LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL HEADS ON TEACHING
INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

KRISCILE PRINCESS C. FERNANDEZ
Holy Trinity University
kriscilefernandez@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Teachers and school heads play a crucial role in improving the quality of early childhood education programs for indigenous learners. With all the efforts made by the Department of Education in promoting a culturally-rooted and responsive education for indigenous people, little is known about the beliefs of teachers and school heads on teaching indigenous children. This qualitative, phenomenological research explores the beliefs of teachers and school heads on the various aspects of indigenous early childhood education. Teachers and school heads were teaching Kindergarten to Grade III classes assigned in four schools serving Batak indigenous learners in Palawan, Philippines. Data were obtained using observations, lesson plan analysis, and interviews with teachers and school heads. Overall, teachers and school heads professed to believe that Batak learners have particular intelligences and learning styles unique to their cultural orientations as hunters and gatherers. They are also described as shy and lacking intention to pursue higher education. The use of rewards and punishment was perceived highly important in classroom management. Participants believe that promoting spiritual values is their primary role in the education of indigenous learners. This study provides guidelines for capacitating teachers and school heads in promoting culturally appropriate education for young indigenous learners.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenological research, Batak, indigenous education, early childhood education, Palawan

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of indigenous early childhood education efforts depends on the appropriateness of education to communities’ cultural perspectives, beliefs, and practices (Tobin, 2005). A culturally-rooted and responsive education incorporates local beliefs, values, and practices of indigenous communities into children’s daily learning (Fleer, Anning, and Cullen, 2004; Hutchins, Martin, Saggars, and Sims, 2007; Schwab and Sutherland, 2001). Schools that promote positive cultural identification enhance children’s self-esteem and self-confidence which potentially raise their academic performance (Agbo, 2001; Singh, 2011). Beliefs about what, how, why and when children learn in accordance to their cultural practices provide the foundation for curriculum designs that teachers and school heads must place high importance to (Romero-Little, 2010).

In the light of recognizing the right of indigenous children to a culturally-rooted and responsive education, the Department of Education of the Republic of the Philippines adopted the enclosed Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Curriculum Framework (Do No. 32, s. 2015) to provide guidance in the implementation of education to IP learners based on their respective social and cultural context. The success of the IPEd program depends on the school heads’ leadership in creating a school culture where culturally appropriate
education for indigenous learners is practiced, as well as on teachers’ efforts in transforming the philosophy of the IPEd program into actual classroom experiences.

In Palawan, Bataks represent the smallest and most endangered indigenous group having only a population of less than 400 (Novellino, 2011). Labelled as a “vanishing tribe” due to its dwindling population (Cabuena, Fernando, Chavez, Pampolina, Geges, Jimena, Bibal, and Amparo, 2015), it is hoped that young Batak learners will receive a kind of education that recognizes their indigenous knowledge systems and practices through the facilitation of their classroom teachers.

The framework of this study is based on David Hume’s Theory of Beliefs. This theory states that beliefs have a great influence on the mind and strongly affect a person’s will by virtue of impressions or memories associated to them (Gorman, 1993). Hence, it this study assumes that teachers and school heads’ beliefs on indigenous early childhood education strongly impacts their attitudes and behavior toward teaching Batak children in the early childhood stage.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To determine teachers and school heads’ beliefs, this study utilized a qualitative research design. A qualitative research focuses on “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Of the many types of qualitative research, a phenomenological approach was the most appropriate for the study since it focuses on examining human experiences through the descriptions provided by people involved (Donalek, 2004).

2.1 Participants

The researcher interviewed 13 participants—nine early childhood education teachers and four school heads—from four identified schools serving Batak learners. Having a small number of participants is the expected norm in a qualitative research. According to Patton (2002, p. 230), “the power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth”. Having a small participant number enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participant experiences and a richer description of their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

2.2 Procedures

Speer (2005) pointed out that self-reports from an interview is the dominant method for measuring teachers’ beliefs. In this study, teachers and school heads’ responses to interview questions served as the primary source of data in this study. To validate data obtained from interviews, classroom observations and document review of lesson plans were likewise conducted.

