigenous education systems has been made because of the provision of dedicated funding for Indigenous teacher training, including language training (Guilherme & Hüttner, 2015).

Indigenous peoples and education in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, national constitutional provisions guarantee free and compulsory education for all citizens (Tripura, 2016), but this is complicated by the country's linguistic diversity. The constitution designates Bangla as the sole official language, while languages of the country's Indigenous peoples are relegated to informal settings, receiving comparatively little political or cultural priority (Sultana, 2021). Bangladesh has around three million Indigenous people residing in areas such as the CHT, where they face educational challenges. The CHT is home to a linguistically diverse population, with 54 Indigenous groups collectively speaking at least 35 languages, including Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro and Bawm (Bangladesh Directorate of Primary Education, 2011). In many communities, older generations retain greater oral fluency in Indigenous languages, while middle-aged adults—often educated in Bangla-language schools—may have only partial literacy or oral proficiency. Among school-aged children, daily exposure to Bangla through schooling, media and administration often outweighs opportunities to use their Indigenous language, resulting in reduced vocabulary, limited literacy and, in some cases, language shift toward Bangla as the dominant medium of communication. Within classrooms, students may vary widely in their proficiency—from fluent home speakers to those with only receptive skills—creating a complex teaching environment. This variability also extends to teachers, many of whom are more confident speaking than reading or writing their mother tongue. Understanding this diverse linguistic repertoire is critical for designing effective teacher training that addresses not only the mechanics of

Indigenous language instruction but also strategies for supporting students with differing levels of proficiency.

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord recognised the right to mother-tongue education, which helped initiate policies to promote Indigenous languages, nevertheless many Indigenous children remain disadvantaged in the current education system (Deshwara, 2022). Although the government at the national level has implemented Indigenous language instruction for primary level education, including Indigenous language curriculum materials, the ongoing shortage of adequately trained Indigenous language teachers is an impediment to the initiative's success (Anam, 2024). The government's introduction of textbooks in five Indigenous languages (Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo and Sadri) represents a step forward, but many teachers lack the proficiency to effectively teach in these languages. Despite initiatives to deliver Indigenous language classes and mother tongue-based education in public schools, the limited preparation of teachers continues to hinder the effectiveness of Indigenous education.

While policies such as the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord and the introduction of Indigenous language textbooks represent important steps toward language preservation, they operate within a broader historical context in which many Indigenous languages in Bangladesh have experienced long-term decline. Successive periods of state-driven assimilation, the prioritisation of Bangla as the sole official language and limited institutional recognition of Indigenous languages in formal education have contributed to reduced opportunities for intergenerational language transmission (Sultana, 2021). Political marginalisation, displacement and economic pressures have also accelerated language shift toward Bangla in daily life, leading to a gradual erosion of literacy and even oral fluency among some Indigenous communities. As a result, many Indigenous teachers—particularly those educated primarily in Bangla-language schools—enter the profession with only partial proficiency in their own mother tongue. This creates a paradox in language policy: while these teachers are tasked with delivering curriculum content in their Indigenous language, their ability to do so effectively is constrained by the very historical forces that undermined language transmission in the first place.

Current study and research questions

Indigenous students in Bangladesh face numerous, overlapping barriers to education, including language, socioeconomic disparities and insufficient teacher training. Despite policies aimed at improving access to education for Indigenous communities, only a small percentage of Indigenous children complete primary education, and the marginalisation that stems from insufficient Indigenous language instruction contributes to higher dropout rates and low levels of academic achievement among Indigenous students (Sarker & Davey, 2009; Talukdar et al., 2020). To address these challenges, it is essential for Bangladesh to further invest in teacher training that prioritises Indigenous languages and cultures, and ensures that its Indigenous tribal people have an opportunity to be educated in their mother tongues (Whitinui et al., 2018).

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of Indigenous teachers in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the Chakma language. This research focused on their own perceived ability to teach Indigenous languages at the primary level with the limited training and resources currently available. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Indigenous teachers perceive their role in Indigenous language education?

2. What are the experiences of Indigenous teachers who teach in their mother tongue language?

3. What initiatives can educational authorities put in place to assist Indigenous teachers in using curriculum materials written in their own languages?

