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Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices of Secondary Learners: Implications for Culturally Responsive Social Studies Education in Mountain Province, Philippines

Samuel S. Buenafe

Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines
 Talubin National High School
 samuelsbuenafe@gmail.com

Dr. Rosemelita V. Bastian

rosemelita.v.bastian@isu.edu.ph

Abstract

This study explored the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of secondary learners in Mountain Province, Philippines, and examined their implications for culturally responsive Social Studies education. Anchored on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory, the study investigated how local traditions, community values, cultural beliefs, and indigenous practices shape learners' identities, worldviews, and learning experiences. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative case study design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis involving secondary learners and Social Studies teachers from selected public secondary schools in Mountain Province. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) preservation of indigenous cultural identity and traditions, (2) community-centered knowledge and environmental stewardship, (3) indigenous practices as foundations for experiential learning, and (4) challenges in integrating indigenous knowledge into formal Social Studies instruction. Findings showed that learners continue to practice indigenous traditions such as community cooperation, oral storytelling, traditional rituals, indigenous farming practices, and respect for elders and nature. These cultural experiences significantly influenced learners' understanding of history, governance, community relationships, and social responsibility. However, participants also identified concerns regarding cultural erosion, limited instructional materials, insufficient contextualized curriculum integration, and lack of teacher preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy. The study highlights the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems and local cultural practices into Social Studies education to strengthen cultural preservation, learner engagement, and contextualized learning experiences among secondary learners.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, Social Studies education, Mountain Province, Philippines, indigenous learners

Introduction

The increasing recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and culturally responsive education has significantly influenced contemporary educational discourse, particularly in multicultural and indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge encompasses the collective wisdom, practices, traditions, values, and belief systems developed by indigenous peoples through long-term interaction with their social, cultural, and environmental contexts. These knowledge systems play a vital role in preserving cultural identity, strengthening community relationships, and sustaining local traditions across generations. In educational settings, integrating indigenous knowledge into classroom instruction allows learners to connect formal education with their lived experiences, cultural heritage, and community realities.

In the Philippines, indigenous communities continue to preserve diverse cultural traditions and knowledge systems despite the growing influence of globalization, modernization, and technological advancement. Mountain Province, located within the Cordillera Administrative Region, is home to various indigenous groups known for their rich cultural heritage, traditional governance systems, indigenous farming practices, oral traditions, rituals, and communal values. Secondary learners in these communities are exposed to both formal education and indigenous cultural practices, creating opportunities and challenges in preserving cultural identity while navigating modern educational systems.

The Department of Education in the Philippines emphasizes contextualization, localization, and culturally responsive education within the K-12 curriculum framework. Social Studies education, in particular, provides opportunities for integrating indigenous perspectives, local history, cultural traditions, and community experiences into classroom instruction. Through culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers can make learning more meaningful by recognizing learners' cultural backgrounds, indigenous identities, and lived realities as valuable educational resources.

Existing studies highlight that culturally responsive teaching improves learner engagement, academic participation, identity formation, and cultural appreciation among indigenous learners (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similarly, indigenous knowledge integration in education has been associated with strengthened cultural preservation, environmental awareness, and community participation. However, despite policy directions supporting contextualized instruction, indigenous knowledge systems remain insufficiently integrated into formal classroom instruction, particularly in secondary Social Studies education.

Furthermore, there remains limited qualitative research exploring how indigenous knowledge and cultural practices shape the educational experiences of secondary learners in Mountain Province. Much of the available literature focuses on indigenous peoples' rights, cultural preservation, or curriculum policies without extensively examining learners' lived experiences and the implications of indigenous cultural practices for culturally responsive Social Studies instruction.

This study explored the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of secondary learners in Mountain Province, Philippines, and examined their implications for culturally responsive Social Studies education. Specifically, the study investigated the cultural experiences, indigenous practices, community values, and challenges associated with integrating indigenous knowledge into classroom instruction.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay, as well as Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy emphasizes the importance of integrating learners' cultural experiences, values, traditions, and identities into teaching and learning processes. This approach recognizes culture as a central component of effective instruction and encourages educators to connect classroom content with learners' lived experiences and sociocultural realities.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory recognizes indigenous knowledge as a valid and meaningful system of understanding developed through generations of interaction with community life, environment, and cultural practices. Indigenous knowledge includes oral traditions, ecological practices, social values, governance systems, rituals, and local wisdom that shape community identity and collective understanding.

