Culture-Based Education: Lessons from Indigenous Education in the U.S.
and Southeast Asia

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CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Abstract

Cultured-based pedagogy has been positively related to students’ socio-emotional well-being, civic engagement, school motivation and higher academic outcomes, particularly with culturally-diverse students is concerned. This paper examines the benefits of culture-based education in the context of indigenous education in the United States as well as in communities in Southeast Asia. It also demonstrates the possibilities that may arise when communities are able to guide the education of their children and ensure meaning to their lives.

*Keywords*: culture-based education, indigenous education, globalization
On September 13, 2007 the United Nations adopted a Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Only Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America refused to ratify this declaration. However, since then, all four of these countries have reversed their positions. Article 13-1 of the declaration states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons”. On the other hand, article 14-1 declares: “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” (United Nations, 2007; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September 2007)

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The challenges facing Indigenous and other multicultural people today extend well beyond the classroom walls. For example in the U.S., unemployment among Native people is three times the national average (Freeman & Fox, 2005). Gang activity is prevalent and incarceration rates are high. This social and economic plight is a result of the destruction of Indigenous families and communities brought about by colonial policies that marginalize and devalue Indigenous peoples and promote culturally-assimilationist policies, abetted by the processes of schooling. A similar concern is made by Gilbert:

“When the current educational system ignores American Indian students’ own traditional teachings nurtured in the home and within the local community, the educational system has lost a
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

valuable educational tool to augment the existing curriculum” (2011, p. 43).

On the other hand, culturally-sensitive educators argue that most formal education systems ignore and underutilize the knowledge and experience that children of minority ethnic backgrounds bring to school. Recently, some have argued that cultural-based education (CBE) is a basic human right that is frequently denied by the colonial powers and settler regimes (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Reyhner, 2010; Reyhner & Singh, 2010). They contend that learning in a language which is not one’s own, exerts undue pressure for children. Not only there is the challenge of learning a new language, but also learning new knowledge and skills. As a result, children find it difficult to cope with the challenges that emerge from the so-called standard language of instruction, which ultimately make them feel alienated (Banks & Banks, 2010; Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2005; Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011; Espinoza-Herold, 2003).

In other words, educators who do not recognize and value the cultural background of Indigenous and other culturally-diverse students can instigate a vicious cycle of self-doubt that leads their students to discount their home and community learning experiences, capacities and gifts (Battiste, 2002). In the United States the National Center for Education Statistics report, *Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives* (Freeman & Fox, 2005), found Indigenous students with more than twice the White dropout rate, the highest death rate of 15-19 year olds, the highest percentage of special education students, and the highest rate of absenteeism. They were also the most likely to have failed to complete core academic programs in their schools and are most affected by school violence. These grim statistics are tinged with irony given that the U.S. government’s past assimilationist “English-only” policy in schools has been successful to the extent that 51% of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Graders reported in 2003 no longer speak languages other than English at home and only 22% reported speaking a Native language half the time or more (Freeman & Fox, 2005).

Hence, CBE is put forward as an antidote to the myriad social and educational challenges faced by Indigenous youth. Its foundation includes constructivist learning theory that situates learning in a cultural-based model. Constructivist-learning theory is situated in how human beings learn by connecting and integrating new knowledge into what they have previously learned. When the culture, and often even the language, of the school—(usually White middle class and English-based)—is far different from the home cultures of Indigenous students, they face major learning difficulties. CBE is designed to decrease that difference and to increase the chance for educational success for Indigenous as well as other culturally-diverse students.

This position paper presents a historical account of culture-based education with focuses on prospects and challenges of indigenous culture-based education in the United States, with reference to some case studies in South Asian nations.

**Genesis of Culture-Based Education**

The concept of culture-based education emerged as an alternative approach to Western and colonial educational approach along with the collapse of colonial powers of Europe. There are many terms have been used by educational researchers over the past century to denote culture-based education: Culturally responsive, culturally respective, culture-sensitive, culturally-rooted, culturally relevant, and culturally congruent (Gay, 2010; Yamauchi, 2005). Despite the use of different terms by various researchers in culture-based education, the basic premise is the respect for multi-ethnic diverse knowledge systems, skills, and the incorporation socio-cultural diversity in educational practices.
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Culture-based education on the other hand, is also viewed by many people as a way to achieve political power and independence. For example, Mahatma Gandhi proposed the use of Indian culture-based education as an alternative to the British education system, (which was also known as Macaulay’s education system), when he led the Indian Independent Movement in 1930s (Khubchandani, 2008). Launching the movement against the British in 1938, Mahatma Gandhi advocated the inclusion of practical knowledge and cottage skills such as, traditional weaving, also known as Charkha Andolan, and agriculture into the Basic Education, by laying stress on integrating education with work experiences through “down-to earth” vernaculars (mother-tongues/local lingua francas) and language acquisition with communicability (Khubchandani, 2008, p. 371).

