

A Qualitative Study on Teaching Indigenous and Cultural Communities in Zamboanga, Southern Philippines

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative study examines teacher perspectives and teaching practices in diverse cultural communities in Zamboanga City, Philippines. The study utilized document analysis and interviews as data collection. The study revealed that teachers who teach in diverse communities recognize the importance of indigenization and contextualization, although these practices are limited.*

KEYWORDS - *indigenous peoples, cultural communities, diversity, multicultural education*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is home to various ethno-linguistic groups, migrants, indigenous peoples (IPs), and cultural communities. Particularly, Zamboanga City in Western Mindanao, Southern Philippines, is home to the Chavacano ethnolinguistic group, the Bisaya and Tausug ethnic groups, and the Sama, Yakan, Bajau, and Subanen IP groups.

The state of education, especially for these communities, is now an interest in research. Grounded with legal basis from the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, and Republic Act No. 10533 on enhancing basic curriculum, and other relevant laws, there is a strengthening of education for IPs and cultural communities. To support education for IPs and cultural groups, the research on teaching diverse students, like Multicultural Education literature, an examination of teachers' perspectives and practices is necessary in the enrichment of the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples (IP) curriculum, Madaris/ Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education Program, Alternative Learning System (ALS), and teaching in cultural communities in southern Philippines.

In addition to the growing literature on the topic, this paper examined the historical and legal basis of IP Education, recent developments, and teaching in cultural communities. The paper explored teachers' views on diversity and their teaching practices in indigenous and cultural communities. It will present themes and concerns of teachers teaching such communities.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 LEGAL BASES OF IP EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Prior to the Twentieth Century, various terms were used to describe native groups. In the Philippines, agencies such as the Philippine Assistant on National Minorities (PANAMIN) use terms such as "national minorities" and "indigenous cultural communities" to describe and acknowledge distinct cultural groups in the

Philippines. It has only been in recent decades that the term “Indigenous peoples” has been formally and officially used to solidify the distinctions of cultural groups in the country (Paredes, 2018).

Building on this recognition, the rights and recognition and promotion of the rights of indigenous cultural communities within the framework of national unity and development are enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution under Section 22 of Article II on Declaration of Principles and State Policies. This is supported by Article XIV on Education under Section 2 (4) on the encouragement of non-formal, informal, and indigenous systems that respond to community needs. Other relevant provisions in the Constitution are Article IX on Local Government, Section 15, and Section 20, creating autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and Cordilleras, and legislative powers over ancestral domains, educational policies, and preservation and development of cultural heritage.

Besides the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the Republic Act No. 8371, or the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, provides under Chapter V, Section 28, a complete, adequate, and integrated system of education. In the same law, Chapter VI on Cultural Integrity, Section 30 provides rights to education:

The State shall provide equal access to various cultural opportunities to the ICCs/IPs through the educational system, public or private cultural entities, scholarships, grants, and other incentives without prejudice to their right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions by providing education in their own language, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children/youth shall have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State (Republic Act No. 8371).

In response to these bases in law, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) was organized to carry out the implementation of the IPRA law. Specific to education, the Department of Education (DepEd) became more responsive in the development and integration of the IPRA law in the national curriculum. In contextualizing K to 12 Curriculum and recognizing indigenous peoples, DepEd issued the IP Education Curriculum Framework in 2015 through DepEd Order No. 32, S.2015, or Adopting the Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework (Republic of the Philippines, 2015). This meant that the rights concept is not just a topic to be integrated but applied to policy-making (Victor & Yano, nd).

Under the IPed Curriculum Framework, the curriculum is designed to enable learners to be culture bearers, with the right to self-determination, and able to interact with other cultures. It shall be culturally-appropriate and responsive according to indigenous communities’ ancestral domain, the community’s worldview, and cultural institutions. It respects spirituality, identity, and languages. It will enrich Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Indigenous Learning Systems (ILS). In the teaching-learning process, the curriculum recognizes the appropriate participation of culture bearers and IKSP holders. It also recognizes the ancestral domain as a primary learning environment and space, and the community’s guidance in designing learning activities. The materials and learning resources for learners shall be in line with indigenized content and teaching-learning processes using the mother-tongue and materials such as artifacts like stories, dances, songs, musical instruments, and the like. Classroom assessments shall use the tools of design and use that address the needs with community participation (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2015).

