



Culturally Responsive Curriculum: A Case Study of IP School in the Philippines

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Abstract

This study explored the practices and delivery of culturally responsive curriculum at Pagsangjan Primary School, a learning institution offering Indigenous Peoples (IP) education in Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija, Philippines. Research questions identified were (a) How do teachers design and implement learning activities that are culturally responsive?; (b) What are the intervening factors that influence planning and delivery of instruction?; and (c) How do teachers assess learners in terms of understanding concepts and integration of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP)? Results have shown that, in designing and implementation of culturally responsive learning activities, teachers have anchored content and competencies in the ancestral domain and cultural practices of students. Teachers' understanding of cultural practices, however, is limited to superficial knowledge. As a result, tribal elders are usually asked to teach students about cultural practices. Indigenous language is also highlighted and revitalized in the process of education. The lack of written material, however, is a hindrance for teachers to preserve and effectively transmit the language.

Keywords: Indigenous People, Indigenous Education, IP Curriculum, Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Introduction

In 1997, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) was adopted to uphold and protect the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral domain, autonomy, social justice and cultural integrity. The Philippines then became one of the first Asian countries to adopt a law that recognizes and addresses the needs of indigenous Filipinos. Taking as its starting point, since the 1987 provision of the Philippine Constitution to recognize, respect and safeguard the rights of indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their culture and traditions, IPRA has mandated the creation of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in due regard to their beliefs, practices, traditions and institutions (Cornelio & de Castro, 2016; Shiu, 2011).

According to the NCIP, over 11 million indigenous peoples (IPs) and 110 indigenous ethnolinguistic groups are reported to have been documented and scattered across 65 out of 78 provinces in the country (Cariño, 2012). Among the major ethnolinguistic groups of the Philippines are Igorot (the mountain range of Cordillera in northern Luzon), Lumad, the Mangyan (Mindanao's non-Muslim indigenous people) and Negrito, which live in different regions with physical properties such as curled hair and the dark skin. Depending on linguistic differentiation and geography, these categories are classified as subgroups (Cariño, 2012). In addition the remaining seven ethnic groups in the Luzon region (Region 3, part of Region 4, and region 5) are comprised of Dumagat, Pugot, certain Aeta groups, and Agta groups (Cabihug, Tabangnon, Cimarron, Itom).

The ethnic diversity among these indigenous groups posed a problem for the state "to provide a comprehensive, appropriate and integrated education system that is relevant to the needs of young people and children" (Republic of the Philippines, Congress of the Philippines, Metro Manila, 1997). It was a challenge for the government to develop specific policies as the administration changed and to set out a different IP agenda. This has resulted in a depressing situation among young IPs. In the country, only about 1.2 million IP children in elementary and secondary schools are registered among an estimated 5.1 million IPs under 18 years of age. (IIMA & VIDES International, 2011; Calunsod, 2013).



Slow policy development also affected the Department of Education (DepEd) to address the needs of Filipino indigenous students. For example, it was not until 2004 that the DepEd issued an executive order allowing community-based schools to operate for IPs. (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education, 2004). In 2011, the Education Department developed an extensive education framework for IPs. Apart from calling for universal access, the National IP Education Policy Framework pursued the integration of indigenous knowledge in schools where IP students are enrolled by promoting “mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)”, and “alternative modes of instructional delivery...to address the peculiar needs of IP learners” (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education, 2011).

This policy framework also emphasized the “desire of IP communities for an education that is responsive to their context, respects their identities, and promotes the value of their traditional knowledge, skills, and other aspects of their cultural heritage” (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education, 2011). To address this concern, the DepEd promised, in its policy statements, “through the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs), to adopt an adequate and culturally suitable learning resources and environment for IP learners, and strengthen the hiring, deployment, and continuous development of teachers and learning facilitators in the implementation of its IP Education Program”.

Given the following provisions that supports the realization of an inclusive, culture-sensitive IP Education Program, this study investigated how the teachers deliver culturally responsive curriculum in classroom instruction. This study also examined the intervening factors that influence planning and delivery of instruction and its effects/implications among the students.

Statement of Problem

One key objective of the IP Education Program was to design a curriculum that is culturally responsive to the specific community context of IP learners. However, the integration of indigenous knowledge into a formal school could lead to some difficulties in delivering effective instruction in line with the national competencies and standards set by the DepEd. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the practices and delivery of culturally responsive curriculum in Pagsangjan Primary School, Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija. The researcher also aimed to answer the following questions (a) How do teachers design and implement learning activities that are culturally responsive?; (b) What are the intervening factors that influence planning and delivery of instruction?; and (c) How do teachers assess learners in terms of understanding concepts and integration of IKSP?

