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People empowerment: an approach towards indigenous early childhood curriculum

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at presenting an implemented community engagement of the University of San Carlos School of Education with the communities of Agusan del Sur, Philippines, in close partnership with the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC, (JPIC-IDC) Incorporated of Agusan del Sur as a response to a felt need in the early childhood education program of the province. In 2004, JPIC pooled together concerted resources from provincial and local government units, non-government organization and academe to create and develop a culture-based curriculum guide for early childhood education that is appropriate and responsive to the needs of indigenous groups in Agusan del Sur, Southern Philippines. To address these needs, an ethnographic community engagement framework was utilized and initiated by JPIC-IDC team and the University Of San Carlos School Of Education. The community engagement framework facilitated the partnership of Agusan del Sur government leaders, a non-government organization in Germany, community cultural masters, Day Care Teachers and the University of San Carlos School of Education to create a developmentally appropriate and culture-based curriculum for Day Care with a supporting handbook for mother-teachers in early childhood education. As a result of this framework, children drop-out decreased from 80% to 10% while parent-community involvement increased from 30% to 90% in 2009 (JPIC-IDC, 2007). Ongoing teacher trainings and community orientations on the culture-based curriculum have been extended to 42 additional communities in 2012-2018 from 35 communities in 2007 upon request from the provincial governor. Two editions of a culture-based handbook have been published and a third edition is currently prepared for District 2 communities with guided participation by Day Care teachers as co-authors. This community engagement framework, initiated by the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation of Agusan del Sur Philippines involving all stakeholders from the provincial leaders to the recipients of early childhood education, serves as a model to community extension service programs (CES) of schools and universities as well as to curriculum practitioners and administrators. Three principles involved in this particular community engagement concretely demonstrate that program sustainability is a product of partnership, sensitivity to culture and context and relevance to community's need.

Keywords: community engagement; culture-based curriculum.

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to share the University Of San Carlos School Of Education's best practice in community engagement on a contextualized curriculum development through partnership with JPIC-IDC, Agusan, and contribute to the literature of best practices in the creation of indigenous curriculum for early childhood education.

In 2007 an urgent problem in early childhood education was presented by the Provincial Social Work and Development Officer to the Executive Director of Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC, Inc of Agusan Del Sur, indicating the impoverished state of early childhood education in the province. The agency expressed the need for support in the implementation of the nationwide Act for Early Childhood Care and Development, also known as Republic Act 8980 which called for a culture-based contextualized curriculum for early childhood education. This paper presents the best practice in applied community engagement framework of JPIC-IDC hand in hand with Filipino indigenous research method, and illustrates how it

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has brought change into the empty state of early childhood education in the province of Agusan del Sur.

A needs assessment survey initiated by Fr. Anthony S. Salas, SVD in 2004, the executive director of the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC of Agusan Del Sur, Southern Philippines, revealed a discouraging image of early childhood education in the province. Privately owned day care centers in the province were managed and facilitated by teachers who were graduates in early childhood education equipped with children friendly chairs, tables, and books facilities conducive to children's learning, while government day care centers in the communities held learning sessions inside chapels, or makeshift houses with soil flooring. Two to three day care workers out of thirty-five had finished secondary school and college education not related to early childhood education. Day Care workers were mothers and volunteers who had the biggest heart and passion for teaching children age 3-4 and 5-6 years old, but had not had training for a culture-based education. As volunteers, day care workers received remuneration as low as two hundred and fifty to five hundred pesos (250.00-500.00), equivalent to IDR 66,666.67–133,333.33 or USD 5.33–10.67 per month. With this small amount, day care workers conscientiously solicited for writing materials such as chalk and books from friends or the *barangay* captain who was the head of the community. Indigenous parent farmers who lacked awareness on the significance and relevance of early childhood education would rather have their children's participate in farm work during planting and harvest seasons than attend learning sessions in day care centers. Thus, the survey showed a summary result of only 30% parent participation and 80% of student dropout rate from 35 *barangay* communities where JPIC is in operation (JPIC, 2007).