Among the pronouncements of the DepEd is establishing schools for indigenous peoples in Mindanao and in its Regions, with a target of 251 schools in SY 2016-2017 (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2016). Besides opening new schools, DepEd has already recognized private schools for indigenous peoples for the first batch in 49 sites in the country (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2014). Across Mindanao, the DepEd conducted trainings to empower teachers and has also developed the Indigenous Peoples Participation Framework (IPPF) to support the Teacher Effectiveness and Competencies Enhancement Project (TEACEP).

These recent IP developments were preceded by the Madrasah Education Program, a comprehensive program, offers support for private *madaris* (schools), implements the Refined Elementary Madrasah Curriculum, to provides Muslim learners in public and private schools with education opportunities within the context of their cultures (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2016). Earlier than this, in 2001, the Republic Act 9155, providing for the Alternative Learning System (ALS), established alternative ways to provide basic education for out-of-school Children, youth, and adults. The legal bases and development of IPed, ALIVE, and ALS programs are a recognition of the need to advance teaching that matches the cultural diversity and differences of students.

2.2 TEACHING CULTURAL AND DIVERSE STUDENTS

Looking at the trends in the Philippines and elsewhere, there is a call for making curriculum and instruction sensitive to the needs and backgrounds of students, following Multicultural Education and its principles. While teaching cultural and diverse classes is not new, the term “Multicultural Education” became popular to mean a concept, process, or reform movement to make education responsive to students’ needs and backgrounds. But focusing on the curriculum, many teachers become apprehensive when they hear the multicultural curriculum (Cordeiro, Reagan, & Martinez, 1994).

The work of Manning and Baruth (2009) provides considerations in planning a curriculum. Some of the guidelines for developing a Multicultural curriculum are the following: consider students’ socioeconomic status, religion, gender, sexual orientation, culture, language, and whenever possible use these differences in designing curriculum; use an interdisciplinary approach, in which topics are addressed in more than one curricular area; use a variety of instructional approaches- ones that reflect how students think, organize learning, and compete or cooperate in learning activities; focus on affective and psychological gains, rather than cognitive gains; and make maximum use of community resources, cultural support groups, and social service (Manning & Baruth, 2009). In support of this, Banks (2006) considered a transformative curriculum to teach critical thinking and knowledge construction to students. It is not merely by integrating or infusing content. It should help students with the ability to make reflective decisions for personal problems and influence public policy (Banks, 2006).

In the discussion of curriculum, the teacher plays a significant role in implementation of the curriculum. An effective transformative curriculum is implemented by teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitude for knowledge construction (Banks, 2006). When it comes to the preparation and professional development of teachers, their beliefs about the construction of learning and diversity can affect learning (Cordeiro, Reagan, & Martinez, 1994). To this, James Banks’ knowledge requirements or his Four Knowledge Categories of effective multicultural teachers: knowledge of the major paradigm, knowledge of the major concepts, historical and cultural knowledge of the major ethnic groups, and pedagogical knowledge to adapt curriculum and instruction to the unique needs of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socio-class groups (Banks, 1999). From these, Banks (1999) suggests that teachers must acquire knowledge ranging from principles of Multicultural Education, the knowledge of histories and cultural backgrounds of students, and the knowledge of pedagogy that fits into the needs of students.

Completing the critical role of teachers, Sabzalian (2019) also emphasizes that youth engagement plays a crucial role in recognizing and enriching indigenous communities. Incorporating indigenous studies into the curriculum, particularly as part of citizenship education, allows learners not only to appreciate and affirm their cultural identity but also to cultivate a civic sense of responsibility towards their own cultural communities. Thus, while teachers serve as key facilitators of multicultural and inclusive education, empowering learners to engage actively with indigenous knowledge and practices ensures that curriculum development becomes both transformative and culturally sustaining.

Though the Philippines has made great efforts in recognizing and implementing indigenous peoples' education in the national curriculum, persistent challenges remain. Butil (2020) identified several factors

influencing the learning competencies of indigenous pupils in English, Mathematics, and Science. The study revealed that learners' performance in these subjects is shaped by socio-economic factors, parental educational attainment, family income, family size, and physical facilities. While teacher and peer interaction were noted to have a positive influence, inadequate and substandard facilities continued to hinder meaningful learning.