Later, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s culture-based education model in India, Julius Nyerere also followed it in Tanzania in the 1960s. Nyerere was famous for his “Education for Self Reliance,” philosophy, in which he emphasized the need for mother-tongue education in local language, Kiswahili. In 1967, Kiswahili was made the sole language of instruction for primary education, and it was planned to extend it to secondary education. The focus of the program was to establish settlements and allow people to access water, electricity and schools more easily. The Ujamma villages were to govern by those living in them and Kiswahili was made the language of instruction for all seven years of primary schooling (Brock-Utne, 2008). Brock-Utne further contends that “President Julius Nyrere implemented the education policy in Tanzania promoting the revival of Kiswahili language as a national language, which flourishes today, even beyond the border of Tanzania in Africa” (2008, p. 49).

One of the calls for CBE in the U.S. Indigenous-education curriculum was made with the release of an extensive investigation of the U.S. Indian Office, commonly called the Merriam
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Report (1928), which highlighted the poor results of the assimilationist education promulgated by the U.S. government. The report emphasized the need to incorporate indigenous languages and cultures in educational material and programming. Referring to the mismatch of the U.S. education practices for Native students, the report stated:

A standard course of study, routine classroom methods, traditional types of schools, even if they were adequately supplied—and they are not—would not solve the problem. The methods of the average public school in the United States cannot safely be taken over bodily and applied to Indian education, no matter how carefully they might be prepared, would be worse than futile. (Merriam et al., 1928, p. 347)

Since those days, the culture-based education movement has evolved in many different ways. For example, Chet Bowers (1993) emphasizes the need for “land literacy” in which students learn about the ecology of their home areas and sustainable practices that conserve that land for future generations (p.64). An example of culturally and land-based curriculum material can be found in the book Between Sacred Mountains: Navajo Stories and Lessons from the Land first published in 1982 by Rock Point Community School (one of the first Indian-controlled schools established after enactment of the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1972).

Pewewardy and Hammer (2003) emphasized the growing interest in CBE during the late 1980s and early 1990s and as a result of rapidly rising diversity. They noted “a serious concern over the lack of success of many ethnic/racial minority students despite years of educational reform” (p.2). In other words, CBE emerged as an alternative framework for developing a model of education for diverse groups that incorporates connections to culture, place/land and community and acknowledges and respects indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies.
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Despite the early recognition of the centrality of culture to education, the ethnocentrism of the dominant groups persists in the form of assimilation programs even to the present time. It has most recently been manifested in the United States in various anti-bilingual education initiatives passed in California, Arizona and Massachusetts in the past two decades (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2005; Espinoza-Herold, 2013).

Many recent publications on CBE reflect an increasing concern over the Native student achievement gap and the apparent cultural disconnections among teachers, students and schools (Klinger et al., 2005; Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2005; Nieto, 2010). While others emphasize cultural revitalization, honoring a rich heritage and attending to a host of other social and economic issues that arose primarily from more hegemonic, colonial approaches to education. For them, CBE can have a healing impact on Indigenous communities through addressing issues particular to students and their families (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012; Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011). Emphasizing importance of the rich heritage of Native Americans, Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert (2011), a former president of the National Indian Education Association, notes:

American Indians have a rich cultural heritage and that heritage has been transmitted orally to each successive generation in song, stories, legends, and history via their native language and traditions. This knowledge provides an understanding of the natural order of existence both personally and communally (p. 43). In sum, sustaining and affirming native cultures and languages in the classroom nurtures children’s academic achievement and educational success.
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Indigenous Culture-based Education in the United States

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) reiterate the concern over the mismatch between the processes of mainstream schooling and educational needs of Indigenous children in the United States. They note that the teaching methods of mainstream schools have not recognized or appreciated Indigenous knowledge systems that focus on inter-relationships and interconnectivity. They point out: “Indigenous knowledge is not static; an unchanging artifact of a former life way. It has been adapting to the contemporary world since contact with “others” began, and it will continue to change” (p. 12).