As a response to the problem on early childhood education for the province of Agusan del Sur, the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC (JPIC-IDC, Agusan) a non-government organization based in Prosperidad, Agusan Del Sur, presented the needs assessment results to the stakeholders and dialogued towards a memorandum of agreement with the provincial and local government leaders, Department of Social Welfare and Development of Agusan province, stakeholders and Day Care teachers from 35 *barangay* communities, through the leadership of its executive director, Fr. Anthony S. Salas, SVD. JPIC-IDC also solicited resources from the Karl Kuebel Stiftung (KKS) organization of Germany as well as research and curriculum support from the University of San Carlos, School of Education, Cebu City Philippines to advocate and plan for the implementation of the Early Childhood Care and Development Act also called Republic Act no. 8980.

Agusan Del Sur, a province of Caraga region Southern Philippines is home to Manobo, Agusanon, Banwaon, and Higaonon indigenous tribes. Migrant workers from neighboring provinces of the country brought in to Agusan by the logging industry have become part of the Agusanon ethnolinguistic group. However, the waning spirit of cultural identity among the indigenous groups in the JPIC's area of operation pushed for a stronger desire to implement the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (Republic Act 8371) through a curriculum for early childhood that is culture-based and peace-oriented (Villaluz, 2008). The pooled financial resources from the provincial and local government provided the monthly remuneration of day care workers, JPIC-IDC and the Karl Kuebel Stiftung (KKS) of Germany supplied the infrastructure, learning facilities and organizing dimensions of the community engagement, while the School of Education faculty-researcher was tasked to conceptualize a culture-based curriculum and organize a core group of trainers to train other groups on the curriculum.

The University Of San Carlos School Of Education has been a support partner of JPIC-IDC Agusan in the field of teaching and learning for early childhood since 2005. In a period of twelve (12) years the culture-based curriculum has expanded to 42 added *barangay* communities in Agusan Del Sur and has opened opportunities for faculty members to share skills and receive indigenous methods from communities.

2. Theoretical Background

Two standing theories were observed as contextually appropriate for the creation of a culture-based curriculum. The preliminary stages applied the Filipino indigenous research method, while the middle and latter stages utilized the community engagement framework.

2.1. Filipino Indigenous Research framework

In a research location where the community participants are members of indigenous groups of Agusan del Sur such as the Manobo, Higaonon, Banwaon and Agusanon, it was appropriate to apply a method of research that was relevant to Filipino sensibility. Torres in Rogelia Pepua(2000) suggests five levels which begin with *pakapakapa*, “an approach that is defined through searching and probing to obtain meaning and directions for research”(Pepua & Marcelino, 2000). The first level suggests that rapport, mutual trust and understanding should be attained to ensure quality valid data, while the second level prescribes equality between researcher and research participants. This level called *pagtatanong-tanong* which means asking questions in a casual manner, allows not only the researcher to ask questions but also the participants. In this level, research participants are considered research partners instead of subjects of research. The third level highlights the ethical responsibility of the research, which is the welfare of the people rather than the funding agency. Santiago (1976) in Pepua argues that the main goal of indigenous research method is empowerment and understanding, and Pepua underlines “not at the disadvantage of the people” (Pepua & Marcelino, 2000). Sensitivity to the culture and ways of the participants are essential as the fourth principle, and lastly the use of the peoples’ language underlines the fifth principle. In their study, Pe-Pua and Marcelino,(2000) reveal extensive contribution by Filipino scholars to indigenous research method such as *pagtatanong-tanong* (unstructured interview) (Pepua, 1989), *pakikipagkwentuhan* (informal conversations) (Orteza,1997), *ginabayang talakayan* (collective indigenous discussion), *nakikiugaling pagmamasiid* (participant observation) (Bennagen, 1985), *pakikisama* (“getting along with”) (Nery, 1979), *pagdadalaw-dalaw* (“visiting”) (Gepigon & Frnacisco, 1978), and *panuluyan* (“residing in the research setting”) (San Juan & Soriaga, 1985) (Rogelia Pe-Pua & Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino, 2000:).

