

Teachers' Experience of using Tribal Children's Language in Classroom: A Collaborative Learning Perspective

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Abstract

The dominant models of pedagogy involve a unidirectional process where children are mere passive receptacles. Mismatch between a child's home and school languages further thwarts any possibility of bi-directionality. This paper is based on a study conducted in primary schools in the tribal blocks of Gajapati district, India, to explore the experiences of teachers while using children's home language in classrooms and to examine if this results in a change in a collaborative model of pedagogy. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers in Guma block that had 100% monolingual tribal students. Content analysis of the data revealed that only a few teachers were able to use the children's home language to create a learning space that was reciprocal, recursive, and collaborative. The theoretical framework was drawn from the social learning theory of Vygotsky, and works on intersubjectivity and collaborative learning by Matusov and Rogoff.

Keywords: Multilingual education (MLE), pedagogy, collaborative-learning, tribal, mother tongue

It is perhaps not difficult to imagine how it would be for a four-year-old to walk into a classroom for the first time and have the teacher speak in a language that the child barely understands. A pervasive sense of alienation and non-comprehension can come to define the child's experience. Not surprisingly, increasing linguistic homogenization in classrooms worldwide has been seen as resulting in a major casualty—increased dropout among children belonging to linguistically and socioculturally marginalized groups. The dropout thus caused has been aptly termed as “push out” (Mohanty 2009) since it is nothing but a forced eviction from the classrooms. However, as we try to understand the experience of children who face a mismatch between the home language and the school language, does it bother us as to what would be a teacher's experience of teaching in a class where she knows that what she says is barely understood by the students, or worse, due to the lack of a shared language, she has no way to ascertain what exactly have the children understood or not understood. If one subscribes to the models of pedagogy that see learning either

as a process of unilateral transmission by the teacher to the student or as a process of one-way assimilation by the children resulting from their exploration of the surrounding environment, one can be satisfied by only focusing on the child's experience, since in both the cases the child is either the sole receptacle or the lone constructor (Rogoff 1994). On the other hand, if one views learning as a collaborative exercise that is marked by reciprocity and mutual exchanges occurring in an intersubjective space, it becomes imperative to also try and understand the teachers' experiences too. Based on the assumption that the classrooms should strive towards being collaborative spaces where mediation and scaffolding can be made possible, this paper discusses the experiences of teachers teaching in Multilingual Education (MLE) and non-MLE schools in the tribal regions of Gajapati district (Guma block), Odisha. It also examines how teachers' view the inclusion of children's language in the classroom and if indeed they are able to use this inclusion to create a collaborative learning space for children and thereby bring about a change in the dominant unidirectional models of pedagogy. The paper

is based on a research conducted in Guma block of Gajapati district involving classroom observations and in-depth interviews with 13 teachers teaching in non-MLE, MLE, and MLE-Plus (Mohanty & Panda 2009)¹ schools comprising largely Saora tribe.

Importance of Including a Child's Language in a Collaborative Space

A formal learning setup in our country largely comprises students, a teacher, and a text, all of whom are historically and socioculturally located and may be seen as participants engaged in a joint endeavor. According to the sociocultural approach to learning and development, the learners and the teacher come together to form a collaborative, interactional space where both share responsibilities and the teacher plays largely a guiding role (Cole 1990; Matusov 2001; Rogoff 1994; Rogoff, Matusov, & White 1996). With its roots in the works of Vygotsky, who termed the social consciousness of the mind primary and the individual dimension its derivative and hence secondary (Vygotsky 1978), the sociocultural approach to learning locates learning and the formation of mind in the context of everyday activities and interactions. Taking the approach forward, various social cultural theorists have proposed the activity theory approach (Engestrom 1987; Leontiev 1981) that can help educationists look at formal systems of learning as located in goal-directed activity systems, where the teachers and the students can be viewed as having shared goals of activity. Based on the same approach, the learning setups can also be seen as comprising of a "community of learners", where learning happens as a process of transformation of the participants (Newman, Griffin, & Cole 1989; Rogoff 1990, 1994) in a goal-directed activity system. Both involve looking at learning as a collaborative endeavor that involves formation of an intersubjective space marked by shared goals or focus of attention, coordination of participants' contribution and human agency (Matusov 2001). However, for a community of learners to have shared goals and purposeful coordination of participating agents' contributions also requires a shared communication. The mismatch between a child's home and school language is undesirable in any model of pedagogy, be it

