Inclusive Education for Ethnic Minorities in the Developing World: The Case of Alternative Learning System for Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Education is integral to achieving sustainable development. It is through education that an improved quality of life ensues with people's acquisition of knowledge and skills beneficial to society, at large. Inclusive education, however, is an issue among countries with marginalized ethnic groups. In Europe, the onslaught of migrants from various parts of the world challenges educational systems to be more attuned to the needs of children of migrant families. In Asia, on the other hand, a gnawing concern is for education to reach indigenous peoples in rural areas. This paper examines how inclusive education is key to accomplishing Sustainable Development Goal 4 which is "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". It tackles the accessibility of alternative learning systems in the developing world, with the Philippines as a case in point. This paper focuses on the process of interface utilized by the Philippines' Department of Education and the Ayta, an indigenous group living in the Philippine province of Zambales to address the unique conditions of this marginalized ethnic minority. It also investigates the effects of these indigenization efforts on the Ayta's cultural rights. This paper uses mixed methods such as key informant interview, focus group discussion, survey questionnaire, secondary research and Filipino psychology research methods. This paper underscores how partnership between government and stakeholders is significant in arriving at the goal of inclusive education. This is reflected in the collaborative relationship fostered between the Philippine government and the Ayta and how the partnership positively affected the Ayta's cultural rights based on a more culturally-appropriate educational curriculum.

Key words: inclusive education, indigenous people's education framework, alternative learning system, ethnic minorities, Philippines

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the importance of education as an enabling tool for people. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 specifically emphasizes the aim "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". It entails providing guarantees for: (1) lifelong learning opportunities for all, from early childhood to adult education; (2) equity, inclusion and gender equality; (3) effective learning and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and competencies; and (4) the relevance of learning, in terms of vocational and technical skills for decent work as well as for global citizenship in a plural and interconnected world (Global Campaign for Education, n.d.).

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Inclusive education being a key component of SDG 4 pertains to the right of all children to learn and participate in schools within a diverse societal environment. UNESCO (2009) defines inclusive education as a "process that addresses and responds to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education." It places a responsibility on states to provide "a principled and systematic approach to identifying and dismantling barriers for vulnerable populations". (Slee, 2018: 8).

This is significant given that the inability to have access to quality education among vulnerable groups such as, children from minority, ethnic, religious or tribal groups, is inevitably linked to discrimination, diminished social opportunities, and income inequalities. Children and youth belonging to minority migrant or ethnic backgrounds are generally disadvantaged in that they struggle to participate effectively in society through gainful employment, civic engagement, and political representation. Social exclusion can take place in what Kabeer (2005) suggests as "disadvantage operating in three dimensions: (1) the resource dimension that is, lack of income, assets, health, education and "voice"; (2) the identity dimension reflecting cultural devaluation by virtue of their distinct cultural practices; and (3) the spatial dimension pointing to the remoteness and isolation of their location" (In Brind et al, 2008: 2).

Inclusive education is a means to prevent marginalization and social exclusion from taking place. One way of addressing the gap in the delivery of education to marginalized groups is through alternative learning systems. Domazet and Gavrilović (2015) suggests a personalized e-learning system as an option based on the Belgrade Metropolitan University experience. Aside from the sequential and resource-based learning models, they also present the value of alternative learning paths as a process model where students can learn based on their existing knowledge, learning styles, and learning goals. Apao, L., Dayagbil, F., & Abao, E. (2014) asserts that the alternative learning system accreditation and equivalency program in the Philippines is effective in cultivating the life-long competencies even outside the walls of the formal school system. Recipients are able to increase financial stability through work, actively participate in community events, and generally improve their quality of life.