4. How do Indigenous language teachers in Bangladesh perceive their ability to promote student achievement?

Literature review

The conceptual framework for this study is guided by Kennedy's (1998) writing on in-service teacher education and Blank and Alas's (2009) work on the impact of teacher professional development on student achievement. Their research, as that of Darling-Hammond (2000), illustrates the essential role of subject knowledge expertise in training effective teachers who are capable of significantly enhancing student learning. In-service teacher education is crucial for enabling teachers to improve their proficiency. Providing high-quality instruction in public schools depends on enhancing teaching quality through professional development (Blank & Alas, 2010). Kennedy (1998) emphasises that teacher professional development should be content-driven and classroom-relevant to be effective. This view is echoed by Lawlor (as cited in Orchard & Winch, 2015), who argues that effective teachers require both preparation in subject knowledge and closely supervised on-the-job training in their academic programs. Studies have shown that ongoing, long-term professional development positively impacts teachers' effectiveness and student outcomes (Althauser, 2015; Holloway 2006).

Importance of effective Indigenous teachers

Effective teachers positively influence students' academic and personal growth and are critical to student success (Bishop & Durksen, 2020). In the context of Bangladesh, this is particularly significant for Indigenous teachers in regions such as the CHT, where teachers often face large multi-grade classrooms, scarce resources, and the need to teach in both Bangla and an Indigenous language. Many Indigenous teachers in the CHT are responsible for teaching the mother tongue as well as delivering core curriculum subjects, sometimes across different linguistic groups within the same school. This dual role is complicated by shortages of trained teachers fluent in both the Indigenous language and Bangla, meaning that a single teacher may have to adapt lessons for students with varying levels of proficiency in each language. Research on Indigenous education in Bangladesh (Anam, 2024; Talukdar et al., 2020) has shown that where teachers have strong subject knowledge, high language proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogical skills, students demonstrate higher levels of engagement, improved literacy in their mother tongue and greater retention through the primary years. In this way, the global literature on teacher effectiveness aligns with the Bangladesh experience: the quality and preparedness of Indigenous teachers directly influences both academic achievement and the preservation of Indigenous languages.

Indigenous teacher training

The extant research highlights the critical importance of Indigenous teacher training in promoting school development and student success, in addition to preservation of Indigenous history, culture and language (Gomes et al., 2020; Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019; Pérez, 2018). Indigenous teacher education programs have been proven to be more successful when they integrate culture and language into curricula (Stiles, 1997; Toohey, 1985). By integrating mainstream educational theories, culturally relevant content and Indigenous language, effective Indigenous teacher training programs equip teachers with

the necessary pedagogical skills as well as a firm understanding of the language of instruction. Whether they are teaching in full immersion programs or language enrichment classes, effective teachers who instruct in an Indigenous language tend to be highly proficient in that language (Cekiso et al., 2019; De Korne, 2013). Indigenous teacher training programs are also more successful when they have the benefit of community support. In some instances, programs train teachers in effective outreach strategies for collaborating with Indigenous students, families and communities (Labone et al., 2014).

Methods

This study investigated government initiatives supporting Indigenous teacher training in Bangladesh, including support for teaching five Indigenous languages and effective teaching strategies for teaching in Indigenous languages at the primary school level. This research followed a qualitative approach, utilising interviews with Indigenous primary school teachers who were involved in Indigenous language instruction. The interview data gathered was intended to provide detailed insights into the challenges facing Indigenous teachers in Bangladesh and opportunities to improve the provision of Indigenous language education.

Research approach

A qualitative research methodology was selected, as collecting data directly from Indigenous teachers in the field allows for an in-depth interpretation of their experiences through the examination of interview responses and field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The study followed a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand the perspectives of participants and provide an accurate interpretation of their everyday experiences and the meanings they assigned to the events and interactions they engage in and how these experiences shape their teaching practice (Pandin & Yanto, 2023).