2.2. Community Engagement Framework

The US National Institute of Health has defined community engagement as a process of working together in collaboration with organized groups, agencies, institutions or individuals towards addressing a particular community issue or concern. It involves partnership with organized groups, leaders, communities and agencies to mobilize resources and influence systems (McCloskey, Gaxiola,Michener, 2011:7). There are nine areas identified by the US National Institute of Health, which were found to be successful community engagement processes. However, for the education arm of the community engagement, only seven of the nine

areas were applied. The first is clarity of objective or agenda, which defined the focus of resources and direction of the engagement; the second is creating relationships and networks to establish trust with leaders and members of the community to facilitate the processes necessary for community building. The third area highlights that knowledge of the community's culture, economic conditions, norms, values, political and power structure, social networks, demographic trends are important for a successful community engagement. This substantiates the fourth level of the indigenous research method which puts cultural sensitivity into the forefront to provide space for consent processes. Public participation is underlined as the fourth area, which enhances the community's ownership of the goals at hand and prepares the ground for the sustainability of the project. Involvement of the public also enriches the data with history and perspective from the ground. Networking with academic partners is observed as the fifth process for success. In community engagement, the contribution of academic partners provides a broader perspective and understanding needed on the social concerns of the community. New insights gained from academic partners open opportunities for expansion of the project at hand. Participation of individuals who hold traditional knowledge, history or skill in the community is the sixth area to be given attention to, while the seventh area is community organization. It is the principles of community organizing that sets the groundwork for community engagement. And prepares members and leaders of the community to move towards achieving their goals (Mckloskey, Gaxiola, Michener et. al., 2011: 3-10)

3. Methods

My research journey with the communities of Agusan Del Sur and the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC Agusan (JPIC-IDC) started in 2005 when Dr. Enriqueta Reston, the School of Education Dean of the University of San Carlos Cebu at that time and Father Anthony S. Salas, SVD Early Childhood Education Project Director of JPIC-IDC sought for researchers from the academe. The task was to do research with JPIC indigenous groups in Agusan Del Sur Southern Philippines for the creation of a culture-based curriculum for early childhood education to thirty (35) *barangays* (districts) where JPIC-IDC was in operation. Having had research journeys with the Talaandig tribe of Northern Mindanao, I jumped to the opportunity for a new research journey with another culture in Mindanao. Preliminary visits to Agusan Del Sur introduced us to dynamic research partners from the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the province, and the education and administrative staff of JPIC-IDC. Friendly visits and informal conversations with social work coordinators from the municipalities of Loreto, Lapaz and Veruela, with the accompaniment of the community organizer of JPIC-IDC, prepared us for the creative venture to a culturally-based curriculum for Day Care children through community engagement.

3.1. Research location

Agusan Del Sur belongs to Caraga Region XIII situated east side of Mindanao island Philippines. This study was located in three (3) of its 13 municipalities namely Loreto, Veruela, and Laz Paz (figure 1) (Province of Agusan Del Sur, 2016). Thirty five (35) *barangays* from the three municipalities served by Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation-IDC (JPIC-IDC) were chosen as pilot areas for the culture-based early childhood program. At this stage the

indigenous research methods of *pagdadalaw-dalaw* (friendly visitations), *pakikipagkwentuhan* (informal conversations), and *pagtatanong-tanong* (unstructured interview) approaches were the most beneficial to the following stages of the research and has also opened up lasting relationships.

Originally the word '*barangay*' referred to a big sea vessel where related families lived and led by a captain called the Datu during the 16th century Philippines. This developed into a political unit composed of a hundred houses or less than thirty families (Scott, 2004). The local government code of 1992 has established the *barangay* as the smallest political unit in the Philippine society. Headed by the *barangay* captain or chairperson and the council members exercise executive, judicatory and legislative powers independent from the municipality (Gargantiel, 2013).