On the other hand, Miranda Wright (2010) underscores the problems of U.S. based-Indigenous children in terms of their Native values clashing with those represented in the Western educational system, “Perhaps the Western educational system has had such a dramatic impact on our Native population that our youth do not know how to frame their inquiries from an Indigenous perspective” (p. 128). Likewise, referring to the gap between the worldview of Native Alaskans and Western science, Kwagley, Norris-Tell & Norris-Tell, 2010 note:

Yupiaq people view the world as being composed of five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. Aristotle spoke of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. However, spirit has been missing from Western science. The incorporation of spirit in the Yupiaq worldview resulted in an awareness of the interdependence of humanity with environment, a reverence for and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment. (p. 227)

It is important to understand that indigenous worldview is different from the mainstream, dominant Western worldview. This means that children of indigenous communities may not perceive the things exactly the same way as their counterparts perceive. Therefore the “one size fits all” does not work in education, especially for children of indigenous communities. As
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Kawagley, Norris-Tell and Norris-Tell (2010) argue that the worldview of Native Alaskans is unique:

They have their own terminology for constellations and have an understanding of the seasonal positioning of the constellations and have developed a large body of knowledge about climatic and seasonal changes—knowledge about temperature changes, the behavior of ice and snow, the meaning of different cloud formations, the significance of changes in wind direction and speed, and knowledge of air pressure. (pp. 224-225)

In considering Culture-Based Education (CBE), attention should be given to “cultural difference theory” that posits one source of learning difficulties for culturally-diverse students emanate from a cultural mismatch between students home culture and the culture of the school (Demmert & Towner, 2003).

The critical pedagogy research field also supports the concept of CBE. It requires that teachers learn about students’ lives and encourage them to become self-directed learners who think for themselves about issues they and their fellow community members encounter in their lives. Teachers must work towards understanding to the best of their ability the culture and home backgrounds of their students because cultural- misunderstandings can create tensions between teachers and students. However, these conflicts can be significantly reduced by educators establishing working partnerships with families with the explicit purpose of gaining better understanding of students’ culture (Gay, 2010; Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011).

In their extensive review of tribal critical-race theory in the CBE field, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) argue that “The increased emphasis on standardization and high-stakes accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 seems to have resulted in less, rather
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

than more gains, leaving behind culturally-diverse children in our school systems” (p. 942). They further note that there are only two dominant models of Indigenous education in the U.S.; The assimilative model and the culturally responsive model. By referring to research studies on assimilative model, they conclude that “there is no evidence that the assimilative model improves academic success; there is growing evidence that CBE does, in fact, improve academic success for American Indian/Alaska Native children” (p. 937).

A growing body of research sustains that CBE is an approach to teaching and learning that facilitates critical consciousness, engenders respect for diversity and acknowledges the importance of relationships, while honoring, building on, and drawing from the culture, knowledge, and language of students, teachers, and local community. It is both a means of attending to prominent educational issues, and a pledge to respond to the specific needs of students, their families, and their communities (Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2005; McCarty, 2005).

Practices and Prejudices of Culture-based Education

Despite the diversity of student population in today’s schools, students from non-mainstream communities are still expected to adapt to the monolithic culture in which the processes and knowledge base of the schools are embedded. These students operate from two worldviews and often have two or more cultures to contend with (Banks & Banks, 2010; Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011). Thus, incorporation of discourse and cultural learning styles is an empowering and practical strategy for teachers to show that all their students are equally valued and treated.

It can be inferred that the one of the strengths of CBE is its attention to students’ culture and experience, as it provides a framework for transforming education for culturally-diverse
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

students and their teachers (Banks & Banks, 2010; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Gay, 2010; Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2005). Likewise, McAlpine and Crago (1995) argue that conflict between classroom culture and home culture may make it difficult for children to participate in class or force children to deny their family and heritage in order to succeed in a culturally alien school.

