LEARNING AND SHARING: UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING INDIGENOUS LEARNERS OF MINDORO

JOHN ROBBY O. ROBIÑOS, PhD(c)[1]
Primary Author
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7051-7764
johnrobby21_0987@yahoo.com
University of Perpetual Help Molino Campus[1]
Molino 3, Bacoor City, Cavite

JOSEPHINE P. DASIG, PhD[2]
PROF. LOURDES A. MENDOZA[3]
Secondary Co-Authors
University of Perpetual Help System DALTA[2,3]
Real St. Pamplona II, Las Piñas City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Changing school culture requires building professional learning communities that aim to improve and empower teacher's competence, complete well-being, and impact on student learning. This qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to determine the purposes, expectations, challenges, and learning and sharing experiences of teachers educating indigenous learners of Mindoro, Philippines. Data were obtained from pre-structured interview of faculty handling multi-grade levels of IP learners delivered essences and emerged themes. Study indicates that teachers' main goal is to transfer understanding and make a difference, they strongly affirmed to deliver significant influence among learners. Meanwhile, learners divergent behavior and learning styles were amongst shared challenges that steered faculty to become progressivists implementing learner-centered approaches. Teachers best realization posited that teaching is a never-ending commitment and education must be inclusive. Based on these results, improving various sources of learning, providing a holistic program for teachers and strengthening the implementation of inclusive education reforms are recommended.

Keywords: Learning, Sharing, Teaching Experiences, Indigenous Learners, Mindoro, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a multifaceted system with constantly changing dynamics. Teachers are expected to work intimately amongst their learners, colleagues, parents, and the entire community to purposely ensure the success of the teaching-learning experiences. The pressure for teachers can be great when dealing with a classroom complete of students with parents and other stakeholders who have high expectations (Hussin, 2018). Together with the extraordinary power that a teacher holds in changing others' lives, comes tremendous responsibility and concerns. Teachers who have shared responsibility, passionate working with one another and who continuously embrace learner's differences learn to enhance their approaches and receive authentic joy and self-actualization. Teaching culture is improved when learning communities consider teachers' collaboration and empowerment (Antinluoma, et al., 2018). However, despite the significant role

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that teachers play and the teamwork towards the realization of the institution's objectives and goals, current cases of suicide and teacher migration to other countries and private institutions have been charged due to several workloads, mental health issues, and human interactions.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education recently instituted a National Indigenous Peoples Education Program which responds to the right of every indigenous people (IP) to basic education that is receptive to their identities, context, skills, cultural heritage and their values (D.O. 22,.2016). Indigenous children, generally, have not given the same quality of education. Teachers have not always been effectively prepared to teach IP students, nor provided with resources to assist them to progress their capabilities and skills (OECD, 2017). Significant literature and evidence posited that teachers, despite their passion and commitment, have an inadequate understanding of application instructions and the complexities of indigenous knowledge, cultures, and identities (Santoro & Reid, 2011).

Subsequently, teaching strategies for non-indigenous learners may be ineffective and inefficient for IP students. Moreover, moving indigenous learners to urban settings for regular schooling and given different programs have been unsuccessful (Wa-Mbaleka, 2013). Many institutions have failed in providing education for indigenous students. According to Wa-Mbaleka (2013), reasons include teachers' lack of contextualization, connections, integration of cultural values in school-setting, lack of understanding of IP needs, absence of a precise vision for their empowerment including the entire community and support system among others. Indigenous teachers face tough challenges in most education systems, but experiences provide learning that is much better than the others (OECD, 2017). The researchers strongly consider that when experiences are shared through certain professional learning interactions among teachers and the whole community, challenges in teaching indigenous students will be minimized. To be successful in a changing and increasingly educational system, school communities need to work and learn from each other, finding the best ways to enhance learners' capacities and education.

The Philippines has been labeled as one of the "worst performers" in Asia in implementing and achieving the Millennium Development Goals due to varied intervening factors (Cornelio & de Castro, 2016). It was reported in the PISA 2018 National Report of the Philippines (DepEd, 2019), that the country was significantly lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. The result reflects an urgency of improving the quality of education in the Philippines which covers the deepening of student's understanding and performance and strengthening even the inclusive education program which covers continuous improvement of the learning environment of the indigenous community. In an indigenous municipal, teachers are generally respected and considered as community enhancers. Teachers are the key implementers of efforts in improving indigenous education (Runhaar and Sanders, 2015).