the transmission model or active construction by the child, since it is extremely difficult to develop a child's cognitive skills in a language in which her basic interpersonal communication skills are already weak or absent (Cummins 2000). However, in the case of collaborative model of teaching, this mismatch becomes particularly significant as it poses a severe threat to the possibility of establishing a shared communication and an intersubjective space, thereby threatening the very existence of a collaborative space. A collaborative learning space in a formal setup requires a more mature adult, i.e., a teacher who according to Rogoff (1994) would:

.....structure the activities in which the children are involved in ways that interest the children and allow them to participate with understanding of the purpose of the activity. (p. 214)

In the following sections, an attempt has been made to provide an insight into the experiences of teachers' teaching in tribal region schools as they transact with the students and also to see if they are able to use the children's home language to form a participatory and a collaborative space enabling the use of methods of learning such as adult- or peer-guided mediation, scaffolding, and spiraling that are informed by sociocultural development approach. However, before proceeding to the discussion of experiences of the teachers, a brief encapsulation of the methods employed for the present research has been presented.

Method

The study was conducted in the Guma block of Gajapati district, Odisha. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers teaching in different MLE, MLE-Plus, and non-MLE schools in the dominantly Saora-speaking regions of the Guma block. Of the 13 teachers interviewed, 5 were from non-MLE schools, 4 from MLE schools and 4 from MLE-Plus schools. The languages used as medium of instruction in MLE and MLE-Plus schools in this region are Saora (the local tribal language) and Odia (the dominant state language); while in non-MLE schools it is only Odia. It may also be noted that of the total 13 teachers interviewed, 6 teachers had the experience of having taught in both MLE and non-MLE schools. The non-MLE teachers were interviewed to obtain a contrasting picture of the classroom where the child's home language differed from that used in school, and to gain an insight into teachers' difficulties, if any, in such a situation. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of content analysis.

¹As a part of project funded by the Bernard Van leer foundation, some of the MLE schools in Gajapati and Phulbani districts were selected for special intervention based on a cultural psychology framework under the directorship of Professor Ajit K. Mohanty and Dr Minati Panda in 2008. Based on the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), specific activities and materials were developed involving the community, and community libraries were also setup. These schools are referred to as the "MLE Plus Schools."

Result, Analysis, and Interpretation

The narratives of the teacher provided significant insight into the teachers' own experiences of teaching and the corresponding dynamics in the classroom. In line with the aim of the research, the resulting themes have been discussed under two broad themes: (1) the teachers' experience vis-à-vis the use of language and culture in the classroom, and (2) the extent to which the inclusion of the two creates a space for collaborative classroom where development of more abstract concepts is made possible.

Teachers' Experience of Classroom Interaction When Children's Home Languages are Included or Excluded

There were several echoing narratives that emerged among both tribal and non-tribal teachers teaching Saora tribe students across the MLE, MLE-Plus and non-MLE schools pertaining to the use of the child's home language in the classroom. There appeared to be an overwhelming recognition of the importance of including the child's home language in classroom, especially in the case of tribal children, most of whom were first-generation school goers. None of the 13 teachers, irrespective of their own tribal or non-tribal antecedents or their teaching experience in MLE, MLE-Plus or non-MLE school, expressed that a tribal child should only be taught in the dominant state language. Their support for the inclusion of tribal child's home language appeared to result largely from their own experiences or from those of their colleagues. The major experiential themes emerging from the teachers' interviews have been discussed below:

Establishing the initial connect

One of the key themes that emerged in all the teachers' responses across schools was the recognition that knowledge of the child's home language played an instrumental role in establishing an initial point of connect between the teacher and the students. The statement below reflects this acknowledgement.