Kaiwi and Kahumoku (2006) found that the introduction of a Native Hawaiian approach to analyze literature, by acknowledging and validating students’ perspectives, really empowers them by demonstrating a sustained connection to ancestors, greater appreciation for parents and grandparents, and an increased desire to learn. Other researchers contend that CBE has also an emancipatory nature; it guides students in understanding that no single version of “truth” is total and permanent (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2010). However, for this, teachers should make authentic knowledge about different ethnic groups accessible to students, including increased concentration on academic learning tasks, insightful thinking; more caring, concerned, and humane interpersonal skills; better understanding of interconnections among individual, local, national, ethnic, global, and human identities; and acceptance of knowledge as something to be continuously shared, critiqued, revised, and renewed (Gay, 2010, p. 37).

Thus, to increase student success, it is imperative that teachers help their students to bridge the discontinuity between home and school cultures and contexts (Allen&Boykin, 1992). ACBE environment minimizes the students’ alienation as they attempt to adjust to the different “world” of school. To this effect Skutnabb-Kangas et al., (2009) suggest: “Marginalized peoples who undergo culturally and linguistically appropriate education are better equipped both to maintain and develop their cultures and to participate in the wider society” (p. xvii). It means that CBE is empowering because it enables students to be better human beings and more successful
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

In recent times, some Indigenous scholars and activists also reiterated that one key to the regeneration of the political power of their people and culture lies in a reorganization of political structures and educational systems to reflect Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning. Banks and Banks (2010) argue that if education is to empower marginalized groups, it must be transformative. For them, being transformative involves helping students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic actions. In this respect, Gilbert (2011) argues that CBE is mostly absent from current national curriculum and pedagogy because it has been assumed that if native language and culture is incorporated, then it must be delivered separately from other content areas which would require additional time and resources. It is important to note that sometimes teachers develop their own ethnocentric attitude towards students of a particular ethnic group and treat them differently, based on preoccupied notion of stereotyping. Pai and Adler (2001) emphasize the need for educators to be cognizant about other cultural beliefs and practices, writing:

It is essential for educators to know how or at what point the values held by the various ethnic groups may come into conflict with school goals…Navajos are said to prize group harmony and hence conformity to the group norm…a Navajo child may be helped to learn function differently in school and in the Navajo community. (p. 171)

So it can be suggested that it is imperative for teachers to understand not only how student’s ethnicity shapes students’ learning experiences, but also how the teachers’ own ethnicity shapes and determines how they categorize children as well as their classroom practices. Culture-based education is not only means of attending to prominent educational
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

issues, but it is also a pledge to respond to the specific needs of students, their families, and their communities.

Indigenous CBE in the Indian Sub-continent

Within the last two decades, many programs have been launched by nation-states in East Asia to honor the rich heritage of Indigenous people and to preserve it for future generations. In the new regional, national, and global contexts, Indigenous knowledge and heritage have been given priority in the national educational agenda of the Indian- sub-continent. In this regard, the forum of South Asian Nations, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has recognized the need for preserving the Indigenous knowledge and heritage in the region by adopting SAARC Agenda for Culture, 2005. With reference to honoring and preserving Indigenous knowledge and heritage, one of the major initiatives began on March 25, 2007 when SAAEC representatives stated: “We want to respect and recognize the identity of South Asian Indigenous People and ensure their social, political, economic and cultural rights in the constitution.” Since then, several culturally-appropriate programs for children are the top-curricular reforms of the member-states in the region.

It is also important to consider the historically diverse contexts of South Asian region when we talk about culture-based education practices in the Indian Sub-continent. Referring to the multiethnic diversity of the South Asian or the Himalayan region of South Asia, Mark Turin (2007) writes:

The greater Himalayan region, which extends for 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia’s most endangered languages. Moving across the region in alphabetical order, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh is home to 39,
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Bhutan has 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72. The entire Himalayan region is often described as one of the ten biodiversity ‘mega centers’ of the world. This stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, so the area should be thought of as a linguistic and cultural ‘mega center’ as well, and an important site for the common heritage of humanity. (p. 1)

Nepal

Nepal is a multilingual nation. Despite its small size, it is linguistically diverse. According to the 2001 census, there are 92 languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal. In this respect, it is worthwhile to refer to Turin (2007) who notes:

In Nepal, linguistic and cultural identities are closely interwoven, and many of the country’s indigenous peoples define themselves in large part according to the language they speak. Language is often used as a symbolic badge of membership in a particular community, and is a prominent emblem of pride in one’s social or ethnic identity. (p. 27)