Study participants

This study focused on government primary schools in the CHT, where Indigenous teachers use Chakma-language curriculum materials provided by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board. The CHT region, consisting of Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban districts, is home to about three million Indigenous people, roughly 1% of Bangladesh's population (Talukdar et al., 2020). It is in the south-eastern part of the country and shares borders with Myanmar, two Indian states and the Chittagong district of Bangladesh. With the assistance of a Bangladeshi Indigenous Chakma primary school teacher, study participants were recruited from Chakma-speaking Indigenous primary school teachers in the Khagrachhari district. These teachers were invited to join a Facebook group and, in keeping with a snowball sampling approach, they were also encouraged to invite other teachers to join. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 teachers from the CHT region. Out of the 14 interview participants, there were seven males and seven females. This sample size aligns with recommendations for qualitative studies, which suggest between 10 and 30 participants to ensure data variation (McClenny, 2020). The participants were all public primary school teachers with levels of teaching experience ranging from five to 35 years.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were selected for data collection due to their adaptability, which allowed participants to provide comprehensive responses in a more personalised manner (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Xerri, 2018). These interviews were conducted online using either Facebook Messenger or Zoom, depending on the interviewee's preference. These interviews were approximately one hour in duration and focused on teachers' experiences teaching in Indigenous languages and their perspectives on measures that could be taken to provide for more effective teaching and learning.

The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to record, organise and analyse the interview data. This allowed detailed responses of interview participants to be captured and transcribed. As the interviews were conducted in the Bangla language, the data was later transcribed in English for analysis. Following the approach of Bogdan and Biklen (2003), the data analysis process involved systematically coding, categorising and organising the interview data to identify the key patterns and themes that aligned with the research questions.

Results

Thorough analysis of the interview data revealed three interconnected primary themes. These themes were identified as follows: (a) Indigenous language teachers seek to preserve Indigenous languages, (b) Indigenous language teachers seek to improve teacher training, and (c) Indigenous language teachers seek to improve Indigenous language instruction.

Indigenous language teachers seek to preserve Indigenous languages

Most participants acknowledged the government's steps to support the development of the Chakma language, including the provision of textbooks and notebooks. However, they expressed the need for the government to take a more proactive role in preserving Indigenous languages. Some of the participants shared their opinion that Indigenous people in Bangladesh should have a right to be educated in their own language and that this would help facilitate the preservation of the country's Indigenous languages. They highlighted the ways that collaboration between Indigenous teachers, Indigenous communities and government authorities could leverage their existing relationships to secure additional educational and social rights for Indigenous communities and protect Indigenous languages. For example, an increased focus on publishing materials in Indigenous languages contributes to the preservation of these languages. The participants discussed the limited use of Indigenous languages outside the classroom and how, while students and their families were interested in learning Chakma, the language was not frequently used in their daily lives, making it difficult for students to practise. The participants emphasised the importance of passing down Indigenous language skills from one generation to the next. One participant noted shared that his grandfather could read and write in Chakma, while his father could only speak it, illustrating the gradual loss of literacy in the language across generations. There were also calls for additional research on the Chakma language from participants. Some of these teachers suggested that conducting more research into Chakma and other Indigenous languages spoken in the country could help improve the development of curriculum materials such as textbooks. They believed that further research could assist in the production of higher quality educational materials for students and teachers alike. Some of the participants' comments on the theme of language preservation are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Theme 1 – Indigenous language teachers seek to preserve Indigenous languages

Sub-themes	Qualitative data
Right to Indigenous language education	I believe everyone should have the right to learn their native language. Communities can access education in their language through books or other mediums. When reading or learning in their native language, people experience different emotions and develop unique interests. Knowing about our own language allows us to comprehend many specifics. Lack of access or opportunity to study in our mother tongue hinders our understanding of its nuances. All communities deserve an education in their preferred language. The Chakma, Marma and other tribes risk losing their languages and cultures if they do not learn them. Educating Indigenous people in their traditional languages is something I consider necessary.
Role of schools in language preservation	We must actively study, use and pass on these languages to ensure their preservation and eventual recovery. Concerning this matter, I would like the government to release books progressively in additional Indigenous languages and incorporate their teaching in schools. By recording and introducing other Indigenous languages in schools, we can prevent them from becoming extinct. As a collective, we aim to effectively teach the Chakma language, provide adequate support and guidance, and sustain the Chakma language. An essential aspect of training is mastering the Chakma language alphabet, Kar Chinno (adding the vowel sound “aa”), and reading and writing systems. They can be attained with a training period of just three to four weeks. Without follow-up practice, one’s ability to use the Chakma language will inevitably deteriorate, as practise is essential to the learning process. Without consistent practice in Chakma reading and writing, our ability to retain it diminishes as it is rarely encountered in outdoor environments.
Community role in language preservation	We must expand out Chakma language learning and using areas. If children and [we], as teachers, don’t practice the Chakma language, we will forget it. We, the Chakma people, share partial responsibility for the delay in having a teaching manual in our own language. Our main focus is on the textbook we need for teaching. Figuring out how to master the Chakma language is not our main concern. The apathy towards learning their native language among individuals hinders parents from helping children become proficient in it, affecting their language development. Obviously institutional priorities are really key. So sometimes we spend a ton of time looking at those. We definitely don’t see ourselves as the experts in anything other than the quality piece and the curriculum piece. So, we don’t sit there and prescribe what they should do in terms of those institutional priorities.
Need for Indigenous language research	Further research on the Chakma language is necessary for children to learn about Chakma tradition, history, language, identity and heritage. I think if prominent language researchers and educators did research on the Chakma language, we would have better texts to help us read and learn the Chakma language better.

