

Learning Sustainable Life: Bukidnon Pulangiyan Community Experience of Integrating Mother Tongue Education for Sustainable Community Life

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SUMMARY

The objective has been to understand the meaningful story of the community, land and quality of life. We need to understand the quality of life, particularly of the youth. We need to understand what really works for a growing generation of Indigenous Peoples.

We need to take a look at the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Mother tongue Education as the first step in Multilingual Education (MLE); not only goal 2 but also goals 1 to 8 and how they can work together.

The challenge faced in the Philippines is that the national school curriculum and language of concepts is alien to the land and context of much of the population and tends to alienate people.

This can be seen in the case of the Pulangiyan people living in the eastern valley of Bukidnon in Mindanao. Mindanao has 36 languages, seven sea-based languages, four dominant languages and one extinct language. Extinction in the next 50 years is very clear for a lot of these languages unless we work to change the situation. The value of these languages is vital to the dignity and integrity of these people and their contribution to society and sustainability of the environment.

I have been working for 20 years with the Pulangiyan people. The community possesses a deep understanding of the forest, water and life in the area. With the Pulangiyan, attempts have been made to integrate mother tongue-based education with the need for sustainable livelihood and the cultural celebration of life.

The Pulangiyan identity has weakened over the years with many of the people simply identifying themselves as Bukid-non as a term of external determination. Extensive logging of their area and the influx of migrants have put pressure on the group. However, with the end of logging in the late 1980s, the community sought a school. What began as a literacy initiative has grown into a formal education program that has allowed many to continue on to higher education, some of them returning as teachers.

The community sees the main value of education in that it helps cultural continuity and the effective management of their gaup or domain, peace being a critical component. The education program for this group helps build cultural identity while at the same time developing the knowledge and skills of the mainstream culture. However, policy makers and the Department of Education have until recently appeared undecided on the Language issue.

One of the challenges for youth is that there is low crop value in the area and a lack of employment. How do you help the youth engage other than at the bottom of the labor pyramid? How do we move from insecurity to peace? We need human security of rights to resources and of needs, opportunity and sustainability.

If the peoples of the Philippines are to participate and not just assimilated at the bottom of society, education in the highlands has to be dealt with in terms of knowledge systems and sustainability. It is not just a matter of the individual excelling. Education for the community matters, including the relation between ecology and creation, as well as society and governance.

Traditional knowledge and culture could eventually die out without the teaching of culture in schools. Mother tongue can be the basis for sustainability of culture and integrated and dignified relations with government. A great deal can be contributed if there is compensation offered for ecological benefit. At present the upland communities are the *de facto* managers of sustainable forest resources including water.

Traditional ways and culture need to be viewed as having value. As people forget about the old ways and move towards mainstream culture, there is a tendency to view the old ways as having little value, something to be ashamed about and outdated. This is not so the culture can play a critical role in strengthening a person's participation in society and in transitioning cultures if managed well.

Much cultural problem-resolution still revolves around teacher in community. Teachers still have high standing in community and society in resolving problems because of their general knowledge and because they are focused on the students and not self-interest.

We are growing up with the youth of tomorrow. We need to keep in mind the sustainability of culture, the flexibility of engagement, the sustainability of the environment, and the aesthetics of living humbly. Children need to learn, families need to practice, and the environment should be benefitting.

DISCUSSIONS

Question: What about the role of women in the curriculum? With indigenous education, it may not be gender just.

Answer: It is important that you raise this question of gender appropriateness. We are fortunate when it comes to gender sensitivity. About 60% of the children in schools are girls and 40% boys. The teachers are mainly women. Most of the women control the purse in the household. Women do the trading in abaca, they also deal with nutrition in the family and deal with health. I acknowledge the injustices that do exist, but it is fortunate that women have a greater chance to speak out. They have a chance to meet in the livelihood center and discuss options and collaborate on interests.

Question: Is there a shift from child-centred learning to community-centred learning?

Answer: If we look at child versus community it is not polarized it is dynamic. There is concern for the child in the community not just the progress of an individual child. There is a focus on children getting education, going to high school and then getting a job while continuing to engage in community. There is a great deal of emphasis on child in the community. It is more an experience of the school in community; the school is very much a dynamic that keeps the community active in so many ways.

Question: When we look at sustainability, what are the key factors?

Sustainability is always a question. Many people say it comes down to money. But for me it doesn't.

The mountains are difficult areas and there are many groups and illegal activities like logging. In a community it comes down to knowing what to do and how to help as we are talking here of the poor and there is much need for all to respect their need to improve their circumstances.

There is opportunity at the hamlet (*sitio*) level that is smaller than the village (*barangay*) level. When 12 of these *sitios* join together on the edges of the barangay there is now a cultural dominance in the discussions and needs are seen differently and local government is

called to respond more directly to their needs. So the small hamlets are important to understand in terms of their needs directly if there is going to be sustainability at the margins of the environment.

We built things from the ground up. We started with a grass-roofed building for a kindergarten. Our own students have come back to teach. What is in the heart is what is important. A sustainable ecological system of the culture that can face the challenges and find the opportunity takes time.