Significance of the Study

This study is important to Pagsanjan, Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija and the Dumagat tribe in general in terms of the potential benefits that can be derived from it. First of all, the Dumagat community would have the opportunity to express its views on education and to educate their children on the suitable approaches and lessons to be taught in the classroom. At the moment, the government is using a top-down approach in the curriculum design, and the Dumagat or any other indigenous groups have to admit it. This study may also serve as a guideline for future interventions in the field of IP Education, in particular by improving current government and non-government initiatives.



Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research on investigating the delivery of culturally-responsive curriculum in the school. In particular, case study was used to provide a thorough case or site analysis. It is based on a systematic investigation by a single person, group or event of the causes of the underlying values. It is an empirical study that explores a real life phenomenon. In his on-line article, Tellis (1997) further stated that the case study satisfies three tenets of qualitative methods: describing, understanding and explaining. This method was used in this research to investigate the teachers and students at Dumagat's experience of their situation at Pagsanjan Primary School.

Participants and Locale of the Study

The *Dumagats* or Aetas are one of the indigenous tribes of the Philippines found in the Luzon region. Like many other native groups, the *Dumagats* have been thriving in the Sierra Madre Mountains for thousands of years, occasionally interacting with the lowlands for trade or manual work. Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija is home to a number of *Dumagat* tribes in the region. Pagsanjan Primary School was built in the community through the efforts of the local government and the Department of Education. This school was the research area, and the *Dumagat* students and the teachers were the subjects of the research.

Instrumentation

In order to answer the research questions and uncover the potential challenges and gaps in teaching culturally responsive curriculum, the study adopted a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. It was validated by the selected professor in the same field of expertise. It consisted of two main parts: the first part of the questionnaire asked the teacher for personal and professional information, while the second part consisted of ten (10) questions on the planning, preparation, implementation of the curriculum and the assessment of student learning (e.g. How do you define indigenous or traditional knowledge? What are the traditional topics/ concepts that you have introduced/ taught inside the classroom?).

Data Gathering and Procedures

The researcher requested permission from the Schools Division Superintendent of Nueva Ecija and the Provincial Officer of NCIP – Nueva Ecija. This study used qualitative methods, taking into account subjective (testimonies) and objective (artifacts and evidence) information. Specifically, the following methods were used: (a) Interview–The interviews were semi-standardized, with a set of pre-determined questions as a guide. Follow-up questions were asked to discuss specific issues or to clarify the answers given to the interviewees. The method of recording the data was the taking of notes and the recording function of the digital camera; and (b) Document Analysis–Relevant school files and teaching records were reviewed and analyzed for trends in the delivery of lessons as well as the implications for student performance.

Data Processing and Statistical Treatment

Braun & Clarke (2006) suggested that thematic analysis is the first qualitative approach to be learned as “it offers core abilities useful for many other types of analysis” (p. 78). Another advantage is that it is a technique rather than a methodology, particularly from the perspective of learning and teaching (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Chan et al., 2020).

1. Familiarize yourself with your data.
2. Assign preliminary codes to your data in order to describe the content.
3. Search for the patterns or themes in your codes across the different interviews.



4. Review themes.
5. Define and name themes.
6. Produce your report.

Ethical Consideration

In this study, ethical principles were strictly observed. Prior to conducting the study, informed consent was secured. Questions included in the interview were reviewed by the NCIP – Nueva Ecija Provincial Officer prior to the interview date. The study involved volunteers and participants who agreed can at any time withdraw. The researcher provided participants with full information on the study, interview and copy of their daily lesson plan. This helped them to make an informed decision and to take an autonomous decision without coercion. A copy of the signed consent form was provided to the participants. The names of the participants were not disclosed for confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also free to withdraw at any time as a participant in the study.

Discussion

Pagsangjan is a remote community of Gabaldon populated by the *Kabuloans*, one of the existing tribes of dumagats in the area, which has existed even before the Japanese occupation in the Philippines. It is called Pagsangjan after the fabled story of two dumagats' meeting place, a river that branches to two. Their primary livelihood continues to be farming, "*pag-uuling*" and "*pagkakaingin*". These forest products are usually sold in the local market which earns them enough money to buy some food supplies like rice and condiments. The tribal barangay is headed by a tribal chieftain. He is tasked to manage the affairs of the dumagats, as well as teach younger members of the tribe.