It is in this light that the indigenous learning system for ethnic minorities in the Philippines is examined and discussed. The Philippines, an archipelago consisting of more than 7000 islands, is home to an estimated 14-17 million indigenous peoples comprising 110 ethnolinguistic groups (UNDP, 2013). After years of in-depth consultation and collaboration among education stakeholders, the Philippine Government led by its Department of Education (DepEd) embarked on an ambitious program that sought to promote inclusive education among Philippine indigenous peoples. Called the Indigenous Peoples' Education (IPED) Framework, the overarching policy was institutionalized in 2011, while the curriculum framework was implemented in 2015. The program is a clear articulation of the educational and cultural provisions of the 1997 Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA). The IPED Framework takes into account the peculiarities of each indigenous group and mandated the development of teaching and learning materials that reflected these unique attributes.

The Ayta people who participated in this study trace their roots to one of the earliest inhabitants of the Philippines. They live in small groupings in the sparsely populated mountain ranges of Zambales, a province in the major island of Luzon in the Philippines. During the Mount Pinatubo eruption in 1991, the Ayta were displaced and have been forced to relocate in resettlement sites that were much accessible to lowlanders and government relief efforts. In the years following the eruption, some Ayta groups opted to return to their respective villages while others chose to stay put in the resettlement sites. The Ayta participants in this study are the elders, teachers, and students in (1) Sitio Gala and Aningway-Sacatihan High School, Subic, Zambales; (2) Loob Bunga High School and Brgy. Maguisguis located at the Loob Bunga Resettlement Site in Botolan, Zambales; and (3) St. Francis Learning Center, Inc. in Mangan-Vaca, Subic, Zambales.

This study, in an attempt to determine facets of inclusive education, sought to examine the points of interface between the Ayta learning system and the Indigenous Peoples' Education Framework of the Department of Education, and investigate the relationship and effects of the indigenization efforts in the upholding and protection of the Ayta's cultural rights. It used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods such as key informant interview, focus group discussion, survey questionnaire and secondary research. In order to ensure cultural sensitivity in the data gathering process, this study also utilized *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Philippine Psychology) methods of *pagtatanong-tanong* (questioning) *, pakikipagkwentuhan* (storytelling)*,* and *pagdalaw-dalaw* (visitation).

2. Education for Ethnic Minorities in Europe

With the influx of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa to Europe in recent times, a challenge faced by European countries is the provision of education to ethnic minorities. The development of inclusive education and lifelong learning systems in European countries is imperative for human capital formation and social cohesion given the region's growing multiethnic landscape.

The issue of segregation in schools is a gnawing concern. School segregation takes place particularly among children with disabilities, Roma and traveler children, and migrant and refugee children (Council of Europe, 2017).

The growing diversity in Europe's populations calls for a more innovative approach to formal education and lifelong learning. Grech, Calleja and Cauchi (2010) noted the need for a useful teaching methodology for adoption to schools for minority learning. In examining a European project called the Social Promotion of Intercultural Communication Expertise and Skills (SPICES), they emphasized intercultural communication as an important aspect in a curriculum not only for primary and secondary school children of migrants but also for adult learners belonging to minorities.

In comparison, Asia as a region is widely diverse with populations coming from various cultural, religious, economic, and ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Education for minorities is an immense challenge and is also linked to identity, poverty, and inequality. This study focuses on the Philippine experience in finding an effective way to address the need for inclusive education for its indigenous peoples particularly, the Aytas in Zambales, a province in Luzon.