It is important to note that since the restoration of democracy in 1990, the government of Nepal has realized the importance of Mother Tongue (MT) education in consonance with the UN declaration of 1951. Some of the steps the government has taken in this connection are reflected in its laws and acts. For the first time, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990) has made provisions for the right to gain primary education through diverse mother tongues. Accordingly, the National Commission for Language Policy (1992) strongly recommended the use of mother tongues as mediums of instruction at the primary level of education. It was followed by the seventh amendment of Education Act (2001) and different policy documents envisaged under the tenth National Plan such as Education for All (NCF, 2007).
Later, in consonance with the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990) and Education for ALL (EFA) National Program, the Government of Nepal adopted a policy to introduce different mother tongues as medium of instruction at primary level of education. It is believed that the use of the child’s mother tongue in school will develop a good home-school relationship and relieve him/her from psychological shock as the child can express his/her ideas well and communicate well if the classroom environment in his/her mother tongue and the subjects taught in class are dealt in his/her mother tongue (Cummins, 2000). In this context it is relevant to refer Anders-Baer et al, who state:

The dominant language medium of education prevents access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates…most indigenous peoples and minorities have to accept subtractive education where they learn a dominant language at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced, and later often replaced by the dominant language. (2008, p. 3).

Hence, it is important to promote Mother Tongue education at primary level in Nepal. It is also important to note that a large number of children drop out of school in Nepal due to various factors, one of them being obstacles with the language of instruction. Referring to the gap between home languages of children and the language of instruction, Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar (2010) argue that “it would therefore be appropriate to educate the children in their mother tongue in order to make the break between home and school as small as possible” (p. 51).

Although the existence of multiple languages in Nepal has long been recognized, there have been many shifts of policy concerning their recognition and usage within the education system. For example, the first education plan (NNEPC, 1956) adopted a policy of language transfer, whereas the second education plan (ARNEC, 1962) proposed Nepali as the medium of
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Instruction in public schools, as did subsequent education plans (NESP, 1970). It was only after the advent of democracy in 1990 that language issues in education came to the forefront. Consequently, the constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990; article 3:18:2) and the subsequent education plans (NEC, 1992; HEC, 2000) advocated mother tongue education.

With the Jomtein declaration (1990) and Dakar Framework for action (2000), the Government of Nepal endorsed Education For All (EFA) program (2004-09) to ensure equity in quality basic education for all Nepalese children. As a strategy, the EFA program adopted the use of students’ mother tongue as the medium of instruction from grades 1 to 3 in a monolingual situation, and from the grade 4 onward the medium is Nepali, as a strategy for the transitional bilingual education. In consequence of the stated new provisions of mother-tongue instruction, primary level textbooks for Social studies and Arithmetic were translated into five local and indigenous languages of the country, Maithili, Newari, Awadhi, Limbu and Tamang (National Curriculum Framework, 2007).

Prior to that, some of the important steps have already been initiated for mother tongue education during the Basic and Primary Education Project, Phase I (BPEP- I, 1991-2001). In the first phase of BPEP, seven local and indigenous languages, Newari, Maithili, Tharu, Awadhi, Limbu, Tamang and Bhojpuriwere introduced at primary level education as optional subjects. It is important to note that the initiation of mother-tongue education in the form of optional subjects proved to be a landmark achievement for mother-tongue education in Nepal. In the following years, curricula, textbooks, and teaching/learning materials were also prepared in local and indigenous languages for the first time in Nepal. Later, five more local and indigenous languages, Sherpa, Chamling, Bantawa, Magar and Gurung were further added in the list of mother-tongue education. As a result of all these measures, there are altogether twelve languages
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

(19 languages, based on personal communication with some government officials of Nepal) have so far been introduced as optional subjects in the different primary schools of more than 17 districts in the country. It is worthwhile to note that with the provision of mother-tongue education at primary levels as optional subjects gave impetus to many local and indigenous languages for revitalization and sustainability. Of many such languages which got revitalized, especially in the forms of their scripts, textbooks, and teaching materials, as a result of the provision of mother-tongue education in Nepal, Tharu language is one of them.

**The Tharus’ Struggle for Cultural-Based Education**

The Tharus community has one the highest illiterate levels among all the indigenous communities in the Indian sub-continent. They were oppressed, marginalized and exploited by colonial powers in the past, as well as by the current dominant group, in power in the region. This ethnic community is located in the southern part of Nepal and northern part of India. According to S. C. Verma (2010), “the approximate Tharus population is 28,287,147 in Nepal and about 169,209 in India” (p. 177). Although the Tharus also are found in small numbers in Bangladesh, their population is not known there yet.