Through the initiatives of the local government, the NCIP office and DepEd, a school was built on the side of the mountains near the *Kabuloan* settlement. The first school building was made of wood and cogon leaves, and the teachers employed by DepEd had to stay there for the whole week, only going back to mainland on Friday and coming back on Monday. Teachers have to walk for a few hours and cross the river many times before they reach school. This was part of their weekly routine. With a small school population of nine to twelve students, teachers follow a multi-grade teaching modality. The teaching staff of Pagsangjan Primary School consisted of three (3) teachers and one (1) school head. Although they were not members of the *Kabuloan* tribe or any IP community, they still used a teaching system that places great emphasis on community involvement and unconventional methods of instruction.

Development and Implementation of Learning Activities

This section of the study explored the instructional planning of teachers in the design and implementation of culturally responsive learning activities. As one of the assumptions of IPed, teachers should be able to contextualize teaching and learning activities that emphasize the cultural identity of students, which in this study pertains to the practice and traditions of *Kabuloans*. Guided by this postulate, the researchers investigated how Pagsangjan teachers facilitate instruction integrated with indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs). In exploring the teaching practices of the teachers, this section looked at how they chose traditional knowledge and linked it to present lessons as corroborated by their perceived experience from interviews conducted; educational manifestations in the planning of lessons and actual teaching observations. The researcher looked at the following training elements: (a) curriculum planning; (b) teaching methodologies; (c) learning space and environment; and (d) learning resources.



Planning of the Curriculum: Participants strongly assumed that, whenever a new lesson is being learned, the cultural background of the learners is considered. All of their instruction plans have set out portions that consider ancestral domains in the lesson. Teachers implemented a competency-based curriculum while integrating a community-based approach. Participants viewed traditional knowledge based on location and tradition. As one of the teachers said, *“Traditional knowledge should be based from the location and kind of students. [Learning experiences] should be appropriate to their context and needs”*. As stated in Section 4 of the Republic Act of 8371, “Ancestral lands/ domains” comprise concepts of territories which cover not only the physical environment but also the total environment, including spiritual and cultural ties to areas which the IPs possess, occupy and use and to which they have claims of ownership. This suggested that teachers must learn the culture of indigenous peoples in order to effectively implement the curriculum (Wa-Mbaleka, 2013).

Participants also placed an emphasis on the language of the learners. The inclusion of Mother Tongue as a separate subject is a key feature of the K to 12 curriculum. Teachers also used tribal language at school to enrich and preserve their culture. *“The language of the Kabuloan is used in the lesson. The prayer we use to ask for the blessings of Makye Depat (Tribal God) is an example of this”*, claimed by a participant. Continued dialog with the members of the community helped the participants learn the words of the tribe. However, because of the lack of materials in their language, teachers were constantly confronted with problems in some aspects of teaching. In that case, they sought guidance from the tribal chief.

Community and family cultural practices were also integrated into curriculum planning. Teaching social and survival skills was one of the key factors in the planning and design of education for students. Teachers considered practical skills such as fishing and hunting in their Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) subject.

Among the topics identified by the participants that should be included in a culturally responsive curriculum were the following: traditional knowledge (ancestral lands/ domains, tribal practices), Kabuloan language (Southern Alta language), and community and family traditions (rituals, folklores, social skills, and survival skills).

Teaching Methodologies: Four (4) prominent teaching techniques are obvious among the methods and techniques provided by the teachers. Participants are engaged in: (1) lectures/ discussions (In this method, the teacher clarifies the content matter to the students by using gestures, simple devices, by changing voice, change in position and facial expressions. Teachers are more active and students are passive but the teacher also asks questions to keep the students attentive); (2) experiential activities (This method focuses on gaining knowledge firsthand instead of simply hearing or reading about a topic, but just because an activity is hands-on does not mean it is experiential learning.); (3) integrated indigenous systems of learning (This method actively engages the students to different cultural traditions and practices of the *Kabuloan tribe*. A good example of this is the active participation of the tribal elders in teaching the students about their traditions); and (4) differentiated instruction (An educational process of ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning). *“We still use discussion and lecture in our lesson”*, one of the participants said. While it seems negative to hear that the lecture is used, the conventionality, practicality and efficiency of the instructional procedure cannot be separated. With limited access to teaching learning materials, participants chose to improvise. If alternative materials are not available, the last resort is the lecture/ discussion.