Indigenous learners and their teachers are considered helpless because of limited access to the basic services of the government. Generally, IP students encounter different forms of discrimination such as being uncivilized and ignorant. Undeniably, formal education and even teacher training may not significantly address their needs. Another problem that most IP schools have encountered is the migration of teachers. Underprivileged working settings, a very limited venue for teaching advancement and low compensation have continued to drive teachers to greener pasture (Ubalde, 2009). Given the present scenario, it is not surprising that teachers of the IP community are also encouraged to move, if not abroad, at least to urban and developed cities and institutions. Despite these issues and challenges, the researchers believe that to stop IP teachers' migration, it is worthy to understand and hear successful stories of teachers in educating indigenous learners. Stories can be shared with other teachers which may promote a better and deeper understanding of indigenous stories and gain teacher's intention to teach in the IP School.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study brought together a team of educators who were enthusiastic to appreciate the lived experiences of teachers in educating *Mangyan* learners. Through a systematic and explanatory phenomenological study, an attempt is made to explore the teaching experiences among teachers of *Mangyan*. Additionally, it was conducted to discover teacher's best learning that can be shared with other IP teachers and other stakeholders who intended to work in partnership in educating *Mangyan* learners. With this, a better understanding of different teacher dynamics that contribute to low retention rates and motivation to stay in teaching the IP were articulated.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative design was utilized using a descriptive phenomenological perspective in understanding the common life experiences of teachers teaching indigenous learners. Qualitative research is an effort to deeply understand the nature of a situation and its experiences. Qualitative study is an investigation and exploration that delivers depth understanding for those who are interested in the events of a particular setting and time (Marchant 2009). Also, descriptive phenomenological design was used to discover the lived experiences of this phenomenon to participants and to purposely discover the learnings of teachers of IP. Phenomenology analyzes the essences perceived by consciousness concerning individual experiences such that the idea of reduction becomes the central theme (Pathak, 2017).

A phenomenological framework requires a relatively homogenous group of participants (Creswell, 2013). The participants comprised of three educators teaching *Mangyan* in Occidental Mindoro, Philippines. Co-researchers were not biologically a member of the IP community. Participants were: (1) faculty members who can understand Filipino and English, and (2) who participated voluntarily in the study to share among their colleagues their lived experiences in teaching *Mangyan* learners. To ensure the participants' confidentiality, each of them was given pseudonyms. Respondents gave their voluntary consent to participate in the study.

The primary role of the researchers was to encourage the respondents to share their lived experiences. At the beginning, the researchers informed the participants on the rationale of the research. The researchers persuaded the participants to be open in their self-disclosure, so they can give significant experiences. As an interviewer, Alase (2017) suggests that, the researcher facilitates the flow of communication, identifies cues, and the participant sets respondents at ease in qualitative research. In the phenomenological analysis, the researcher keeps the subjectivity of the study.

Data for this study were drawn from the participants' lived experiences as teachers of *Mangyan* learners. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 1.5 to 3 hours conducted by the members of the research team. The interview questions aimed to elicit experiential and evaluative accounts of the participants' experiences. Questions were grouped according to categories such as: purposes and expectations, teaching experiences, and learning and sharing in teaching indigenous learners. Questions were checked and subjected to evaluation by experts and colleagues who were familiar with the situation and were knowledgeable with research considerations. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers and returned to individual participants for checking and verification.

The general data analysis procedures included were preparing translated answers for the analysis, reducing the data phenomenologically, engaging in imaginative variation, and uncovering the essence of the experience using themes (Yuksel & Yildrim, 2015). Realized themes were validated through focus group discussion (FGD).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study is anchored on the underlying principle of the professional learning community

(PLC), that the core mission of formal education is deep learning and understanding and not solely teaching. PLC is defined as an inclusive group of people encouraged by their shared learning vision that supports one another and find ways together. People work inside and outside their immediate community to learn together that will enhance learners' learning engagement and experiences (Antinluoma, et al., 2018). Teaching culture is improved when learning communities maximize and deliver collaboration and empowerment among teachers, break down walls of isolation and create collective responsibility and secure continuous professional learning. Professional learning is distinguished by its emphasis on collective learning and knowledge sharing. For sharing of insights is a learning engagement with which teachers not only improve and outgrow themselves but also contribute to the proficiency and development of their co-workers (Runhaar & Sanders, 2015; and Mahimuang, 2018). The researchers considered that the capacity of the professional learning community to empower and motivate teachers is vital and must be accentuated.