These challenges were further magnified during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As the Department of Education highly emphasized that learning will continue in different alternative modalities, there has been a rise in hindrances, especially for indigenous learners. In Buenaflor et al. (2023) study on indigenous learners in one of the public schools in the country, various hindrances have been identified that contribute to indigenous learners' difficulty in continuing and accessing learning, such as financial instability, transportation difficulties, lack of access to learning resources, and language barriers, all of which limits their ability to participate fully in remote and modular learning.

Although some of these challenges and hindrances have emerged from localized and time-bound circumstances, they have shown the recurring struggles experienced by indigenous learners and teachers in the teaching-learning process. These realities highlight the need for sustained and context-sensitive interventions to ensure that education for indigenous communities is not only accessible but also equitable and culturally responsive.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper examined documents, literature, and narratives to answer teaching in cultural and indigenous communities. Interviews were conducted with a DepEd official and five teachers teaching kindergarten and elementary in different areas in Zamboanga City. Of the five teachers, two were handling Chavacano (the majority group) in the mainland, and the three were handling students like Tausug, Yakan, Bajau, and Sama in the coastal or island schools.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Five teachers were interviewed for their background, beliefs, and practices in teaching cultural communities. The two teachers who handled the Chavacano students followed the DepEd curriculum guide and prepared instructional materials. As for the IPs, the IPed was recently implemented so that teachers can only localize their teaching. Other practices include integration in areas like Values Education and Social Studies, especially on beliefs, character, and values of the community. Among the interesting cases are the teachers in island schools. Their brief descriptions are given, and their schools are anonymized.

Teacher 1 is teaching in a community-based kindergarten school with mostly Tausug and Sama students. The school follows the DepEd curriculum guide. Teacher 1 uses Tausug, Filipino, and Sama languages for teaching. Since the island school is a project of an organization working on dialogue and interfaith movement, the focus of teaching was on Peace Education. Teacher 1 works with books as guides and emphasizes dialogue with God and dialogue with others. This is spirituality. She talks about culture in terms of prayer, occasions like weddings, and the values of the communities. What she does is share stories in circles that reflect realities. Most of her activities involve writing and drawing of things familiar to students, like the island, *buhangin* (sand). Assessment involves quizzes using the provided books, but she makes adjustments, especially by not giving too difficult questions. Her materials include the blackboard and drawing materials. She notes there is not much difference in teaching students from the mainland or mainstream culture. But it was spirituality that arose from her teaching.

Teacher 2 teaches on an island with Tausug and Sama students. She follows the DepEd curriculum guide, also she integrates content and activities from the cultures of the community. She tells stories, usually translated stories from books. She translates the lessons to Tausug and Sama, and gives an explanation in Tausug. Her instructional materials are generally used by other communities, but she explains them in the language of the

students. She uses the *buhangin* or sand, clay made of flour and food color, and a model house that the students build, designed using materials in the area. In her classroom were also drawings of a *bangka* (boat) and that reflects the cultures of the community. For example, she discusses *paniniwala at mga lugar* (beliefs and places) in her content. She discusses the mosque, *simbahan*/church clinic, the sources of livelihood, and gives examples from the community. The songs are really taken from the community, and the *pangalay* (Tausug dance) is adapted by others in the community. She teaches routine to students; the students greet in their languages and are taught “*lingkud*” or seat, and some of the gestures. She utilizes cooperative learning and grouping of students. She confides that she gives equal treatment and does not discriminate among her students. She also allows independent learning. Her assessment allows cooperative learning activities and individual assessment every week.

Although Teacher 2 believes that the IPED is not fully appreciated. She believes it is better to have teachers of ethnic background to teach in the early grades. It is difficult to find teachers who are Subanen or Bajau to teach students of the same cultural backgrounds.

Teacher 3 teaches in a diverse environment with Tausug, Sama, and Yakan students. Although she is already handling Grade 6 students, she still translates her lessons into the languages. She gives examples concerning “*lupa*” or the ancestral domains and “*pagpapahalaga ng karunungan*” or justice. She indigenizes in art, especially showing pictures of musical instruments like *agong* and *kulintang*. She only shows pictures since there are no available materials. She makes students draw, role play, and discuss customs like *pagkawin* or weddings. She uses performance-based assessment and rubrics. But she laments that the students do not recognize their own culture anymore. She says the generation is different now. Even in the language they do not wish to be recognized as Yakan, Sama, and Bajau, and instead speak Tausug, the dominant language in the area.