	The combination of research and the availability of books in the Chakma language has allowed children to gain knowledge of the language's alphabet and words. They can speak, read and write in Chakma. Further research into the Chakma language could have helped academicians correct book errors. Thus, more research would contribute to publishing more Chakma language books, significantly developing our language.

Indigenous language teachers seek to improve teacher training

All but one of the interviewees noted that they had received formal training in teaching in the Chakma language. The interview responses highlighted their views of the importance of these teacher training programs. Many reported that this training helped them develop a deeper appreciation for their native language and several of the teachers highlighted that the training equipped them with the skills they needed to teach effectively in the Indigenous language. While many of the participants shared positive experiences, most of them felt that the training they had received was insufficient to enable them to fully master teaching in the Chakma language. Most participants expressed a desire to have opportunities for longer, more comprehensive and continuous training to retain their newly acquired language skills and gain a higher level of fluency and proficiency. Several participants noted that significant gaps between their training sessions, in some cases spanning several years, hindered their ability to retain and apply what they had learned. Some of the participants' comments related to the benefits of training opportunities and ways to improve upon them are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Theme 2 – Indigenous language teachers seek to improve teacher training

Sub-themes	Qualitative data
Benefits of training	It's funny how I did not know of Chakma language literacy until I underwent training. Since I didn't have knowledge in reading the Chakma language … how can I effectively teach the students? Now, with the completion of my 14- and 7-day trainings, I can read, write and almost confidently teach students in Chakma. Through my training, I have gained insights into the Chakma language and recognised its crucial importance. This training not only equipped me with knowledge about the Chakma language, but it also proved to be immensely beneficial for students as they learned and understood the Chakma language. They gradually realise the importance of their language to some extent.
Ways to improve teacher training	It would be beneficial for me to undergo additional training to gain these skills. Moreover, individuals who join as new teachers for teaching the Chakma language should initiate their journey with training prior to conducting language lessons in the classroom. The training period of either 15 or seven days is not enough for us as we are beginners in learning the Chakma language. We forget if we do not practise regularly and train repeatedly. My ability to comprehend and read the Chakma language is limited. However, if I could undergo an extended training period of a month or more, it would have improved my ability to comprehend and read the Chakma language.

	Mastering a new language poses a significant challenge. We must acquaint ourselves with the written form of the language despite it being our native tongue. Initially, reading and writing were difficult. Considering our considerable obstacles, the government must facilitate extensive training and enact various educational programs in the Chakma language. We should offer a Chakma language teaching course. Topics covered in this course [should] include the Chakma alphabet, language and historical context. It should offer guidance for tackling the language learning challenges Chakma students and teachers encounter.