Mangyan learners generally behaved when we handled their class in our first visit dated November 2019, while one of the researchers is conducting the interview. Both teachers and students showed inviting and accommodating gestures that made us want to spend more time in the school. The following were the themes that synthesized the teaching experiences of participants and were validated through FGD last February 2020. Themes were arranged based on the three main categories presented such as for purposes and expectations, teaching experiences and learning and sharing in teaching indigenous learners.

1. Purposes and Expectations

Theme 1: To transfer knowledge and make a difference. To share knowledge and make meaning to other's life is the best reason that drives participants to teach in the school. Participants, generally, posited the most com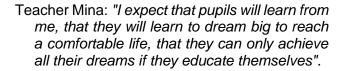mon reason why teachers pursue and practice the teaching profession, is for the transmission of wisdom and the creation of significant change to learners' lives. Knowledge comes from the deep understanding of teachers on subject matters which make learners be engaged in the transfer of learning (Burroughs, et al. 2019). Making a difference in student's lives is a sign that teaching delivers improvement and quality learning, which is the common purpose of indigenous teachers (Hellsten, & Prytula, 2011; Santoro, & Reid, 2011; and Mart, 2013). These purposes were supported by the respondents' answers;

Teacher Mina: *"I always felt that my body and heart are wanting me to return into teaching, that is after I transferred in Mindoro and stopped for the meantime too. What drives me to teach in the School is because I want to impart knowledge and help them to realize that through education, they can change their future".*

Teacher Nella: *"I want to share and provide things that my students need for them to become educated, disciplined and person with self-confidence. I want them to feel that there is an equal opportunity for them".*

Teacher Anna: *"I choose to teach in this school to share my knowledge, help them to develop their skills and talents, enhance their values formation and become holistically developed for them to achieve a better life".*

Theme 2: To deliver significant influence. All participants expressed hopes relative to providing notable and substantial impacts to *Mangyan* leaners. According to Jaeger (2013), reflective teaching must give learners the reason to help themselves solve problems and discover what they already know and what else to know. Also, it was mentioned in the study of Peterson, McIntyre, & Heppner, (2018) that teachers expect that their role extends beyond four walls. Participants' answers were as follows:

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Teacher Mina: *"I expect that pupils will learn from me, that they will learn to dream big to reach a comfortable life, that they can only achieve all their dreams if they educate themselves".*

Teacher Nella*: "I expect that my pupils will learn a lot from me and likewise, me from them. Though the facilities are not sufficient, I expect that through other alternatives and strategies that I know, I can encourage them to attend to my class".*

Teacher Anna: *"My expectations are for them to grow and improve their knowledge and skills which they can apply every day. I expect them to learn good manners and right conduct, to become well-disciplined and determined in achieving their dreams"*

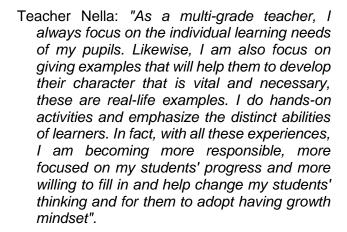## 2. Teaching Experiences (Challenges and Strategies)

Theme 3: Learners divergent behavior and learning styles. The school is composed of 115 learners, were 80 per cent are *Mangyan* while the rest is *Tagalog*. It is well-noted through participants' responses that diverse learning attitude and learning styles were the most common challenges they encounter. It can be inferred from the response that schools have to improve in terms of pedagogy and make reform in ways to respond positively to common difficulty of learner's diversity since each student is different and has unique abilities and learning needs, this will create a better relationship which is essential in teaching profession (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013; Mart, 2013; and Dussault, 2018). Understanding the varied perspectives and divergent behavior amongst students and community are shared challenges but can be of great influence (Marchant, 2009 & Rom, 2017). Responses of the coded theme were as follows:

Teacher Mina: *"There are lots of challenges, few of these are poor reading ability, low motivation in attending to school, and pupils behaving indifferences".*

Teacher Nella: *"The challenges that I face normally are dealing with pupil's different behavior and their poor self-motivation. Some students are unbecoming, playful and attention seeker…. And in this kind of profession, you must have overflowing patience".*