Since childhood they (Saora children) speak in their language and suddenly when they go to school and are taught in other language, they do not come to school out of fear. When their language is used, tribal children come to school with interest. Earlier they used to be scared of teachers, but this fear goes from their mind when they know that their person is in school who will teach in their language. (Tribal teacher, MLE school)

The above statement was made by a tribal teacher who is nearing retirement and has over three decades of teaching experience in tribal area schools, beginning from the times

when the Saora tribe children were forced to learn in Odia to the present scenario where he is now the headmaster of an MLE school. While on the one hand, the statement brings out a sensitive teacher's understanding of the children's discomfort, on the other hand it also reveals a realization that it is not the mere fact of him being a tribe that makes students see him as their own. It is only in conditions where the student and the teacher have the possibility of speaking a "common" language that a sense of "community" is forged. Dewey (1966) pointed toward the shared root of words "common," "community," and "communication." According to Dewey (1966):

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community and communication. [People] live in a community in a virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. (p. 5)

Thus, lack of a shared language in a classroom can be seen as leading to an immediate disconnect a child experiences with the school. Several scholars have reported this disconnect and the subsequent difficulties faced by the children in various parts of the world (Aikio-Puoskari 2009; Heugh 2000, 2009; Mohanty 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas 2007; Tamang, Hough, & Nurmela 2009). However, as can be inferred from the above statement, this fear or sense of discomfort does not necessarily escape the notice of a teacher and as is evident in the statement of another teacher below, the lack of a shared language may create a parallel sense of discomfort in a teacher:

I have been in this school for the last 10 years. I have seen how close the students feel to the MLE teachers. They talk with them, share their problems. They would even force Mahendra [a community worker]² to play them. Now I have also picked up Saora. I cannot read and write Saora like MLE teachers, but can speak. Children help me when I get stuck ... children speak with me more freely now. (Non-tribal teacher, MLE-Plus school)

The above statement clearly brings out the sense of alienation a teacher might experience if she is unable to understand the children's language, and if one were to examine the statement more carefully, it begins to strike that this alienation results not

²As part of the MLE-Plus experiment, a few members from the village community were provided extensive training and were employed as community workers in the school. The community workers helped maintain an organic and sustained link with the community. In several MLE-Plus schools, they were also given teaching responsibilities especially for younger children in grades I and II.

merely from the “lack of shared language” but more so, from the awareness of what “shared language can do.” As the teacher describes how the children act with other teachers who can speak in the children’s language, one can see how inclusion of children’s language and it becoming the shared language can create a collaborative space where the students and teacher become co-participants who share and play together. Further, the learning of the children’s language by the non-tribal teacher and the acknowledgment that she is helped by the children in the process also establish the classroom space as comprising a community of learners in which the teacher is also a learner. In contrast, in situations where the teachers have had no exposure to such mutually constructed collaborative spaces, they may still recognize the importance of including child’s home language for the purpose of concept development, but still fall short of making a shift in pedagogy from transmission to co-participation. The following responses of two non-MLE teachers, one non-tribal and the second tribal, help elucidate:

Our language and their language is very different ... interaction does not happen properly. Our school is non-MLE and I also know very little Saora, which I sometimes try to use. But there is another teacher in the school from community, so I take his help or help from class V and VI students to translate ... (if) we don’t do this, they will stay a little back. (Non-tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

No, they don’t understand Odia, so I teach in Odia and then have to translation. I translate in Saora, I have to do it. (Tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

The response of the tribal teacher in a non-MLE school, who as a student studied in a “submersion” model school and now happens to teach in one, a model where children belonging to linguistic minority groups are “submerged” in the dominant language with a choice to either sink or swim (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984), is particularly telling. While his own difficulties as a student may have led him to empathize with his students and use translation, the home language of children thus introduced by way of translation does not reflect a shift in the pedagogic style. The statements above also mark a movement from the experiences of the teachers in establishing initial connect to actual “learning-focused transactions.”