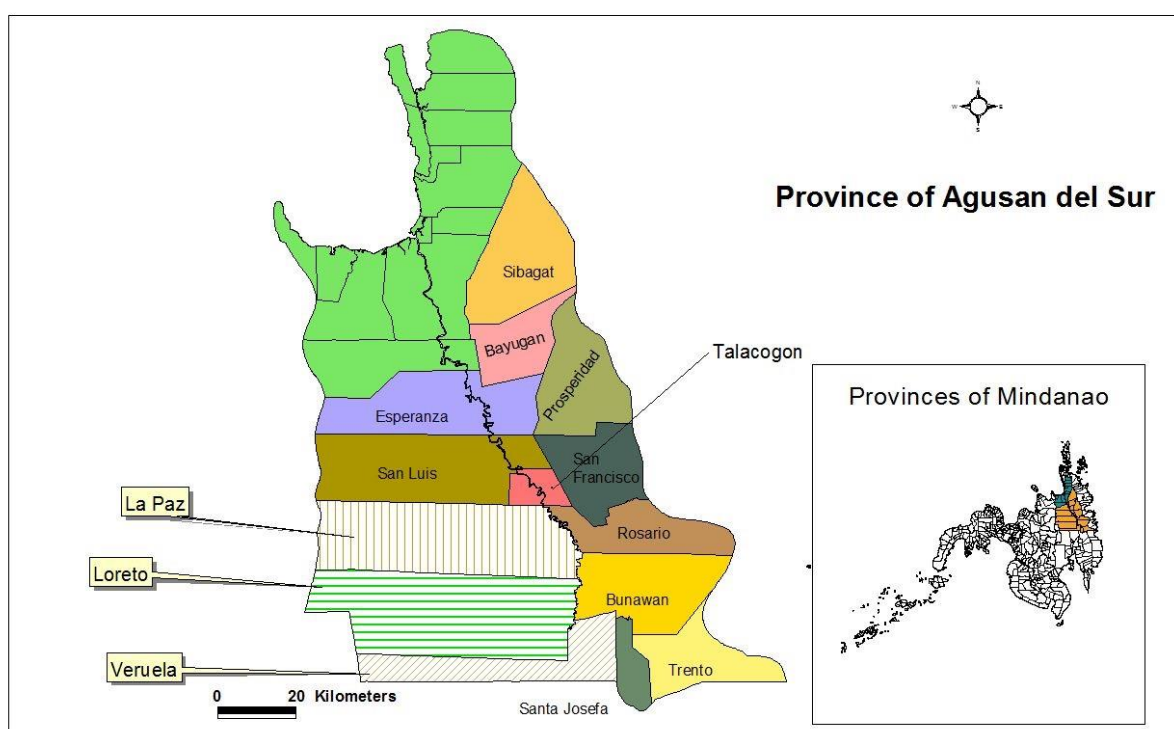


Fig. 1 a) Map of the Province of Agusan del Sur
Source: Liz Rodriguez-Ardary (2009)

3.2. Research Participants

The 35 Day Care teachers who represented their *barangays* and 5 cultural masters from two indigenous communities joined the research process from its conception to the training stage. The Day Care Teachers were mothers who belonged to indigenous groups (Manobo, Banwaon, Higaonon) and Agusanon of mixed marriages. The teachers were fulltime mothers, 80% with elementary – high school academic backgrounds and 15% having college background. They eventually became the field researchers of the culture-based resource materials. The education coordinating staff from JPIC-IDC and the Department of Social Welfare and Development from the province and myself were simply facilitators and assistants to the process of creating the culture-based curriculum.