The descriptions of teachers’ experiences share some common issues and themes in teaching diverse classes; discussed below as perspectives, teacher support and training, knowledge, practices, inclusion, and coverage.

4.1 PERSPECTIVES ON DIFFERENCES

The interviews determine how the teachers view differences. Although it cannot be concluded that it affects practices but some of their views are relevant to teaching diverse classes. When asked about teaching students of cultural backgrounds, the perspective of one teacher is that there is no difference in teaching diverse students, as the participant said: *wala naman pagkakaiba* (there is no difference). Another added: *dagdag trabaho sa teachers* (added work for teachers) to contextualized or localized lessons. The two revealed how they see differences and their values on teaching diverse classes. While one participant said: we should teach them the importance of their culture and be proud of who they are. Here, the teacher said she recognized the differences and the need for the teacher to help students develop a positive image of themselves in terms of cultural background.

From the interviews in relation to literature, the teachers handling diverse classes must resolve their own personal clarifications, including enriching their knowledge. First, on the knowledge of major paradigms and concepts, teachers need to develop reflective cultural and national identifications if they are to function effectively in diverse classrooms and help students from different cultures and groups to construct clarified identifications (Banks, 2002). The literature says that it is important for teachers to come to grips with personal and cultural identities, such as self-clarification, as a prerequisite in dealing effectively with students (Banks, 2006).

Besides the self-clarification, teachers need the knowledge of the historical or cultural background of students and the skills necessary to develop their curriculum for IPs or cultural communities. The second knowledge requirement of Banks (2002), require teachers and pre-service teachers to know the cultures and histories of ethnic groups. Teachers participate in the process of formulating and constructing knowledge on how

groups in society formulate knowledge (Banks, 2006). It is essential to recruit and educate teachers with the ability to function as insiders within the cultural community; teachers with social science knowledge, clarified cultural identifications, positive attitude, and pedagogical skills. But selection is the most challenging task in a multicultural curriculum (Banks, 2006).

Teachers need support and training in handling a diverse classroom. The IPED trainings were held in Zamboanga, attended by Chavacano, Tausug, and Bisayan teachers, with the aim of training for IPed, developing a curriculum and materials for the indigenous peoples. The training and other support are in place by the DepEd for the continuous development of teachers.

Research says that personal background is an element in formulating multicultural perspectives. Among the suggestions is placement, reflection, support from community and colleagues, research, and professional in-service. Develop teaching styles to become effective in many situations and communities (Glasgow, McNary, & Hicks, 2006). Some of the models to support teacher learning include training, peer coaching, action research, teacher portfolios, and systematic school improvement. Peer coaching between teachers provides technical and psychological help for improvement. Action research is a process of inquiry into one's own practices. A teacher's portfolio reflects on professional practice over time (Lasley, Matczynski, & Rowley, 2002).

To address the need for teachers to respond to diverse classes, the teacher education programs must look into teacher training. Cochran-Smith (2003) gave a comprehensive framework on teacher education and asked eight key questions: the diversity question, the ideology or social justice question, the knowledge question, the teacher learning question, the practice question, the outcomes question, the recruitment/selection question, and the coherence question (Cochran-Smith, 2003). The teacher programs in higher education institutions in the Philippines can complement the efforts of DepEd to look into the program and preparation of teachers and prepare them for multicultural practices.

There is a deep importance in establishing a strong partnership between the Department of Education and higher education institutions with teacher education programs, not only as a way to ensure teacher graduates fulfill the learning goals of the Department, but also to ensure that every learner will not only have equal access to learning but also enrich their own cultural identity. Yip and Chakma (2024) highlighted the important factors when it comes to training teachers for indigenous education. First, recognition of indigenous knowledge in teacher preparation, there is a rising importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into teacher training programs, while still aligning with global shifts towards decolonizing curricula. However, the issue arises with efforts of integration only settling on the surface-level of knowledge, limited to single courses or modules, rather than fully incorporating into the entirety of the teacher preparation program.