Indigenous language teachers seek to improve instruction

The study participants shared a variety of ideas for improving instruction and the learning experience for their students. Some participants believed that students could be better supported in learning their native language if their schools had dedicated Indigenous language teachers whose responsibility was solely to teach the Chakma language to students. Several suggested that the current numbers of Indigenous language-speaking teachers were insufficient, which in some instances led to the cancellation of classes that were supposed to be instructed in the Chakma language. Some of the teachers were also concerned that the amount of time allocated to teaching the Chakma language in their schools was too limited and insufficient for students to be able to acquire language skills and develop a sufficient level of proficiency. It was also noted that some students struggled to learn Chakma alongside both Bangla and English. Most participants acknowledged the government's steps to support the development of the Chakma language, including the provision of textbooks; some of them would also prefer to have a written manual for teachers to help guide their instruction. It was also suggested that curriculum materials would be improved with the inclusion of more information on the history and culture of Indigenous languages, including traditional Chakma stories and songs. A selection of participants' comments related to this final theme are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Theme 3 – Indigenous language teachers seek to improve instruction

Sub-themes	Qualitative data
Need for designated language teachers	We should hire a dedicated Indigenous teacher who exclusively teaches Chakma. The teacher will be well versed in this language, making teaching easier. We still need a designated Chakma language instructor. Despite this, some teachers multitask and teach this language alongside other subjects. Teaching Bangla, English and Chakma language books simultaneously poses many challenges. The presence of qualified instructors and sustained training are essential for effectively teaching the Chakma language.
Need for additional language teachers	We teach six primary school classes every day. These classes range from pre-primary to fifth grade. These remote, hilly areas are also experiencing a shortage of teachers. Some schools have only one or two teachers. There are teacher shortages. As a result, conducting lectures at all levels, ranging from pre-primary to level five becomes challenging. Sometimes, we face the dilemma of prioritising regular subject classes or Chakma language classes due to a shortage of teachers.

Need for additional language instructional time	We allocate just two days per week, Sunday and Tuesday, for Chakma language classes at the primary level. These classes run for a duration of 40 to 45 minutes. The children struggle to remember everything since they only have [language] classes twice a week and learn it like a new language. The students could have learned the Chakma language more quickly if we had offered additional classes. Children in the class struggle with learning three languages simultaneously—Bangla, English and Chakma. The Chakma language is more challenging for them to comprehend than other languages because of the need for more frequent classes and practise sessions, which are only conducted twice a week.
Need for additional language teaching curriculum materials	Despite government initiatives to teach the Indigenous mother tongue via book publications, the absence of a written teacher module raises questions. The availability of written instructions would have enhanced [the] teachers' role in fostering students' progress. We already possess instructional guides for other subjects. Unfortunately, there is no teaching manual available for the Chakma language. A comprehensive teaching handbook and specialised training could have significantly enhanced the teaching of the Chakma language. The manual and proper training will emphasise the importance of teaching the Chakma language through textbooks. Manuals are available for every subject except the Chakma language. Instructional modules detail our approach to instruction, assessment and monitoring the progress of students. Given the lack of a guidebook for Chakma-published books, we frequently rely on [other] support to navigate and evaluate their progress. Chakma language textbooks contain Ajapath (vowel), Arjabipath (consonants). We can include Posson (novels and fairy tales), Chakma songs, rhymes, and stories that are part of the Chakma language and culture, which the current Chakma generation often does not have exposure to or knowledge of.

Discussion

The participants in this study unanimously expressed appreciation for the efforts that have been made by government and educational authorities to advance education in their mother tongue, such as providing textbooks and teacher training opportunities. However, they also urged that further support be provided to enhance Indigenous language teaching, such as more intensive teacher training, additional instructional resources and improved curriculum materials. The participants highlighted challenges faced by teachers in Indigenous schools, particularly in remote areas, including challenges associated with recruiting qualified teachers and inadequate facilities. It was suggested that, to effectively teach in an Indigenous language, teachers should have training that is longer in duration followed by periodic professional development. Another option raised was teacher training led by experienced Indigenous language specialists, such as Chakma language experts. The participants argued that student progress could be improved if additional classroom time was allocated for Indigenous language teaching and specialist teachers were allocated to teach language skills specifically outside of instructional time for other subjects.

Previous research has shown that, in addition to the academic benefits, Indigenous language education and training itself fosters a sense of self-worth and cultural identity (Sundararajan, 2024). Further, Benson (as cited in Laguarda & Woodward, 2013) observed that "simply having teachers conduct instruction in the local mother tongue can also have a positive impact on teachers' ability to tailor instruction to meet students' needs" (p. 455). In the current study, the participants, all teachers and Chakma language speakers, were able to improve their own native language proficiency because of the training opportunities they accessed; they also developed a deeper appreciation for how Indigenous languages shape their distinct identity. This added to their motivation to teach their own students to improve their Indigenous language skills. This aligns with the teacher training research of both Kennedy (1998) and Blank and Alas (2010), who stressed the importance of in-service teacher education and professional development in enhancing the proficiency of Indigenous teachers.