Ease in understanding the child’s difficulties through child’s home language

Another important role of child’s home language as acknowledged by all the teachers, irrespective of whether they were in MLE or non-MLE schools, was pertaining to the role of child’s home language in enabling teachers to assess the

academic difficulties faced by the child. Two excerpts from interviews of two teachers, one from MLE-Plus school and one from non-MLE school help elucidate this emerging theme:

Whatever subject I am teaching, after teaching I ask the questions and they usually answer, so when they don’t I know that they haven’t understood. (Tribal teacher, MLE-Plus school)

Now contrast the above statement with the following:

They don’t ask doubts ... they can’t speak the language. (Non-tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

Even as both the statements point toward didactic models of teaching where the teacher teaches and the students are expected to receive, it is evident that if the child’s home language finds a place in school, it is easier for the teacher to ascertain if the child is learning or not. However, if one were to try and imagine a collaborative classroom where an involved teacher is designing activities for the children to participate, interact, struggle, and in the process learn, the matter of inclusion of child’s language would no longer be about a teacher’s ease or difficulty in understanding a child’s difficulty. The sociocultural approach to learning conceptualizes the role of teacher as a guide who can not only determine the children’s “actual levels of development” but also explore their levels of potential development by providing assistance (Vygotsky 1978). Given that language not only serves to organize a child’s thought but is also a means of establishing a connect between the child and the surrounding world, a lack of shared communication between the student and the teacher forecloses the possibility of any such collaborative space where a child’s journey from what she can do on her own to what she can do with assistance can be made possible.

The illustration of the collaborative learning space as described above was provided by the non-tribal teacher in the MLE-Plus school who had reported that she learnt Saora to connect better with the students. In most government schools in tribal regions of Guma block, the number of teachers in a primary school is usually two or three leading to multiple grades being seated in a single classroom. The school where the aforementioned teacher taught was a two-teacher school consisting of five grades. The teacher shared that to ensure that children do not get bored and distract others, she either assigned reading or writing tasks to the grades whom she did not plan to take a lesson with, or tried to design an activity in which children across grades could participate. Given the graded form of activities themselves (e.g., sorting animal flashcards based on categories like wild and domestic animals that requires identification of animals, awareness of where they are found,

and the understanding of the concept of what constitutes domestic and wild), the younger children could only do some parts of the activities by themselves and required assistance by the teacher or the older students. The participation in these activities as witnessed during the observations was marked with tremendous noise, arguments, playful banter, and regular calling out to the teacher by some or the other student who felt stuck. The gain of these exercises was that the children of grade I who otherwise would not have engaged with some of these concepts as they were not covered in their syllabus also developed these higher concepts. The teacher added that these exercises would not have been possible had she not learnt Saora as the younger children did not understand Odia sufficiently and for her to be able to assist them she needed to know where exactly they were stuck.

Role of child's language in facilitating use of activities and cultural references

As seen in the above example of a "teacher- and peer- mediated" activity, the use of children's language in the classroom played a significant role in enabling the teacher to make the activity more collaborative and recursive for the children as they listened to each other and built on each other's inputs.

The incorporation of "activities" in classroom pedagogy has gained much impetus after the release of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005. According to the NCF (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT] 2005):

Activity is the heart of the child's attempt to make sense of the world around him/her. Therefore, every resource must be deployed to enable children to express themselves, handle objects, explore their natural and social milieu, and to grow up healthy. (p. x)

However, before proceeding to examine the teachers' experience vis-à-vis the use of activities, it is important to note the theoretical difference in the use of activities in a constructivist and a collaborative classroom. Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996), terming the constructivist model a "pendulum swing" to child-run instruction as opposed to the teacher-run instruction in a transmission model, describe it as a:

one sided approach in which children are active constructors of knowledge and adult involvement is seen as a potential impediment to learning. In the children-run model, children discovering reality on their own or through interaction with peers is the ideal: children become the active agents in learning and the adult world is either seen as passive source of materials

or as negative influence that can stunt the budding of children's own potential. Children are expected to discover and extend the knowledge, skills and technologies of human history among themselves. (p. 395)

