



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

The Role of Elderly on IP Education and Self-Determination: A Mini-Ethnographic Study in Aeta Community

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Abstract: Indigenous Peoples (IP) have been going through scores of developments over the years. Recognition of their existence and their rights are continuously articulated in evolving definitions of IP and emerging perspectives for better treatment, historical justice, and integration. Central to these emerging perspectives about IP development is education. This paper articulates some of the developments on IP education based on literature, field observation, and interview with Aeta parents and elders. Related here are the contingent issues of these developments such as language, traditional vs. formal schooling, and the stance or the voice of the IP elderly. A brief reflection on actions to address IP education issues are also presented.

Key Words: Indigenous Peoples; IP education; self-determination; role of elderly

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Who are the Indigenous Peoples?

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (Article 1.1) in 1989 defines the IP as “tribal people in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations.” It entails recognition of their presence, their historicity and cultural indelibility (May & Aikman, 2003). Indigenous peoples are populations of specific geographical locations whose institutions were preserved even after colonization of the country. Their ways of life and living are not changed, which differentiated them from populations shaped by modern and complex structured socio-political and economic

ways. Their “being different” from the majority places them in vulnerable situation, hence, articulation of their identity and rights became increasingly prominent in the past decades. Indigenous peoples are now at the forefront of promoting respect for their societies, their ways of existence, and their holistic social constructs --- all these are part and parcel of affirmation to their collective and individual rights (May & Aikman, 2003). The expression of IP rights has become clearer as outlined through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. In Article 8, it is stated that “Indigenous Peoples have the collective and individual right to maintain and develop their distinct identities and characteristics, including their rights to identify themselves indigenous and to be recognized as such.” Further, Article 3 stipulates that “Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and



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freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.” Hence, policies and actions of mainstream society to assimilate them are forms of unequal power and betrayal to their identity and self-determination. However, various social mechanisms such as migration, colonization, conflicts, and environmental problems inevitably expose the IP on the verge of cultural and historical loss. It is important to reclaim their collective and individual right; central to this is education. May and Aikman stressed education as “key arena in which indigenous peoples can reclaim and revalue their language and cultures” (2003, p. 141). Similar to the case of Obo-Manobo of Mount Apo, who were confronted by external conflicts, are “regenerating” their culture in order to claim their rights as IP community (Alejo, 2000).

2. METHODOLOGY

This research brief used a mini-ethnographic study and review of related literature on IP education. Specifically, a field observation was done in the IP community. Interviews with key persons in the community were also conducted. Families were visited during the field observation and some mothers and elderly allowed the researcher for an informal group interview. Existing studies on IP education also provided substantial knowledge to further understand the explored experience of the Aetas vis-à-vis IP education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *What are the current developments and issues in IP education?*

One of the emerging developments introduced to indigenous peoples is formal education. In the Philippines, a 100% primary education in 10 years is targeted in the Millennium Development Goal. This is institutionalized by the Department of Education (DepEd) on its Educational for All (EFA) program, which include the indigenous peoples across the country. In order to concretize this program for the IP, two policies were mandated: 1) the cultural integration through the inclusion of Islamic values and basic Arabic grammar into the curriculum in Muslim dominated areas (RA 9054); 2) the accreditation of IP schools for indigenous non-Muslims (DepEd Memorandum 42, s. 2004).

However, contingent to this development are issues that concern the identity and self-determination right of the IP. Some of these issues include the strain between the traditional and formal schooling; the disappearing indigenous peoples’ language; and the fading voice of the IP elderly in transmitting their historical and cultural resources (Arquiza, 2006; Ismael & Cazden, 2005; May & Aikman, 2003).

Mucha-Shim Quiling Arquiza studied about the traditional way of educating the Suluan children in Mindanao (2006). The IP children in Mindanao learn through the guidance of a *guru*. According to Arquiza, this traditional home-based learning includes the teaching of *Qur’an*, values, Islamic beliefs and practices, Arabic alphabet and grammar, prayers, domestic and cultural skills, and fending a family. The Suluan children undergo through this traditional education until they reach the age of 14. The indigenous peoples and most of children in Mindanao have never gone to formal and mainstream schools due to conflicts, disinterest of the IP to the formal school curriculum, distance of government schools from IP community, and poverty. This situation is reflected on the poor level of literacy (57%) among the five provinces at Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, based on the UNDP Human Development Index. Taking from the point of view of Arquiza’s study on the Suluan children’s traditional education, this U.N. literacy indicator may be irrelevant since it is based on the mainstream education. While the government promotes education for all program, the danger is that the indigenous methods and literacy distinct to a specific IP are undermined. The context and historicity of the IP, which is woven in their identity, are lost in the process of formal schooling. The DepEd IP school is “integrationist rather than full recognition and empowerment of traditional systems and indigenous ways of educating the IP and minority children” (Arquiza, 2006, p. 24).

This development issue, as observed in the local scale, is also a concern in foreign IP education studies. May and Aikman assert that “...the role of formal education and schooling as an institution that has contributed significantly to the loss of indigenous identity, control and self-determination” (2003, p. 142-143). The social practices that promote and transmit the indigenous language and culture are disrupted, if not rejected, in the formal schooling. The focus of this kind of state-run policy is assimilating the IP to national identity rather than being accepted and recognized as they are. This



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scepticism was strongly stated in May and Aikman's paper about the current IP education issues: "Achieving acceptance and recognition for indigenous alternatives to state-run formal schooling is a slow and difficult path – such initiatives have to overcome national policies aimed at assimilation and homogenization, as well as trends towards standardization which smother innovation and diversity for the sake of accountability and supposed equality" (2003:143).