The study participants consistently noted that educators could improve upon the quality and effectiveness of teaching in their Indigenous language through greater collaboration with Indigenous communities. Community collaboration and partnership was raised as one possible avenue for helping to better integrate Indigenous history, culture and traditions into language instruction. The benefits would not be limited to increasing student engagement and success, as collaboration was also regarded as a way to further secure educational and social rights for Indigenous communities. Participants suggested that efforts toward improving Indigenous language literacy and Indigenous language revitalisation could be strengthened through outreach to senior Indigenous community members, more research on Indigenous culture and languages, and increased focus on publishing works in Indigenous languages.

The findings of this study demonstrate how Indigenous language teacher training programs can play a crucial role in helping to preserve Indigenous language and culture. They also highlight the necessity for Indigenous communities to be proactive in preserving and transmitting their languages, knowledges and cultures across generations. To preserve their language, they need to be motivated to learn it enthusiastically. The teachers interviewed for this study improved their language fluency and pedagogical knowledge; they also reported feeling a deeper appreciation for the importance of their native language because of the experience of teaching in the language. They also believed there should be a greater focus, both on the part of government and their community, on revitalising and preserving their Indigenous language. As with Delva's (2019) research on the impact of learning one's native language and culture in primary school, this study reveals that a culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasises Indigenous language instruction and cultural awareness, plays a crucial role in fostering a stronger sense of identity.

Summary

This study examined the role of Indigenous teachers in preserving Indigenous languages and cultures, focusing on the Chakma language in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative methodology, the study gathered insights from 14 Chakma-speaking primary school teachers in the CHT, revealing their experiences and challenges in teaching in their Indigenous language. Despite national policies supporting Indigenous language instruction, including the provision of Chakma-language materials, efforts in this regard face challenges associated with limited teacher training opportunities and educational resources, as well as a shortage of trained teachers. The findings highlight the importance of teacher training in Indigenous languages and the role of Indigenous language proficiency in improving student outcomes. In this study, the teachers advocated for more resources, dedicated language instructors and expanded classroom time

for Indigenous languages. The findings also underscore the need for extended and continuous teacher training, and highlight the critical role of Indigenous teachers in sustaining languages and preserving traditional cultures. These recommendations align with the extant research suggesting that Indigenous language instruction bolsters student engagement, cultural identity and academic achievement. Overall, the study advocates for stronger collaboration among communities, educators and policymakers to foster language preservation and educational equity for Indigenous students.

The participants in this study expressed appreciation for the efforts made by government and educational authorities to advance mother-tongue education, such as providing textbooks and teacher training. However, they also emphasised the need for more intensive training, additional instructional resources and improved curriculum materials. Challenges persist in the recruitment of qualified Indigenous language teachers and in ensuring equitable access to resources, particularly in remote areas. Addressing these barriers will require a deliberate, coordinated approach among key stakeholders.

Strong collaboration between government, Indigenous communities and educators must be anchored in well-defined roles, structured processes and mutual accountability. The government can lead by committing long-term funding for Indigenous language teacher training, developing and distributing comprehensive teaching manuals, and embedding language preservation objectives into education policy. Educators can contribute by engaging in continuous professional learning, integrating community knowledge into lesson planning and advocating for expanded Indigenous language instruction within the school system. Indigenous communities—especially fluent elders and cultural knowledge holders—can serve as linguistic and cultural authorities, providing traditional stories, oral histories and authentic language usage to enrich learning.

Establishing local Indigenous language education committees, composed of representatives from all three stakeholder groups, could serve as a permanent platform for joint decision-making, curriculum co-design and monitoring progress. Regular planning workshops, formal agreements specifying roles and responsibilities and mentoring arrangements pairing teachers with fluent elders would reinforce these partnerships. Such measures would help ensure that collaboration moves beyond aspirational statements and becomes embedded in the daily practice of Indigenous language education. By grounding these efforts in shared responsibility and consistent engagement, the preservation and revitalisation of Indigenous languages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts can become a sustained and achievable reality.

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