In a collaborative model, however, while children continue to be seen as active agents, both adults and children share the responsibility of learning. The adults are expected to assist the child's learning by enabling child's participation, often along with other peers, in an appropriately designed activity. According to Dewey (1938):

Education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group. As the most mature member of the group, (the teacher) has a peculiar responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and intercommunications which are the very life of the group as a community. The tendency to exclude the teacher from a positive and leading share in the direction of the activities of the community of which he is a member is another instance of reaction from one extreme to another. (pp. 65–66)

The excerpts above show how mere inclusion of activities, as in the case of child's home language, by itself does not necessarily point towards a collaborative classroom. However, the experiences shared by the teachers revealed that the availability of children's home language played an important role in determining if the activity remains demonstrative or allows the possibility of a meaningful collaboration, especially in case of didactic models of teaching where the discourse is unidirectional. For instance, most teachers from non-MLE schools, even as they frequently reported using activities, failed to cite a single activity in which the children could work together in a collaborative manner that required building on each other's contribution. A non-MLE teacher, when asked about how they used activities, shared:

We use activities like charts, flashcards or whatever we find in that area like bamboo or any other such thing. We show these children and ask them to name. (Non-tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

Another non-MLE teacher shared a similar use of activity:

While teaching shapes of geometrical figures like triangle, rectangle, circle, we can use a pin board that has an equidistant pins placed on it, then using an elastic band we can show triangle and other different types of shapes and give them an idea. (Non-tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

The activities mentioned above by the teachers, far from being reflective of constructivist or collaborative pedagogy, appear

to be demonstrative and deep-rooted in a didactic approach. The coinage “learning by doing” that is popularly used to describe activity approach can be seen getting effectively transformed into “teaching by showing.” The communication barrier created by the exclusion of child’s home language becomes more pronounced in teachers’ narratives when they struggle to relate child’s school knowledge to her everyday living experience. In an attempt to make meaning of his experience, a non-tribal teacher explained:

When the child takes birth, for the first four–five years before coming to school, he stays at home. He receives a lot of education in home and from the surroundings ¼ like different types of animals, birds, and other things that they see in their environment. They also go with their parents to the land and see how cultivation happens. But when we teach in Odia and name these familiar things in Odia, the child will not know what we are referring to, in order to talk about them we must talk in Saora. Since I do not know Saora, it is difficult for me to talk about what child does at home, with family¼. (Non-tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

The difficulties that the non-tribal teachers experience in making the classroom experience participatory and meaningful may lead one to assume that once the child’s language is brought inside the nature of the classroom transforms. The next section explores this assumption by focusing exclusively on the narratives of the Saora-speaking teachers of MLE and MLE-Plus schools.

It is important to note here, that the theme is not an acknowledgement or a confirmation of the argument that a teacher must necessarily know a child’s language in order to be able to use the child’s context and activities meaningfully in the classroom. This theme reflects the concern among the teachers in non MLE school themselves that not knowing the language makes them unable to do so. The concern therefore in some ways again reflects the asymmetry inherent in a transmission model of pedagogy where the teachers’ centrality and the unidirectionality of the discourse is the norm. This unidirectionality makes it impossible for anything that a teacher does not know to be used. In other words, a non MLE paradigm is thus indicative of the larger insensitivity of the transmission model towards what the child brings to the classroom, including her experiences or language. In a model where the child’s role is confined to that of a receiver and not a collaborator, and the teacher’s role is confined to that of one who transmits and never the one who also learns, it becomes extremely important what a teacher knows and can thereby use.

Does Shared Communication Always Lead to Collaborative Classrooms?