3.3. Focus Group Discussions

A total of five focus group discussions (FGD) transpired within six months from November 2004-March 2005. Two goal setting orientations were set in the municipalities of Loreto and La Paz through the facilitation of municipal social workers. Participants wrote their families' origins on note cards or Meta cards and pasted these in appropriate locations in the Philippine map. This exercise stimulated an inspired introduction and claimed knowledge identity from each participant's ethnolinguistic cultural values. The second focus group discussion revealed heartbreaking and enlightening stories on the desire of communities to recover their cultural values. One cultural master, Datu Miel symbolically describes the weakening spirit of the Manobo cultural values in their community: "to me this discussion on our cultural values is heartening because I see our culture like a candle slowly melting away" (*"nalipay ko ug dako niining atong gihimo nga pag-istorya kabahin sa bilihong kaalam sa kultura kay daw kandila na kami nga naghinayhinay ug kaupos"*) (Miel, 2005). Having heard the communities' concerns, hopes and aspirations, one significant question became the heart of the birthing culturally based early childhood curriculum. The question proposed was "what cultural values do you want to pass on to your children at this time?" (FGD, 2005). Answers to this question served as the core of the early childhood education curriculum content and activities which the participants as field researchers gathered from relatives, and cultural masters. The fourth focused discussion session was a lively shared gathering of poems, rhymes, songs, dance steps, stories of cultural values. The fifth focus group discussion centered on data validation, feedback and suggestions. The ideas, concerns, aspirations and researched data were all presented to the participants who helped facilitate the calendar of topics and activities according to the life and work cycle of the Agusanon culture.

3.4. Drawing out Voices through Ethnography

The Manobo and Higaonon cultural masters of Loreto and La Paz municipalities have sadly expressed their lament of a gradual diminishment of indigenous knowledge among the young amidst the growing culture of globalization brought about by media and technology. The sentiments of indigenous peoples represented by the cultural masters in Loreto and La Paz municipalities are the undocumented and unpublished silent voices in Agusan society. It is from this context that ethnography as an approach was applied in this community engagement. It was through observance and participation in rituals, informal storytelling sessions, and friendly visits that the sentiments of indigenous communities were heard and documented. Poems, children's chants, tales, and cultural masters' stories were gathered to become sources of teaching learning for the young in day care centers.

3.5. Skills Training

Cultural masters from the different indigenous groups joined a two day live-in sessions of workshop on mat weaving, indigenous instrumental and dance study, indigenous games experiences, rituals and prayers and storytelling sessions. The sessions were closed with a ritual thanking the spirit guides of our cultural traditions to bring our hopes into reality

through our children's education. This ritual is called *ulahingan* (a Manobo chanted oral communication) from one of the *ulahingan* masters who chanted this message to each of us:

"As we move on from here, we travel with the wind like the cogon flowers, to our areas of work and to our homes; to our Barangays and to the city of Cebu, may we always remember that we carry with us a stem of this rattan palm, and in time the wind will bring us back to meet again..." (Datu Grasya, 2006)

4. Result and Discussions

Four significant outcomes from the School of Education's community engagement with JPIC-IDC, Agusan, Provincial Department of Social Work and Development, and the *barangays* of Districts 1 and 2 of Agusan Del Sur will be laid out and discussed in this paper. These outcomes are empowerment, a culture-based handbook for Day Care in Agusan Del Sur, long term academe and NGO relationship and personal enrichment for educators.

4.1. Empowerment from Focus Group Discussions

Creating a curriculum are usually done by an individual or a team of experts in academic institutions with consultations to parents, students and users of the curriculum. However a culture-based curriculum created by members of the community, such as the cultural masters, parents, day care workers, community leaders and representatives of indigenous groups in the municipalities of La Paz, Loreto and Veruela in Agusan del Sur laid out elements of empowerment to every participant of this community engagement including the facilitators. Participants heard the sentiments of indigenous cultural masters saying