On the other hand, teachers provide experiential activities to develop practical skills and realize ideas among learners. For example, one participant in Mathematics explained that forest trees and leaves were used to teach



basic addition and subtraction. He asked students to pick up leaves outside the school and used the environment as a learning laboratory. Teachers also integrated the Indian Learning System (ILS) into the school system by inviting the tribal head to teach and lecture the myths, cultures and traditions of tribal people. This supports Cerdeña's claims (2008) that students should be given an opportunity through ILS integration to deepen their relationship with the environment and their ancestral lands.

Since they used multi-level modes of teaching at school, teachers decided to implement differentiated instruction (DI). Differentiated instruction is an educational process of ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning. One participant offers several training activities that are adapted to the students' needs and learning styles. *"I always do various activities because they are in multi-grade classes. For example, one group is involved in mathematics, reads another group and writes for the rest of the students"*.

Learning Space and Environment: In terms of learning space, participants use the community as an educational avenue. In addition to the school, the surrounding area is used as a place for teaching and learning. Teachers encourage the help of the members of the tribe to carry out educational activities. "We are looking for the Tribal Chief's guidance on what plants can be sown in connection with this season", said one participant. The surrounding materials are also used to teach the written and drawing of mathematical symbols.

Learning Resources: The government provides textbooks. In the context of the school, however, the contents are not appropriate. Teachers therefore develop their own educational materials such as big books, flip charts and audio. This supports Soriano's study on the integration of indigenous peoples and indigenous knowledge into the system of public schools (Soriano, 2008), which shows how students should be motivated to use various materials to enable them to stay in school. A tablet of the teacher shows video presentations of stories and scientific concepts. Since the community does not have a source of electricity, the tablet is good only for several sessions. This also shows the effort of teachers in integrating ICT in their classroom despite the glooming situation in their area (Mercado & Ibarra, 2019). Another key observation was that although language is highlighted in the teaching and learning process, there are still no documents written in their language.

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

Teachers use both traditional and alternative evaluations to evaluate student learning. During the learning process, teachers provide students a formative assessment to extrapolate concepts into forms such as the preparation of guidance questions and paper and pencil examinations, filling in blanks for monitoring the relationship of concepts and group discussions. These data demonstrate that teachers offer a range of activities to monitor the understanding of students of the indigenous concepts they teach. Teachers could maximize significant impressions of student learning by using the data on their formative evaluation activities properly during the teaching and learning process. This means that formative evaluation is essential to the student's understanding of concepts.

In addition, teachers use alternative assessment strategies to assess the indigenous knowledge of students. These data show that teachers hand over authentic evaluation activities to students to implement what they learned in real life. Allowing students to apply their knowledge is an important indicator of the successful integration of indigenous knowledge in the teaching and learning process. It confirms Gorjestani's (2004) idea that indigenous knowledge could contribute to the management of locally-managed, sustainable and economic survival strategies through community-based evaluation processes.



Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion

Based on findings, the conclusions were drawn:

1. In designing and implementing learning activities that are culturally responsive, teachers anchor the content and competencies on the ancestral domain and cultural practices of the students but teachers' understanding of cultural practices is limited to superficial knowledge
2. Indigenous language is emphasized and revitalized in the instructional process. However, lack of written materials serves as a hindrance for the teachers to preserve and effectively transfer the language
3. Teachers integrated the indigenous learning system (ILS) of the tribe in the schedule of school to teach indigenous knowledge system and practices (IKSPs). However, integration of IKSPs and ILS is unstructured.
4. Community-based assessment tools are used in assessing learners' understanding of concepts and integration of IKSPs.

Recommendations and Implications

Based on the results, the researcher recommend the following: (a) document all cultural practices and indigenous language of the *kabuloan* tribe through an in-depth ethnographic research; (b) conduct comparative analysis of pedagogical practices among different IP schools catering different tribes; (c) review and remap the IKSPs and ILS in the curriculum guides using the learning context on tribe's ancestral domain; and (d) develop modules for teachers and students on how to properly integrate IKSPs and ILS in the K to 12 curriculum.

The school-level implementation of indigenous people's education reflects the impact of the national government's efforts in addressing the needs of indigenous Filipino learners. Appropriate implementation of culturally responsive curriculum will definitely support the preservation of IKSPs and uphold ILS in the community. Development of an indigenized curriculum relevant to the local context will enhance the quality of education delivered to the indigenous Filipino learners, increasing their survivability in the outside community.

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