These theoretical perspectives guided the exploration of how indigenous cultural practices influence learners' educational experiences and how culturally responsive Social Studies instruction can strengthen cultural relevance and learner engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative case study design to explore the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of secondary learners and their implications for culturally responsive Social Studies education in Mountain Province.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in selected public secondary schools in Mountain Province, Philippines. Participants included secondary learners and Social Studies teachers selected through purposive sampling. Learners were chosen based on active participation in indigenous cultural practices and community activities, while teachers were selected based on their involvement in Social Studies instruction and contextualized teaching practices.

Data Collection Instruments

Data for the study were gathered through multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed insights regarding the indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and educational experiences of secondary learners and teachers. Focus group discussions were also utilized to encourage collaborative sharing of experiences, beliefs, and community practices among participants. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to examine actual teaching practices, learner participation, and the integration of indigenous knowledge within Social Studies instruction. Document analysis of instructional materials, lesson plans, and cultural artifacts was likewise carried out to identify the presence of contextualized and culturally responsive educational content relevant to indigenous culture and community traditions.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was secured from school administrators and relevant educational authorities. Participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data gathering. Interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. Themes and patterns were identified through systematic coding and interpretation of qualitative data.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was established through triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement with participants. Dependability was ensured through audit trails and documentation of procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflective analysis, while transferability was supported through rich descriptions of participants and research settings.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Preservation of Indigenous Cultural Identity and Traditions

Participants emphasized the importance of preserving indigenous cultural traditions, practices, and values within their communities and educational experiences. Learners described culture as an essential foundation of their identity, social relationships, and understanding of community life. Indigenous practices were viewed not only as traditions inherited from previous generations but also as guiding principles that shape behavior, discipline, and respect within the community.

One learner shared:

“Importante sa amin ang kultura kasi dito namin nakikilala kung sino kami.”

(“Our culture is important because it helps us understand who we are.”)

Learners described active participation in cultural activities such as traditional dances, rituals, community gatherings, oral storytelling, indigenous celebrations, and customary practices observed during important community events. These activities allowed learners to remain connected to their cultural roots and indigenous identity.

Another participant stated:

“Tinaturo pa rin sa amin ng matatanda ang mga tradisyon at tamang paggalang sa kultura.”

(“The elders continue teaching us the traditions and proper respect for our culture.”)

Classroom discussions and observations revealed that respect for elders, communal cooperation, discipline, and preservation of traditions remained central indigenous values transmitted within families and communities. Learners expressed pride in their indigenous heritage and recognized the importance of sustaining these traditions despite modernization and changing societal influences.

The findings indicate that indigenous cultural practices continue to shape learners' identities, social relationships, cultural pride, and sense of belonging within their communities. These findings support culturally responsive education perspectives emphasizing the importance of integrating learners' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences into educational processes.

Theme 2: Community-Centered Knowledge and Environmental Stewardship

Participants highlighted the significant role of indigenous knowledge in promoting environmental responsibility, sustainable living, and community-centered values. Learners described how traditional practices and indigenous teachings influenced their understanding of environmental care and collective responsibility.

One learner explained:

“Natuto kami sa mga magulang namin kung paano alagaan ang lupa at kalikasan.”

(“We learned from our parents how to care for the land and environment.”)

Traditional farming methods, resource conservation practices, watershed protection, and communal labor systems were frequently mentioned as important indigenous practices learned through family and community participation. Learners explained that indigenous teachings emphasized balance between human activities and environmental preservation.

Participants also emphasized the value of cooperation and collective responsibility within indigenous communities.

“Kapag may gawain sa komunidad, nagtutulungan talaga ang lahat.”

(“Whenever there is community work, everyone cooperates.”)

Community cooperation was viewed as an important cultural practice that strengthened social relationships and

communal unity. Learners shared experiences of participating in communal farming, environmental clean-up activities, and traditional community projects that fostered responsibility and collaboration.