Teacher Anna: *"As I perform my teaching profession, the challenges that I am encountering are pupils' diverse attitudes and poor participation among parents. Sometimes I feel so stressful because of the different attitudes of my pupils".*

Theme 4: Progressivists teacher implementing learner-centered approaches. In the interview, it was mentioned that teachers of IP are becoming progressivist. Teachers start to identify clear associations between their student achievement and their experiences, professional knowledge, and as they continuously grow and learn (Burroughs, et al. 2019). Furthermore, most strategies were designed to cater to individual requirements and styles. Infrastructure, curricula, and pedagogy should be tailored and accommodated a child-centered approach capable of meeting indigenous needs and culture which made IP learners feel integrated, more welcomed and genuinely cared (Schwieter, & Jaimes-Dominguez, 2009; Marchant, 2009; and Lukong, 2016). Teachers' common vision was to ensure that learning needs, though varied, were met and that student's progress is fundamental considering the most important thing to them. Participants' responses were as follows:

Teacher Mina: *"I always call my student's attention to make sure that individually they learn and receive the best teaching and learning from me. I give differentiated activities that will check progress among them. In Math, I let some of the good students to teach their classmates as collaborative engagement. I am confident to say that I make sure that I know all my students, how they are different from one another, and that they are improving day by day".*

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Teacher Nella: *"As a multi-grade teacher, I always focus on the individual learning needs of my pupils. Likewise, I am also focus on giving examples that will help them to develop their character that is vital and necessary, these are real-life examples. I do hands-on activities and emphasize the distinct abilities of learners. In fact, with all these experiences, I am becoming more responsible, more focused on my students' progress and more willing to fill in and help change my students' thinking and for them to adopt having growth mindset".*

Teacher Anna: *"To improve my student's skills and talents, I use to give individual and group activities that best suit them, their diverse characters. I used strategies based on their ability and capability through collaborative and differentiated tasks. I must say that I am doing a good job knowing that my pupils learn from me, and gradually they are learning to always seek improvement, for themselves and their family".*

3. Learning and Sharing Experiences

Theme 5: Teaching is a never-ending commitment. Every teacher is different. Likewise, how they handle challenges in their teaching experiences is also different. For about a year, participants learned that teaching indigenous learners is a never-ending commitment to God and their community. Addressing their everyday obstacles helped them to become more resilient and dedicated to the profession they chose. They moved from a habit of thinking first about the development of the learner, how to keep learning purposeful and how to see themselves as learners as well (Marchant, 2009; and Mart, 2013). According to Rebeiz (2018), improving the indigenous learning community is a long-term process of genuine commitment. Participants mentioned that:

Teacher Mina: *"At most, I learned that as a teacher we should not give up to our students whether Mangyan or Tagalog. Teaching*

teaches me to embrace their individuality. It will never be replaced by any material thing. Teachers must provide equal opportunity, love, and care to all pupils. I think this will be my greatest obligation as a teacher, forever".

Teacher Nella: *"I learn to be more determined in assuring that all my pupils are learning… and this is always part of my vows. I learn that we should treat them fairly whether they are Mangyan or not. I become better at listening to my pupil's views and personal stories because they need someone to listen to them".*

Teacher Anna: *"I learn that teaching will be a forever commitment to God and a passion that would require selflessness and love for all things that you are doing-especially for the learners. I value further my work this time. I learn that as a Mangyan teacher we should accept their varied nature, diverse characteristics, their personalities, and culture. I love my work".*

Theme 6: Teaching must be inclusive. The knowledge of the subject matter, learning styles, and different pedagogy is essential, but would not guarantee a clear perspective of the teaching profession. Participants strongly recognized that to be fully familiar with the teaching job, a teacher must also understand inclusive education. Inclusive education gives transformative power and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and disabilities. Promotion of inclusivity enables and recognizes the value of culture, traditions and the unique perspective of the teaching-learning process (Jaeger, 2013; Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013; and Lukong, 2016). This was greatly affirmed by the respondents' answers such as:

Teacher Mina: *"I want to share that as a teacher we should treat our learners as our children. Let us accept who they are. We respect each of them whatever race they have and wherever they are coming from. We teach them values so that they will learn to respect*

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their family, teachers, classmates, other's culture and race, and for them to be God-fearing".