A feeling of collaboration can only develop if the students and the teachers who have come to form the community of learners can come to a shared sense of purpose, feel involved in an activity which they feel is authentic, and be able to carry out a shared communication that involves listening to one another, responding, debating, disagreeing, reconciling, and in the process build on what each individual brings in (Matusov 2000). The attempts in a collaborative endeavor do not end with a sense of having collectively participated. A journey collective as well as individual must be made possible in such a participation, a journey from the everyday to abstract, a journey from what one can do by oneself alone and what can be accomplished through assistance. An invocation of Vygotskian concepts of “everyday,” “scientific,” and the “zone of proximal development” becomes necessary if we have to ensure that “collaboration” does not become an end in itself, else we would be faced with classroom transactions where children do happily play, sing, dance, or enact but in the end gain little in terms of conceptual development. For instance, a tribal teacher teaching in an MLE school talked about an activity that he used with children and as he talked, he enthusiastically drew illustrations on a piece of paper (see Figure 1):

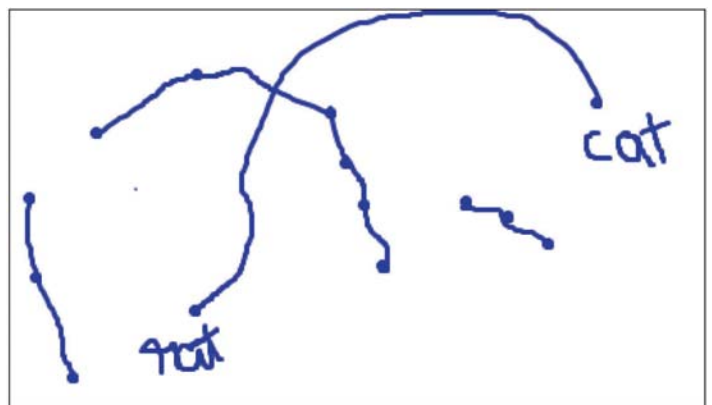


Fig. 1: The Diagram Drawn by the Teacher to Illustrate the Math Activity

I make children play a game of cat and mouse. One child becomes cat and tries to catch other children who play the role of rats. The children try to run away from the catch as the catch tries to catch all of them one by one ¼ (he picks up a piece of paper and begins to draw with a pen) ¼ like this ¼ one by one all the rats are caught. (Tribal teacher, MLE school)

Later, responding to the purpose of the activity, he explained that once the game was over, he asked the children who had assumed the role of cats to tell how many students they had

caught and when they try to remember, they count. The children might have undoubtedly enjoyed a game of running and catching outside in the open but whether this activity makes for collaborative learning needs to be examined in keeping with the parameters outlined in the opening paragraph of this section. In terms of a shared sense of purpose, the authenticity or the relevance of the activity and the space for coordinated and recursive participation among the members, the activity appears to fail on all counts. The children when told they can play, play without an awareness of a non-playing objective, i.e., the sole objective during the course of the activity is to catch one another. In terms of relevance, the activity fails to establish in the perception of the participants, a meaningful relationship between the participation in activity and the shared academic goal, which the teacher later informed was "learning how to count." Therefore, even as the students may have enthusiastically participated, or in Matusov's words their "engagement may have been authentic," the activity failed to be so. Furthermore, the activity involved no degree of recursive communication where children would have felt it necessary to talk to another, observe, react, and complement each other's efforts, and thus also fails to create an intersubjective space. Thus, at the end of such an activity if at all children are able to tell the number of students they caught, the cognition that gets invoked is eidetic memory and not principles underlying numeracy.

Therefore, returning to Vygotsky, it is important to understand what a formal classroom setup aims to obtain. Beginning with "everyday concepts," Vygotsky sees them as developing from day-to-day life experiences and as being "characterized by a lack of conscious awareness" (Vygotsky 1987, p. 190). They are characterized more by spontaneity than volition. The development of scientific concepts, on the other hand, "begin in the domain of conscious awareness and volition" (Vygotsky 1987, p. 220), the key features being generality, systematic organization, conscious awareness, and volition. Outlining the link between the two, Vygotsky added:

The link between these two lines of development reflects their true nature. This is the link of the zone of the proximal development and actual development ¼ Scientific concepts restructure and raise spontaneous concepts to a higher level, forming their zone of proximal development. (1987, p. 220)

Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to locate cognitive development and learning in a social interactive context. He maintained that a child follows the adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. He called

the difference between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without guidance the "zone of proximal development."