3. The Ayta Indigenous Peoples' Education Framework: A Historical and Contextual Overview

The Ayta Indigenous Peoples' Education Framework is the outcome of the interface between the formal education system and the indigenous learning system. Philippine education has come a long way as far as the institutionalization of indigenized schooling is concerned. The nation's colonial past, to a great extent, has shaped the overall objectives of the Philippine educational system. During the Spanish colonial era, the Catholic Church played a pivotal role in shaping the content and method of education, with the specific aim of evangelizing the 'natives.' Both the State and the Church have undertaken a systematic process of educating the 'natives,' and discriminating against those who refused to be assimilated. The American colonizers, for their part, have adopted a secular approach to education through the establishment of the public-school system. With emphasis on citizenship, indigenous peoples who refused to be assimilated in the mainstream ended up being discriminated in the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. By the time that the Philippines has gained independence from colonial powers, the Western ideas have become deeply embedded in the collective psyche of non-indigenous Filipinos (Constantino, 1966). More specifically, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that have resulted from a colonial schooling system have severely affected non-indigenous peoples' views of the indigenous world. High drop-out rates, absenteeism, and low school performance among IPs enrolled in the formal education system are commonalities shared by Philippine IPs with other indigenous groups in other countries. Victor and Yano (n.d.) attributed these to discriminatory attitudes resulting from being identified as a 'native,' or 'tribal'. The discrimination that indigenous peoples have encountered throughout the centuries have resulted in multiple layers of marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. Not only are they confined to poverty, there are also layers of discriminatory practices across structures and interpersonal relations that resulted in what Buasen (2006) called as a 'disintegrating sense of self and identity.'

As a response to these experiences of discrimination by indigenous peoples, a two-fold approach to recognizing, promoting, and protecting indigenous peoples also emerged: (1) the needs-based approach that seeks to improve the welfare of indigenous peoples; and (2) the rights-based approach, which seeks to uphold the economic, political, social and cultural rights of indigenous peoples (Buasen, 2006). In the last few decades, an increasing awareness on the part of non-indigenous populations to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of indigenous peoples to a culturally-appropriate educational system has taken foothold. The recent developments do not only answer the question of improved access to education, but more importantly address the issues of content and curriculum (ADB, 2011).

The institutionalization of a culturally-appropriate education is deemed necessary. This kind of educational system enables indigenous peoples to exercise some control over the system and curriculum that affected them, and influence the national curriculum and educational policies. It consolidates the lessons from the many initiatives, both in the local and international stage, that promote linguistic and cultural pluralism through the adoption of measures that will guarantee an education system that is flexible and specific

to the needs, cultures, languages, and challenges faced by indigenous peoples (ADB, 2011).

Indigenized formal education includes mainstream systems and institutions that integrate indigenous perspectives and language (UNHRC, 2009). This means that a culturally appropriate curricula, designed with the participation of indigenous peoples, and largely facilitated by a bilingual education based on the mother tongue, is crafted and implemented. This educational system is described as employing teaching methods that are culturally sensitive, thus requiring teachers and students to include local knowledge, topics, situations and examples in classroom discussions, invite the participation of elders in some activities, and add underlying values like identity and self-determination in the educational system. This modality of educational system for indigenous peoples has gained headway when reforms were undertaken by the Philippine government to ensure that the Philippine educational system becomes inclusive and culture-based.

4. The Process of Interface and Challenges Encountered

The process of interface requires a rights-based partnership between indigenous cultural communities and the DepEd, the support of education stakeholders, and the continuous documentation, validation, and presentation of the indigenous cultural standards. The interface in perspective recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to their culture, indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs), and indigenous learning systems (ILS), as well as their right to participate in national development. The interface in policy outlined the application of the rights-based approach which is actualized by ensuring (a) access to culturally-responsive basic education; (b) appropriate pedagogy, content, and assessment through the integration of IKSPs in all learning areas and processes; (c) culturally-appropriate learning resources and environment; (d) appropriate teachers and involvement of community members in the teaching-learning process; (e) appropriate institutional systems to support the IPED curriculum; and (f) eradication of discrimination.

The process of interface between the Ayta IKSP and the IPED Framework is laborious and demands a change in mindset on the part of the administrators and teachers of the Department of Education. Indigenizing the curriculum, the ultimate objective of the IPED Framework, requires substantive changes in how culture is viewed and evaluated in terms of its impact on education. It also required DepEd to engage the community in analyzing the key stages of their life cycle. The process of interface entailed two levels of contextualization - localization and indigenization. Through the IPED interface, attempts are made to position the indigenous worldview as a co-equal dimension of teaching and learning.