Some scholars have given credit to the colonialism, modernization and the expansion of media and communication technology for the movements of Indigenous peoples and calling for their rights of self-determination, land and territorial ownership, and distinct identity across the globe (Kingsbury, 2008). However, the Tharu communities are known for their resilience and for living their Indigenous roots, despite all kinds of persecutions led by the colonial powers in the past and by the political powers of the dominant communities in the present. The Tharus have always lived with their indigenous roots by relying on themselves. In this regard, they took a major step for the literacy of the communities when they set up an organization, Backward
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Society Education (BASE) in January 1985. They founded it as a pioneering movement (Charpate Club) to fight against human exploitations within some of Nepal’s poorest communities. It is worthwhile but inspiring to note that the stated organization (BASE) emerged under the leadership of Mr. Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary, a social activist and member of the Tharu community, when a group of 34 youths raised NRS.735 (less than $ 11) through their cultural shows during the period of a festival, Maghi (Tharu’s New Year). The BASE is determined to fight against the exploitation of bonded labor and slavery, social and political discriminations, illiteracy and poverty of the Tharu people, and other marginalized communities of Nepal (http://nepalbase.org/). As I stated in the previous section that along with provision of mother-tongue education in local and indigenous languages, Tharus succeeded in educating their children in their own language and culture, one of their long cherished demands with the authority of Nepal. As one of Tharu language textbook writers, Laxman Tharu observes for their achievement:

Tharu communities tried to introduce education in their own language from long time and this time their efforts yield result after the education authority worked jointly, and since 2009, 23 primary schools in Tharu settlements in Chitwan district of Nepal, have been providing education to Indigenous Tharu children in their own language.

So it is evident that this is a very important development for the inclusion of marginalized linguistic and ethnic communities like Tharus into the basic educational system of Nepal.

India

In India, the concept of culturally appropriate education practices came into vogue along with its independent movement in the early 1930s, when Mahatma Gandhi emphasized for inclusion of local knowledge and skills to be incorporated in the place of then British education
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

system (Khubchandani, 2008; Mehta, 1976). After its independence, The Center for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) was established in India in 1979, for sustaining the country’s diverse linguistic and cultural heritage through culture-based education practices. Nonetheless, culture-based education did not get a real push until 1980s, when the National Policy of Education (1986) recognized the need of education to be culture-based, given India’s multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Now, the CCRT functions as an autonomous organization under the aegis of Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Its main thrust is to make students aware of the importance of culture in all development programs by conducting a variety of training programs for in-services teachers, teacher educators, educational administrators and students throughout the country. It conducts a variety of in-service teacher training programs by covering broad areas of interlinking education with culture, for development of the child’s personality-particularly in terms of helping the child to discover his/her latent talent - and to express it creatively. It also conducts various academic programs on Indian art and culture for foreign teachers and students. The center has adopted its motto to develop consciousness of the “Indian Cultural Heritage” through the utilization of local resources and community interaction. As it is stated, “for education to be effective and result-oriented, it has to be culture based, and it must take into account the cognitive, emotional and spiritual needs of the student”. It is further stated, “knowledge of culture plays a prominent role in democratic thinking: a democratic citizen is known for his ability to sift truth from false and he/she is more receptive to new ideas” (The Center for Cultural Resources and Training, India, 2010).

It is important to note that a local tribal culture-based education project, Janshala was launched in nine Indian states as a joint program of the Government of India and five UN
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO and ILO) for the universalization of primary education among educationally underserved communities in 1998. The Program covered nearly three million children, and 58,000 teachers in 18,000 schools. Out of 139 blocks more than 75 blocks had substantial tribal population. The proportion of tribal children was 33% of the total target group children in the project area. However, in a survey study, records collected in schools in the Janshala program areas indicated continuing high “dropout” rates among tribal children. A major reason for that was that in most states the medium of instruction was the regional language. Most tribal children did not understand the textbooks, which were generally in the regional language. The appointment of non-tribal teachers in tribal children’s schools was another problem: the teachers did not know the language the children speak and children did not understand the teacher’s language (Gautam, 2003; Paliwar & Mahajan, 2005).