Referring to the ZPD as a metaphor for teaching and learning mediation that occurs between the learner and the more capable peer or adult guide, he reasons that since the individual's activity is a system within a system of social relations, it cannot exist outside these relations (Cole 1985, p. 151).

The ZPD's role is also crucial in transcending the conceptual distance between knowledge that is embedded in everyday context and that which requires more abstract, context-free, and complex thinking. According to Vygotsky (1987, pp. 168–169):

The development of the scientific concept, a phenomenon that occurs as a part of the educational, constitutes a unique form of systematic co-operation between the teacher and the child. The maturation of the child's higher mental functions occurs in this cooperative process, that is, it occurs through the adult's assistance and participation.

Thus, it is in this framework of systematic cooperation between the child and the teacher that a collaborative space develops and the child moves toward more independent, willful, and higher-level thinking. Let us now look at another teacher's experience with an activity to see how much of a systematic cooperation and subsequent movement from every day and scientific are made possible when the teachers and students share a common language.

When I teach about "plus," I take leaves of small stones or bamboo sticks and then by adding more or removing some, show how it is done. Then I ask the children to do and when they can't I show again ¼ I explain and repeat till they are able to do it. (Tribal community worker, MLE-Plus school)

The activity described above by the teacher involved a shared goal and appeared authentic in terms of its relation to the outside world of experience where children are occasionally required to collect bamboo sticks for various purposes at home. However, what is reported as lacking are the coordinated efforts and struggles of the participants along with an absence of any kind of reflexivity. On occasions where the children are unable to successfully accomplish the task, the teacher does not guide, give hints, or make children reflect on their own actions and thinking. As appears from the teacher's narrative, the other children too are not encouraged to help a struggling child. Consequently, the process of metacognition remains uninitiated. Thus, at the end of the activity even if the child is able to successfully perform the addition task, the fact that the same

was achieved by way of repeated demonstrations and not through genuine attempts toward encouraging a recursive and a reflexive dialog between the students and the teachers, the learning thus arrived at reflects a memorization of the formula and not a “mathematical thinking.” The classroom fails to become a collaborative space since the efforts of two or more individuals do not at any point complement or conflict each other. The space fails to become a “social learning” space in any meaningful way. In case of inclusion of child’s cultural context, the interviews revealed that the inclusion was more in the form of content rather than as a pedagogic tool facilitating collaborative practices:

In MLE and MLE plus, the books which have been developed and the TLM which has been prepared for activities has been taken from their environment. The things used at home, in their lives have been included in the form of pictures. According to me their environment and culture is so important, that when the children will see the books, their teacher will explain them this is this. (Tribal teacher, non-MLE school)

However, there was little mention from him or other teachers of how by citing cases from what exists in their environment, the children can be guided toward a system of abstractions or generalizations. The reference to cultural context was only in terms of examples rather than a stepping stone toward a discursive process. The teachers talked about making references to the marriage practices, local festivals, and local occupations but unfailingly added that “teaching them about their own culture” was the guiding objective. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of tribal children learning about their culture and local knowledge systems, one also needs to be cautioned that an approach of teaching that does not create an opportunity for further cognitive engagement also runs the risk of constraining academic discourse, where every day and scientific concepts get frozen into two insulated compartments. Activities and cultural experiences offer immense possibilities of enabling academic discourse as demonstrated very effectively in a study by Panda and Cole (2007) where they argue that:

Various aspects of complex mathematical concepts can be evoked by bringing in select cultural activity to the class and making explicit the network of “as if” assumptions that underlie the concepts evoked by these activities both in the realm of its everyday use and the academic use. (p. 7)