The actual implementation of the IPED Framework in the province of Zambales is considered one of the best practices not only in the Central Luzon region but also nationwide. IPED in Zambales is being implemented in schools where at least 85% of the student population are classified as IP learners. However, reaching and organizing them for the purpose of commencing the process of interface is just a few of the hurdles that DepEd Zambales has to overcome. There was a need for DepEd Zambales to build relationships and foster trust between the government agency and the communities.

Aside from this was the limited number of available materials on the Ayta knowledge, systems, and practices; most of which are from an outsider's perspective.

DepEd Zambales started the process of interface by inviting the participation of Ayta communities and facilitating agreements among them insofar as cultural peculiarities are concerned. This entailed a series of consultations involving the elders designated by the Ayta communities. It helped identify IP community competencies, linking these with the competencies specified by the DepEd in order to arrive at the indigenized learning objectives. DepEd Zambales distinguished three integral components of the community curriculum. These are (1) knowledge, which pertains to the students' cognitive ability; (2) conscience, which refers to the students' appreciation and observance of morals, ethics, values, and perspectives of the community; and (3) practices, which DepEd Zambales defines as the expression of cognition and conscience. The Department was also able to identify the customary laws, the indigenous farming system, the indigenous fishing system, the hunting system, rituals, and other indigenous traditions and beliefs.

While the program was clear with its noble objective, its actual implementation has to overcome several hurdles across the government bureaucracy. From changing mindsets to re-designing curriculum to re-orienting teachers, the IPED Framework has to gradually break through institutional barriers that are deeply embedded in the educational system. For instance, there is a need to synergize between the DepEd and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). The NCIP is mandated, among others, to provide oversight on all matters involving the indigenous peoples, but it does not have any mandate over public schools. NCIP is also constrained by a low budget allocation that could have helped in research and development activities. DepEd, on the other hand, has the expertise when it comes to developing the curriculum for IPED and the appropriate teaching and learning materials. As a result, DepEd has to directly work with the IP communities through the signing of Memorandum of Agreement, and the NCIP is only able to help in matters directly involving the IP communities.

Other challenges involve the inability of teachers to cope with the changes in the content and the process of the curriculum that can adversely affect the learning experience. The continuous availability and retention of teachers well-oriented in IPED remain. The far-flung location of many IPED-implementing schools can be daunting for some teachers and a challenge to those in-charge of monitoring the implementation of the program. Moreover, the scarcity of learning materials has been cited by some respondents due to the fact that IPED implementation has only reached Grade Level III. Many of the books used in higher grade levels are written in English, thereby leaving the teachers to translate for the students the contents of these books in the local dialect.

5. Conclusion: Towards a Community of Culturally Competent and Proficient Learners

The narrative behind the institutionalization of the IPED Framework revealed the numerous attempts to create a learning environment that will hone learners with cultural competence and proficiency. Learners are expected to demonstrate the ability to understand and appreciate peoples with diverse values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors,

to adapt to these differences, and to use these knowledge, skills, and attitudes in dealing and relating with peoples from diverse backgrounds.

With this objective in mind, the State and the Ayta have moved to build on a partnership towards the creation of a culturally-appropriate education, modifying the curriculum so that the perspectives, themes, issues, and concepts relevant and meaningful to the Ayta are embedded in the educational system.