Teacher Nella: *"I want to share with my co-teachers that we, as teachers, have to be still in all circumstances and with all obstacles that we may face. As teachers, we need to establish a good reputation, self-integrity and become more accountable in every aspect. We must heighten our dedication towards work, our love for our students, the achievement of our school's Philosophy, Vision and Mission and recognition to the community where most of our pupils belong".*

Teacher Anna: *"As a teacher of Indigenous Learners, we must lengthen our patience with their diverse behavior. We put God at the center of everything we do for them, for the community and our country. We must embrace and adopt fully our pupil's culture and nature. Let us build this mission school a better place for the Mangyan community".*

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that experiences are the best teachers. Experiences in schools are critical to making education successful and relevant especially to all learners. Teachers' reflections about the profession indicated that their understanding creates good sources of learning, influence, and opportunities. Generally, teachers posited their common purpose and expectation, and that is to transfer understanding and make their students' life meaningful. Their shared expectation of helping, encouraging, and guiding their learners to dream and to live better lives, whether *Mangyan* or Tagalog showcased their genuine concern, love, and care for their learners.

In the discussion of challenges, pedagogy and the kind of teacher that they had become, participants conveyed their thoughts as having learners with different personalities, characters, and learning styles, providing differentiated learner-centered activities, and becoming progressivist educators ensuring that

pupils are advancing in all subjects that will help them to improve their life condition.

The most significant lessons and sharing which participants expressed had to do with the practice of the profession's vows and pledges of being devoted and noble. Participants articulated that teaching is a never-ending promise of acceptance to learner's individuality and a deep understanding of their diversity. *Mangyan* learners are not different from others and that they should be given the same amount of genuine love and care, recognition and education. Inclusive education reform must respond to diversity among all learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The lessons gained from this research study lead to the three major recommendations.

First, school administrators may focus on improving the various sources of learning may it be the physical facilities, learning materials, and resources, integrative technology such as a computer, printer, televisions for better teaching pedagogy and other interactive learning equipment. Suggestions may support *Mangyan* teachers in promoting learner-centered approaches, enhancing progressivist's strategies, assuring that learner's divergent behavior is given emphasis and upholding a more meaningful learning experience.

Second, top management and administrators may seriously consider providing a strong program that will advance and support teachers to be more committed to the profession. An enhanced professional learning community, enriched study plan program, well-aligned in-service training and workshops, and improved compensation and benefits are few recommendations. With these, teacher's migration may be minimized, devotion to transfer knowledge will be reinforced, and loyalty will surely be achieved.

Lastly, Philippine inclusive education reforms on providing fair and equal education opportunities for all may be strictly implemented. Local government must strictly monitor and evaluate the implementation of the National Indigenous Peoples Education Program under

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DepEd order #22, s.2016. Moreover, strengthening the participation of internal and external stakeholders must be considered. This will help in the better access and execution of quality education for indigenous learners.

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AUTHORS' PROFILE

John Robby O. Robiños, PhD(c) has been a researcher, journal writer, statistician, teacher, and a lifelong learner. Presently, he is the Senior High School Assistant Principal of the University of Perpetual Help-Molino Campus and a faculty member of the College of Education, and Arts and Sciences. He has presented and published researches on mathematics stressors and coordinator's leadership, and currently writing his dissertation paper on internationalization practices vis-à-vis school culture of quality and action researches on math anxiety and efficacy, career change, pandemic impact on employee's well-being, and students exit competencies. Curiosity, love of wisdom, and growth mindset are his key reasons for engaging himself in writing collaborative researches. He believes that research experience varied greatly and allows us to hone our flairs and outlook towards life

Dr. Josephine P. Dasig is the Head of the Community Extension Services of the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA and a faculty member of the College of Education and the Graduate School of Education of the same university. She is also one of the accreditors of the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA) and a member of the various professional affiliation like the Philippine Association of the University Women and Bataan Research Educators Organization.

Prof. Lourdes A. Mendoza is the Tourism Program Chair of the College of International Tourism and Hospitality Management of the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA. She is teaching tourism professional courses in the last 30 years. She is also one of the accreditors of the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA) and the Vice President of the Union of the Filipino Tourism Educators, Inc. (UFTE), and a member of the various professional affiliation like the Philippine Association of the University Women and Philippine Association of Researchers in for Tourism and Hospitality Inc.

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