The use of activities and cultural context in the case of most MLE teachers, however, can be seen as conforming to the old “transmission” model of learning. The support for the fact that the existing model of teaching–learning in these schools is

still largely didactic also comes from the fact that if it were not so, as NCF 2005 itself puts it, there would have been “mutuality to the genuine construction of knowledge” (NCERT 2005, p. iii) and the teachers too would have learned in the process. However, most of the teachers reported that they had learnt in the process of teaching. Though, two non-tribal teachers acknowledged having learnt the language, only one of them acknowledged the contribution of students in learning. In case of the other teacher, the language had been learnt outside the classroom with an aim to teach and connect more effectively rather than being learnt in a process of a collaborative participation. The few examples that some teachers did manage to cite when asked about their own learning that happened as a result of their interaction with the students were all content based, such as a learning a new poem or a song or a word. This is not to say that one does not realize the importance of such learning; in fact, this learning, despite its limited nature, still points toward a participatory involvement of children in the class. However, if one were to go by the nature and aim of this participation, as discussed in the preceding sections, this kind of participation still falls short of becoming a joint endeavor where both the teacher as well as the students challenge themselves and venture out into uncertain terrains, engaging in systematic ways of inquiry, posing questions to each other, and in the process both reaching a new juncture that is characterized not just by addition of new content but more so by advanced and nuanced ways of addressing conceptual problems. Regarding the existing systems of MLE schools, it can thus be said that the process of unfolding, struggling, and then progressing with guidance remains unexplored, and the scientific concepts fostered rather than acquired. Such a process of teaching learning is clearly not in line with Vygotskian formulation where:

Scientific concepts are not simply acquired or memorized by the child and assimilated by his memory but arise and are formed through an extraordinary effort of his own thought. (Vygotsky 1987, p. 176)

Conclusion

While studies across the countries have conclusively proved MLE to be beneficial for the students (Ramirez, Sandra & Ramey, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Report of the Ethiopian study by Heugh, Benson, Bogale, & Yohannes 2007; Mohanty 1982a, 1982b, 1990a, 1990b; Mohanty & Babu 1983; Mohanty, & Perregaux, 1997; and several others), it is important to examine if the inclusion of language, despite its obvious benefits, has led to a paradigm shift in how the implementers view pedagogy or does language gets confined to an intervening

variable that brings its advantages but without any change in how pedagogy is looked at. The study cited in this paper was aimed at examining the teachers' experiences of using tribal children's home language in the classroom and also exploring if the teachers' were able to realize and capture the potency of such a powerful tool in creating collaborative classrooms. The interviews with teachers revealed that while inclusion of language was unanimously viewed as advantageous for classroom teaching-learning process, its utility remained confined to a transmission model of teaching. The teachers were still found to be struggling to see themselves as co-participants who could use children's home language not just to transmit textbook content, but instead to establish a mutually enriching dialog with the students. As one attempts to understand the MLE experience from the teachers' perspective, it becomes imperative to look at the MLE theories or models that inform such perceptions. Panda (2011) has identified one of the core problems of MLE programs in India, the idea of "bridging" which she terms as an inaccurate interpretation of Jim Cummins work.

This led to a modelling of MLE programmes around the issues of bridging that inappropriately translated Jim Cummin's linguistic interdependence theory into a practice of two "roads" to learning (again, improperly linked to BICS and CALP), one leading to the other or one making the other intellectually accessible. (p. 1)

The MLE programs in India by failing to establish multilinguality as an objective³ or identifying language as pedagogic tools sans hierarchy have resulted in teachers reducing the use of local language in classroom to mere reciting of poems or songs, or translating difficult Odia words into Saora when children fail to understand. A child's home language is rarely allowed to become the language of academic discourse, thus the classrooms remain essentially didactic. The ease experienced by teachers in establishing a connect with the tribal children and in understanding their difficulties is rarely transformed into establishing a mutually engaging academic dialog. The vision of a collaborative classroom where the teachers and students will jointly learn thus remains a promise only partially redeemed.

³In the two states, in which the MLE programs have been formally introduced in select districts, i.e., Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, both follow a transition model of MLE where the child's home language is used only in very early years of schooling and its extent of usage is progressively reduced as the relative percentage of the usage of dominant state language increases. The details of the two MLE programs can be seen in the MLE status reports of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha by the National Multilingual Education Resource (Author *et al.*, 2009a, Author *et al.*, 2009b).

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