Figure 1 below shows the relationship between the Philippine State and the Ayta as they form a partnership to create a culturally-appropriate education through the IPED Framework that will hone communities of culturally competent and proficient learners. It emphasizes the change in the State's perspective and the upscaling of its accommodation of indigenous welfare and rights. It also demonstrates the evolving response of the Ayta as they sustain their efforts in the creation of a culturally-appropriate education.
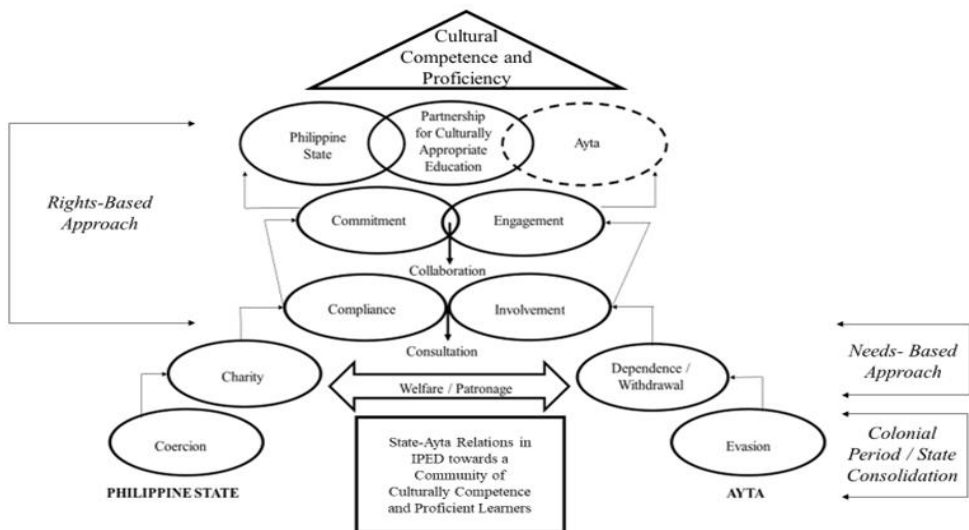

Figure 1. State-Ayta Relations in Indigenous People's Education Framework (IPED)

This paper posits that the cultural rights of indigenous peoples are fulfilled with the institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples' Education Framework primarily because of the process of contextualization (localization and indigenization) and the modified interventions undertaken by the participants in this study.   Through the IPED Framework, the Ayta are able to develop a sense of self-worth and dignity, mainly due to processes of dialogue and negotiations that characterized the process of interface. The spaces that the IPED Framework provided and expanded, from the basic acquisition of functional literacy to the development of their self-esteem, skills, and leadership potentials, contribute to the building of an enabling environment that is supported and participated in by stakeholders in the education sector.

Moreover, the IPED Framework contributes to the empowerment of Philippine indigenous communities. This program is borne out of the articulated desire of the indigenous communities for inclusive education. The active response of education

actors, despite initial misgivings and constraints, demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity with indigenous peoples, which in itself is empowering and validating. The IPED Framework exists because of the collaborative relationship that has been fostered through the interaction between the Ayta, the State and other education actors. The IPED Framework provides an important mechanism for continuous dialogue between the State and education actors as partners.

Lastly, the IPED Framework is one of the instruments that demonstrated the government's attention to the educational needs of indigenous peoples. While this study raised questions about its motives and sustainability, and issued a warning about the threat of cultural appropriation, it cannot be denied that the existence and sustainability of such a program emphasized not only the problems and constraints experienced by the indigenous peoples, but the possibilities and potentials of a liberating kind of education.

Through the IPED Framework, the State is able to engage with the Ayta and the non-State actors, and craft enabling policies in a truly democratic manner. The policies created by the State in relation to the educational aspirations of the Ayta improved and strengthened the social position of indigenous peoples as these provided the much-needed platform from which they can assert and claim their rights to education and culture.

It is important to note the tensions and challenges that marred the relationship between the State and the Ayta as they both strive to uphold cultural rights through the IPED Framework. On the part of the State, these include concerns arising from the lack of teaching and learning materials, hiring, retention, and training of teachers, and synergy among government agencies working with indigenous peoples. On the part of the Ayta, the ongoing threats to indigenous knowledge systems, practices, and language, and the specter of cultural misappropriation pose risks to the successful and meaningful implementation of the IPED Framework. The biggest challenge for both the State and the Ayta, however, is the changing of mindsets of the implementers of IPED and even among some of the Ayta who have become wary of government interventions due to past experiences. In this regard, both the State and the Ayta need to carefully navigate through these constraints, as the long-term outcomes of the program depend on their ability to sustain their partnership, resolve current constraints, and overcome the hurdles that are to come.

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