"We are happy that this curriculum for our children will reflect who we are and what we want our grandchildren to learn as they grow. As cultural masters of the Manobo tribe, we feel that our cultural knowledge is like a candle lightly burning and melting away. So many researchers in the past have come and collected our stories, songs and dances but we remained to be providers of information for them" (Miel, 2007)



Fig 2. Focus Group Discussion on Culture-based Curriculum

Photo source: Villaluz, 2007

As a result of the focus group discussions day care workers felt empowered to research for local stories, children's rhyme songs called *Buwa-buwa* by the Banwaon tribe, games, and dance steps turned out to be the field researchers for the culturally based curriculum. In the group discussions day care workers discovered sources of indigenous storytellers within their own localities and were overjoyed to source these as curriculum materials. Nanay/Mother Teofila Bada, a popular storyteller who learned stories from her grandmother shared her book of stories entitled *A Voice in the Forest* compiled by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL, 1979-2000). She also gave permission to JPIC-IDC to provide illustration of a hero crocodile story for children's use. Poems, songs, games and children's rhymes were collected and shared in the focused group discussions, which turned out to be a celebration of indigenous tales, songs, rituals, colors and dances.

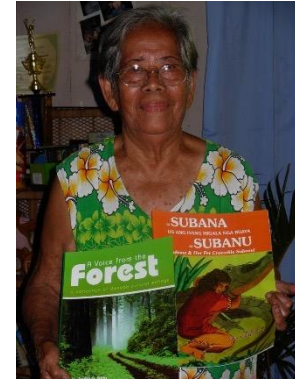


Fig. 3 Teofila G. Bada, Stories
Photo source: Villaluz, 2007

Focus group discussions are empowering tools in community engagement. Indigenous research scholars of the University of the Philippines claim that *ginabayang talakayan* or facilitated discussions open spaces for empathy where participants discover that they share the same experiences or the same plight as mothers (C. Aquino, C. Sobrechea, 1999). Day care workers realized that they have the best resources for a culture-based curriculum for early childhood around their own environment; and that they are capable of research as day care workers. These continuous sessions have become venues for participants to express and reclaim indigenous knowledge and history.

4.2. The Culture-Based Handbook for Day Care in Agusan Del Sur

The handbook created and researched by day care workers, mothers and cultural masters is a guide that contains the dreams and aspirations of the community concretized into activities for the young. Domains of learning in early childhood education are distributed by the parents themselves into the 12 academic months according to the rhythm of planting and harvest seasons in Agusan Del Sur. During these events in the family's life, the concept of color, numbers, language and values are assignments that parents introduce to their children in the field at harvest and planting time. Thus this justified the monitoring results of an increase in parent involvement from 30% in 2007 to 90% in 2009 and a decrease in student drop out from 90% in 2007 to 10% in 2009.

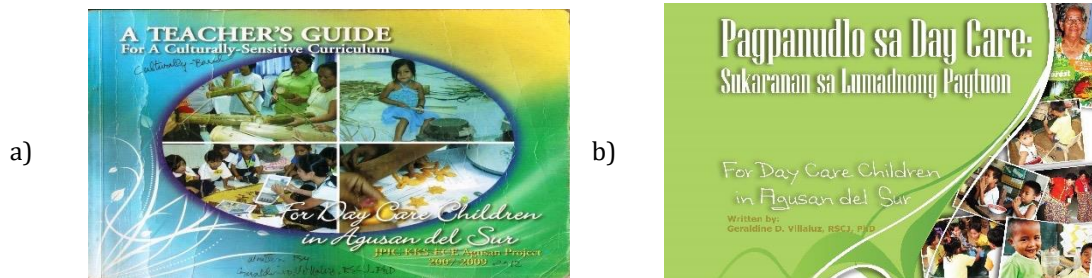


Fig. 4 a) First Edition, 2008
b) Second Edition, 2013
Published Culturally Based Curriculum for Day Care in Agusan Del Sur