The findings suggest that indigenous knowledge systems strengthen learners' understanding of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, sustainability, and collective participation. These practices contribute not only to environmental awareness but also to the preservation of indigenous community values and traditions.

Theme 3: Indigenous Practices as Foundations for Experiential Learning

Participants described how indigenous cultural experiences enhanced their understanding of Social Studies concepts and community life. Learners explained that lessons became more meaningful and easier to understand when connected to their own cultural experiences and local realities.

One learner stated:

“Mas naiintindihan namin ang aralin kapag konektado sa kultura at karanasan namin.”

(“We understand lessons better when they are connected to our culture and experiences.”)

Teachers incorporated local history, indigenous traditions, community practices, oral narratives, and cultural examples into classroom discussions to contextualize Social Studies instruction. Learners became more participative and engaged during lessons involving familiar cultural experiences and local community issues.

Classroom observations revealed that culturally grounded discussions encouraged learners to actively share experiences, community stories, and indigenous practices related to governance, history, environmental conservation, and social relationships. Teachers observed that learners demonstrated stronger appreciation of cultural identity and local history when indigenous knowledge was integrated into instruction.

Teachers also emphasized that integrating indigenous examples and local experiences strengthened learners' appreciation of history, citizenship, governance, cultural preservation, and social responsibility. Experiential learning through community interaction and cultural participation allowed learners to connect academic concepts with real-life experiences.

The findings align with culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes meaningful learning through contextualized, learner-centered, and culturally grounded instruction that recognizes learners' cultural identities and lived realities as valuable educational resources.

Theme 4: Challenges in Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Formal Instruction

Despite positive cultural practices and community support, participants identified several challenges affecting the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal Social Studies education. Teachers expressed concerns regarding limited resources, insufficient training, and curriculum-related constraints that affected culturally responsive instruction.

One teacher explained:

“Kulang pa ang materials at training tungkol sa kultural na responsibong pagtuturo.”

(“There is still a lack of materials and training on culturally responsive teaching.”)

Teachers explained that existing instructional materials often lacked localized cultural content and indigenous perspectives relevant to learners' experiences in Mountain Province. Some participants also noted that time limitations and curriculum requirements reduced opportunities for integrating extensive cultural discussions into classroom instruction.

Learners further observed that modernization, technology, and social media exposure contributed to declining interest among some young people in indigenous traditions and practices.

“Unti-unti nang nakakalimutan ng ibang kabataan ang kultura.”

(“Some young people are gradually forgetting the culture.”)

Participants expressed concern that younger generations may gradually lose appreciation of indigenous traditions if cultural preservation efforts are not strengthened within schools and communities. Teachers emphasized the need for stronger institutional support, teacher capacity-building programs, and culturally contextualized learning resources to sustain indigenous knowledge integration in education.

The findings reveal the importance of strengthening culturally responsive curriculum development, teacher training, and institutional support systems to sustain indigenous cultural preservation and meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge into formal Social Studies instruction.

Conclusion

The study revealed that indigenous knowledge and cultural practices continue to significantly influence the identities, social relationships, environmental awareness, and learning experiences of secondary learners in Mountain Province. Indigenous traditions, communal values, environmental stewardship, and oral cultural practices remain essential components of learners' lived experiences and cultural identity.

The findings further demonstrated that integrating indigenous knowledge into Social Studies instruction enhances learner engagement, contextual understanding, cultural appreciation, and meaningful learning experiences. Culturally responsive pedagogy enables learners to connect classroom discussions with their cultural realities and community experiences.

However, challenges related to cultural erosion, limited instructional materials, curriculum constraints, and insufficient teacher preparation continue to affect the effective integration of indigenous knowledge systems within formal education.

Strengthening culturally responsive curriculum development, teacher training, and community collaboration is essential in sustaining indigenous cultural preservation and contextualized learning in secondary education.

Recommendations

1. Schools should strengthen the integration of indigenous knowledge systems within Social Studies instruction.
2. Teachers should be provided with professional development programs focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy and contextualized instruction.
3. Educational institutions should develop localized instructional materials reflecting indigenous culture and community experiences.
4. Schools and communities should strengthen partnerships promoting cultural preservation and indigenous knowledge transmission.
5. Future researchers may conduct broader studies involving multiple indigenous communities and educational settings.

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