Second, tensions between mainstream standards and indigenous epistemologies, Yip and Chakma emphasized that there is a continuing struggle with fully integrating indigenous studies content with national curriculum standards. There were attempts to do so, but they commonly result in dominant or Western cultural frameworks rather than culturally inclusive models. Similarly, the Philippines also experiences the same; despite the country's goal towards decolonizing its own curriculum, it has continued to struggle to effectively integrate indigenous education contents or even an independent subject in the national curriculum.

Third, pedagogical approaches and strategies, unlike traditional fields or majors that pre-service teachers choose, indigenous studies lack the pedagogical principles and strategies needed for it to be effectively delivered. Similar to the first factor, there is a need for pre-service teachers to not only know the content but also know how to deliver it to learners. Yip and Chakma highlight that, unlike other fields of education that primarily deliver knowledge through traditional lecture-style methods, in indigenous education, there is a great emphasis on experience and creating community partnerships. Lastly, the professional identity formation of teachers, in totality, the study stresses that introducing or even integrating indigenous knowledge in teacher education

programs does not only stop at learning the content but, more importantly, contributes to the teacher development of professional and cultural identities. In this regard, teachers view themselves not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as co-learners with indigenous communities.

4.2 PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

It was gathered from those interviewed that the common way of indigenizing is using the language. There were also attempts to use songs and dances, including a discussion of musical instruments. Some use indigenous materials or what is available in the community. These are additive to instruction. There is still a need to provide materials and research on the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Indigenous Learning Systems as a teacher resource. As defined in the DepEd Order No. 32, s. In 2015, these systems were a body of knowledge that embodied patterns of relationship between people, their lands, and resources. This definition is consistent with definitions given in the literature. Indigenous knowledge is when knowledge is living, dynamic, and is connected to others and the world. As a cited definition, it is an expression of the vibrant relationships between people and their ecosystem. In application to education, indigenous knowledge in education is a process of applying learning meaningful to oneself and the relationships of the learners (Villegas, Neugebauer, & Venegas, 2008).

The application of IKSPs and other culture-based pedagogy is part of the teaching of diverse and cultural communities. The child-centeredness of the curriculum is effective for engaging students. In Banks' four approaches or levels of curriculum reform, the last or the Social Action Approach allow students to take action. Here, a really culturally-relevant curriculum looks into the elements of curriculum and the total school experience.

Teachers must have the ability to match the culture of school and home by utilizing community resources, topics, and experiences in designing curriculum and instruction. A teacher uses instructional materials and classroom decorations grounded in the culture of the students. Another is the conscious conduct of cultural and learning-style contexts. Besides content, teachers must know students for problem-solving strategies in real life (Lasley, Matczynski, & Rowley, 2002). The teacher needs critical skills in evaluating the curriculum. Teachers must have the skills to discover students' cultural outlook and to model the reflective techniques to students. Teachers need to be aware of their students' ethnicities, worldviews, and connections to their own local communities and personal histories. They must be sensitive to alternative beliefs and perspectives (Glasgow, McNary, & Hicks, 2006).

From the literature, here is a list of activities to begin teaching indigenous and cultural groups:

1. Get oriented (know the culture and history of the community).
2. Survey and get data about students, and consult parents and the community.
3. Communicate with school administration and peers, and involve government agencies.
4. Plan content and strategies.
5. Get feedback from students and the community to assess teaching.
6. Engage in action research and reflect on teaching.

The above steps can help teachers as they develop content and strategies. The steps here also show the need for collaborative efforts, participation, and consultation to make teaching effective in cultural communities.

V. CONCLUSION

The Philippines is a diverse country. In response, the Department of Education came up with its IPED Curriculum Framework and prior programs like the Alternative Learning System (ALS), the ALIVE/ Madaris Program. This is commendable and grounded upon the context and reality of the diversity of the Philippines. While it must be anchored upon community participation and culture-based, the policies must also investigate how the programs can be inclusive and informative to other cultures. The need for cultural pedagogy does not only work for the IPs or the cultural communities, but also for the majority and the mainstream as well. Further

steps can be taken to understand how knowledge about indigenous and cultural communities may reach the mainstream.

Gleaned from Philippine history, the division of peoples is still struggling to find its identity. While the application of the IPED and Madaris Program respects the diversity of people and addresses the needs of indigenous and cultural communities, safeguards must be guaranteed that these communities are able to transition into the larger community and that education ensures that those in the mainstream affirm the respect for these communities.

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