Source: Villaluz research photos

In the creation of a culture-based curriculum for early childhood education, the ethnographic research method proved to be most useful because the sharing time with mothers and day care workers uncovered the word *pahina*, understood by everyone in the community as giving one's resource or service freely or voluntarily to a communal project. To introduce this value of service orientation the teacher's guide include a day's rhythm during snack time where children help mothers serve their classmates with plates and food. Recognition of neighboring farmers as sources of learning where the day care centers are located have become special places for day care children's field trip tours, and this added life to the community's participation to children's day care education. Community involvement in the education of children increased dynamically because cultural masters such as story tellers, master dancers, musicians and community leaders became visiting resource speakers to children. Day trips were organized by teachers, for children to visit farms and practice a few minutes of harvesting experience with farm owners.



Fig.5 Chrysolite Day Care children experiencing Rice Harvest in Fernando Mapano's Farm
Source: Teacher Marissa Peleno, (2008)

The applied culture-based curriculum from 2008 – 2011 has called the attention of then governor, Maria Valentina Plaza now a congressional representative to fund a second edition of the teacher's handbook which was published by the University of San Carlos Press in 2013 and an expansion of trainings to the first District of Agusan Del Sur with some members of the first batch who served as core trainers. Table 1 illustrates the expansion of trainings from 2007 – 2018.

Table 1. Number of Barangays/Communities Receiving Culturally Based Curriculum

Agusan Del Sur Phases	District	Municipalities	Year	Number of Barangays
Phase 1	2	La Paz, Loreto & Veruela	2007-2009	35 barangays
Phase 2	1	Sibagat, Bayugan City, Properidad, Talacogon, San Luis, Esperanza	2012-2015	30 barangays
Phase 3	2	San Francisco, Rosario, Bunawan, Trento & Sta. Josefa	2015-2018	12 barangays

Source: JPIC-IDC, Inc. Agusan Del Sur (2017)

These training expansion has opened pathways for faculty members of the University of San Carlos School of Education to participate, share and learn from trainings extended to additional *barangays*. These trainings are held upon request from mayors and a governor of neighboring Districts during school break periods for faculty members to travel from Central Visayas to Mindanao.

4.3. Community Engagement in the Teaching Profession

I started my training in education as a music educator where lessons are designed and determined by the instructor of a piece of music and where long hours of practice was a required discipline. It was my love to learn from the wisdom of indigenous peoples in my country that I volunteered to represent the School of Education in a community engagement curriculum project in Agusan Del Sur. Little did I know that the initial two years of engagement with the education staff of JPIC-IDC, and day care workers of every *barangay*, the social workers of the three municipalities and the province and best of all the cultural masters' dreams and sentiments have inspired my commitment for a longer engagement.

There have been unlimited challenges in community engagement. The time to leave school and travel through rough roads in an overloaded motorbike on rainy seasons, or the waiting time spent before a session starts. However, these inconveniences are minor compared to the hour's hike of day care workers crossing rivers to attend a focused group discussion at the town center even on rainy seasons. These experiences and an unlimited tale of life stories have opened venues for me and my colleagues in the School of Education to reflect on our role as educators and to change perspectives and strategies in teaching and learning with our students in education. Community engagement opens doors to new relationships, new ideas and brings fresh air to daily classroom sessions.



Fig. 6 JPIC Education staff, Motorbike driver, The author and Provincial Social Work & Development Coordinator

Source: Villaluz, 2007

5. Conclusion

As we move closer to a full implementation of the K-12 system of Education in the Philippines and aim to apply outcome based teaching and learning with our students, the positive response gained from this community engagement sends a message to our schools and universities to listen to expressed needs of our communities. Allowing stakeholders and the agencies in society who will receive our graduates to be part of the curriculum creation can be a slow process and a laborious endeavor. However, the results can address our stakeholders' appropriate needs. In addition, empowerment and sustainability are assured when participation of community members become central to curriculum creation and issues on faculty development, research involvement and updating of teaching-learning are addressed as one.

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