Likewise, in July 2007, a project started in Indian state, Orissa. Under that project, in 200 schools, Indigenous (“tribal”) children from ten language groups are being taught through their mother tongues in the first grades, with materials collected from children, parents and teachers. Later sixteen more languages added in 2008 (Muthukumaraswamy, 2009, p. 5).

Bangladesh

In 2001, BRAC, a large NGO in Bangladesh, initiated a program of “Education for Indigenous Children” as Non-Formal Education Program (NFEP) in Bangladesh (over 30,000 classes). BRAC’s non-formal primary education program provides five-year primary education course in four years to poor, rural, disadvantaged children and drop-outs who cannot access formal schooling. Local and indigenous mother tongues are used as the medium of instruction in the classroom (SIL International, Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development - Mahidol University, and UNESCO Bangkok, n. d.). The program begins with a 4-month
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

preparatory phase in which mother tongue is used and all activities are oral. In the last 15 days of the preparatory phase Bangla, the second language, is introduced using the total physical response (TPR) approach. In Grade 1 approximately 80% of the activities are conducted in the children’s mother tongue and 20% in Bangla (Ryan, Jennings, & White, 2007, Aldeen, 2009). Moreover, teaching and reading materials are locally produced by focusing on the children’s heritage culture and their everyday experiences. Indigenous teachers receive pre-service and regular in-service training as well as stipends, which enable them to continue their own post-primary education. By the end of 2006 there were 2,139 schools for indigenous and/or linguistic minority children in which 52,940 children were enrolled including children with special needs (Ryan, Jennings, & White, 2007).

Bangladesh Adivashi Forum has recently translated some primary grade books (from grade 1 and 2) into five languages of small ethnic communities with the help of Action Aid supported by Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) (Aldeen, 2009). Prior to this, a local non-government organization ASHRAI was created in 1991. Since then, it has been working with the Adivashis of Bangladesh aiming at developing their self-help structures. It is concentrated in the Barind Tract in the north-west of Bangladesh where there are more than 700 thousand Adivashi people comprising of as many as 18 ethnic groups. It provides basic primary education up to grade three and training (survival, development, participation and protection) in 70 Adivashi villages where there are no such facilities. The schools are bilingual, with both Bangla and the major local dialects are used together for instructions (Aldeen, 2009).

Conclusion

There is no doubt about fact that there has been a worldwide awakening concerning the rights of Indigenous people. But Indigenous people also feel in danger of losing their cultural
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

heritage and distinct identity, in the race of cultural homogenization by the global dominant forces. The problems, issues and challenges of the Indigenous peoples are common all over the world. By referring to the challenges of the Indigenous peoples of Asia, Stavenhagen (2008) states, “Some of the most serious forms of human rights violations that indigenous peoples’ experience all over Asia are directly related to the rapid loss of indigenous lands and territories” (p. 309).

On the other hand, globally, educational systems have failed Indigenous students by undermining their human rights and academic equity. As a result, Indigenous students around the world suffer a lack of academic achievement and lose their innate enthusiasm for learning when subjected to schooling in its conventional colonial form (Battiste, 2002; Cooper, Batura, Warren & Grant, 2006; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Ezeife, 2002). The failure of Indigenous students in colonized circumstances is manifested in high dropout rates and an abiding sense of mistrust concerning the assimilationist and culturally insensitive educational systems to which they are been subjected to.

However, UNESCO has repeatedly called for incorporation of indigenous knowledge, skills and cultural heritage into mainstream education of nation states and for broader participation of indigenous and marginalized communities into education system worldwide. UNESCO has reiterated this call again in its 2003 education position paper, stating, “Education should raise awareness of the positive value of cultural [and linguistic] diversity, and to this end: curriculum [should be reformed] to promote a realistic and positive inclusion of the minority [or Indigenous] history, culture, language and identity” (p. 33).

In an era of globalization, a society that has access to multilingual and multicultural resources is advantaged in its ability to play an important social and economic role on the world
CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

stage. The challenge for educators and policy-makers around the world is to shape the evolution of national and global identity in such a way that inherent rich indigenous culture and heritage of societies to be preserved and honored, and the cultural, linguistic, and economic resources of the nation to be used for the betterment of human kind. Nonetheless, in the changed national and global contexts, it is evident that the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy is drawing much more attention of educationists in curricular reforms all across the globe. So it can infer that the prospect of indigenous culture-based mainstream education is bright.
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