The integrationist approach to IP education has been making a complex impact to the nature of IP existence and interrelations with the mainstream society. This on-going assimilation and socialization through formal schooling are threatening the use and transmission of indigenous language. Language is indispensable in preserving IP cultures, in promoting their identity and self-determination. Ismael and Cazden highlight the role of language in indigenous education, "language envelopes culture and codifies thoughts of its people in such a way that it is impossible to separate the two" (2005, p. 89). Hence, the holistic nature and historicity of IP cannot be imbued by adding some elements of it in a formal or mainstream curriculum. Language is not ought to be taught as a separate entity but as part and parcel of teaching about values education, cultural distinctiveness or differences, and civic and moral education. This is practiced in Singapore where the mother tongue is taught and fulfils the roles in social and cultural education (Ministry of Education, 2007).

3.2 What is the voice of the elderly in IP education?

With these current issues in IP education that significantly concern their identity and self-determination, here is a dimension that is usually neglected in state-run programs and IP education practitioners – the elderly of indigenous peoples. It is very unfortunate that the IP elderly have miniscule role in IP education. The elders are the most important resource in the classroom formal schooling and research in curriculum development (Ismael & Cazden, 2005). The elders are the vessel of their history, indigenous language and cultures. They have the "lens" in imparting the appreciation of their identity and contextual relevance of their traditions even in the present.

In an Aeta community in Pampanga, Aeta children attend a formal schooling in a nearby DepEd accredited IP school. There is a rewarding feeling

from the Aeta parents and non-IP community leaders to be able to send children into a formal school. But the signs of fleeting indigenous language and cultures are already present in the community; to some extent are cultural conflicts between the Aeta elders and non-IP collaborators. In an interview with Aeta mother, who sends all her children to the formal IP school, she expressed joy that her children are learning and hopeful that formal schooling could give her children a better opportunity in life. However, she admits the children's lessons are not familiar to her. Her children, on the other hand, could speak their indigenous language but cannot perform their traditional system of writing anymore. In the school, they speak their indigenous language with awkwardness. Aeta students shared that they only speak their language when communicating among themselves. Most times, they are the ones who adjust in the use of language when communicating with non-IP students. In the interview, the observation that social and cultural traditions are scarcely practiced in the village was relied. Nonetheless, there is willingness and attempt to preserve their language and cultures, especially from the elders. Accordingly, there are four Aeta elders in the community who are still knowledgeable of their stories, language, and traditions. In their desire to impart these to the young generation, they occasionally gather the Aeta children to tell the stories of Aeta and teach them traditional songs and dances. The knowledge and efficacy of the elderly towards their indigenous identity are family resources. This must be shared and transmitted to the children. Indigenous education should aid this process and not disrupt or deprive the family of this resource. Hence, there is a conscious effort to revitalize their identity and promote self-determination among the young Aeta population in the community. Indigenous education should be a process of collaboration among indigenous families and non-IP educators and researchers; while the elderly take the role as sources. Todal stresses the significance of linguistic maintenance in IP education that requires the participation of IP families and non-IP groups connected in strategizing and implementing IP education (as cited in May & Aikman 2003). Hornberger (1997) called this as "bottom-up language process" that promotes local decision making, control, and participation.



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3.3 What can be done?

Articles 14 and 15 of the UN Declaration of Indigenous Peoples (2007) clearly stated that (14) “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize and transmit to future generation their histories, language, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places, and persons”; further (15) “All indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own language and culture. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes.” Indigenous education is intended for indigenous empowerment and self-determination, which are concomitant to the articulation of their rights. Having endowed with rich history and cultures, indigenous peoples, particularly the elderly, should oversee the shaping and controlling of their education system. The anthropologists and sociologists have also important role in the collaboration by co-constructing with the elders the cultural texts distinct of indigenous communities. This task is important to be able to collect, validate (by the elders), transmit, and revitalize indigenous cultures in an educational system. On the other hand, education practitioners can train elders and parents to become teachers to their fellow indigenous peoples. The Department of Education mandate regarding the IP education (DO 42, s. 2004) may be reviewed to understand if “mainstreaming the educational system” by creating IP formal schools using mainstream curriculum with only added-on lessons about IP is in line with the stance to recognition and self-determination of indigenous peoples.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The historicity and cultures of indigenous peoples make them distinct but also vulnerable to out-of-the-context equality and development agenda of the mainstream society. Language and culture revitalization are key elements for the IP to be recognized and to be empowered. In this case, the IP elderly have indispensable role in shaping the IP education. They can be valuable resources and

transmitters of their traditional learning, linguistics, and social practices essential to the collaborative process with the government agencies and academes. Moreover, a study that will use observation and more in-depth interview with elderly, school collaborators and IP students are recommended to enrich data and further the analysis.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Melvin Jabar for the opportunity to be part of a brief immersion activity among the IPs in Pampanga through the “Workshop on Curriculum Development for the Integration of Filipino Indigenous Culture” held on March 28-29, 2015.

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