2.3 Data Analysis

Transcribed data were coded through the use of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package produced by QSR International. Software Packages that assist in the analysis of qualitative data are called Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Patton, 2002). This software gives the researcher more time to discover patterns, recognize themes and draw conclusions (Hilal and Alabri, 2013). Two experts—one in the field of education and another in cultural anthropology—separately validated the coded themes.
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As for the profile of the participants, the average length of teaching experience of teachers is 5.56 years while that of the school heads is 13 years. In terms of religion, 10 participants (seven teachers and three school heads) are Born Again Christians, and three others (two teachers and one school head) are Roman Catholics. With regards to ethnicity, seven participants (five teachers and two school heads) are Visayan, five (three teachers and two school heads) are Cuyunon, and one teacher is Tagalog.

The sections below present the themes that synthesized the beliefs of teachers and school heads on indigenous early childhood education. These themes are not common to other related studies conducted.

**Theme 1: Have particular intelligences and learning styles**
Nine participants professed that Batak learners possess oral and naturalistic intelligence as shown in their ability in reciting long stories in their native Binatak language and in naming many different kinds of flora and fauna found in the mountain. They also reported that majority of Batak children are visual and kinesthetic learners. This view of children having own particular intelligence and learning style supports one of the guiding principles of the National Early Learning Framework which describes every child as a thinking human being (www.eccdcouncil.gov.ph). The Multiple Intelligence Theory of Howard Gardner (Gardner, 2011) further explain their abilities and potentials in terms of remembering and reciting long traditional stories (verbal intelligence), and of relating to their natural surroundings (naturalistic intelligence).

**Theme 2: Shy**
Eight participants professed that majority of Batak children are typically shy. They explained that Batak families usually go together as one clan, and they do not usually interact with other indigenous groups. According to the concept of primitive social organization, human societies that are small-scaled and kin-based have evolved without government and ruling elites for a long time (Elman Rogers Service & Delelee-Desloges, 1971). Hence, the reason why Batak children are "shy" is most likely because they are used to live in small family groups for a long period in history and living with other cultural groups is not the norm for them.

**Theme 3: Lacking intention to pursue higher education**
Some participants felt that Batak children seem to have no intention to pursue higher education One of them explained that the reason maybe mainly due to poverty and their cultural practice of getting into early marriage. In order to fully understand the reason for the said behavior, the principle of cultural relativism should be applied. This principle refers to the idea that the cultural orientation of a person should be the basis for understanding his/her beliefs, values, and practices (Tiley, 2000). Hence, it could be speculated that Batak children's seemingly lack of drive to pursue higher education (and eventually become a professional) may be because they are aspiring for other highly respectable positions in the community (i.e, to become a babaylan or elder).

**Theme 4: Highly motivated by rewards**
All participants reported that Batak children are motivated the most if they are given extrinsic motivation. This finding suggests that most teachers and school heads believe that Batak children learn effectively using a behaviorist approach—through the giving of rewards (e.g., food, toys, and the like) and punishment (e.g., removing play-time). According to Landau (2001), since effective and equitable classroom management strategies require a particular set of professional skills, teachers lacking knowledge on learner-centered teaching processes resort to the quick and easy systems of using rewards and punishments in their classroom instruction. The participants of this study must be aware of the implications of giving too much...
reinforcement in a form of rewards as Hoffman, Hutchinson, and Reiss (2009) warned that reliance on these do not promote the long-term development of learners' pro-social behavior.

**Theme 5: Need to promote spiritual values**

More than 75% of the participants who are Born-Again Christians expressed that being a teacher is part of their calling to be a missionary. This finding is directly parallel to the findings conducted by Wa-Mbaleka (2013) when he studied the best practices of several schools for indigenous learners in Mindoro, Philippines. The said study also found that promoting spiritual values was perceived by school heads to help the learners develop skills in order to be of service to others and to God. Both studies stressed out the reliance of the participants on God for their success in teaching indigenous learners.

**4. CONCLUSION**

From the findings obtained in this study, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, teachers and school heads believe that young Batak learners have unique intelligence/s and learning styles. Second, they believe that giving of rewards and punishment is a very effective way for managing Batak learners. And third, teachers and school heads believe that promoting spiritual values is their primary task for teaching Batak children. The knowledge gained from this study leads to the realization that teacher education program developers should include in their curriculum special units about indigenous education as knowledge on this topic may contribute to teachers and school heads’ culturally appropriate beliefs.

**REFERENCES**

- Early Childhood Care and Development Council. Retrieve from eccdcouncil.gov.ph.


