
Advancing indigenous peoples' development through MLE

Monday, 01 February 2010

Students of APC, an MLE school in Bendum, an upland village in Mindanao, Philippines.

Pedro Walpole

Multilingual education (MLE) is a major trend in addressing education needs of indigenous peoples and communities in the greater margins of many Asian countries. There is increasing awareness of the need for more appropriate education that sustains local culture and that bridges the social gap with mainstream society.

Examples can be found in different parts of Asia, but a comprehensive understanding let alone a national strategy in the Philippines are lacking. Most communities are left with their own local initiatives and strengths to persevere, although external support is at times available.

The Philippines is challenged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) especially in education and there is an awakening in the national government to the importance of culture-based education that can more easily respond to local cultural needs while ensuring integration with national society. The MLE perspective that comprehensively synthesises cultural needs sustains a broader national integration through social equity.

At the margins of the Philippines, education has not been accessible in any workable fashion. This is most notable in the uplands of Mindanao, in indigenous communities situated at the edge of villages with a predominantly migrant population. In many cases, churches and voluntary support groups have supported both non-formal and formal approaches, but not always with the sustainability desired. In places where indigenous children do have access to formal education, their culture and language are marginalized by the national educational system. Throughout the Philippines, the language of formal education is not the language of home and of local knowledge. The dropout rate is high in areas that are culturally and economically marginalized, and this is especially true for indigenous peoples. There are no clear figures for the number of informal education programs in Mindanao, but a rough estimate of 300 plus alternative child literacy and formal community programs is probable.

Mother tongue-based MLE is an approach to education that begins with the students' first language and gradually adds

other languages that are needed. The students' first language is used in the beginning as the language of classroom communication. After students have developed appropriate competence in the oral and written forms of the language, a second language is added. The first language is not abandoned. Its use is continued throughout the school years, but the amount of usage decreases. After the students gain competence in a second language, a third language can be added usually as a subject.

Indigenous school children.

What exactly is MLE?

Communities do see mother tongue first as appreciative of local meaningful learning that leads to an enhanced learning of the national language and a greater engagement of marginal communities with national society. In this sense, this kind of education is easily understood as multilingual. The majority of informal schools throughout the country are a cultural and national wealth of experience not only in addressing educational deficiencies, but in contributing critically to the enhancement of the national education program in its diversity and incorporation of all.

The actual use of a language is necessary for acquiring a language, so MLE favors teaching that reduces how much teachers speak and increases how much students interact, speak, and think. Given that language and culture are closely related, MLE favors teaching that uses as much cultural knowledge as possible.

This growing effort to teach in the mother tongue in the Philippines connects with the support strategy of the UNESCO and multiple partners in the Asian region to get national government assistance for mother tongue education as the most proficient way of supporting marginal communities whose first language is not the national language. Studies in the region increasingly show that children learning in their mother tongue can develop more rapidly, and in a sustained manner, skills in other languages. Too often, children shifting from home to school have difficulty in understanding when taught directly in the national language. This is one of the main reasons for the high dropout rate in Philippine schools.

MLE is now a formal program of action by the Philippines' Department of Education and seeks to address the need for an education that is responsive to culture and social interrelations. It is also a response to the need for growth in the quality and extent of education currently provided. The roots of MLE are in mother tongue educational programs and local determination to secure and improve opportunities in community life. This approach to education may also be considered a community-based approach to sustainable development. Applying MLE in a community's education program needs to integrate the community's culture, knowledge, and language, but also the landscape and the resource management thereby strengthening its capacity for development that is sustainable.

Responding to other needs sustains education

Efforts to address other basic needs can, and should, coincide with education initiatives given there is a basic community structure, physical location and possibility to schedule events and services. The school facilitates by having not only school children present, but also mothers and infants who are easily drawn in. Health services, if not already active, can be greatly strengthened and made more regular and inclusive of families and their members.

The presence and effective management of a water system is important for community health and sanitation. A voluntary support group may facilitate the initial process of construction, but technical involvement from the community is essential for the maintenance of the system and also possible in the tapping of solar and hydro sources of energy. These initiatives increase the community's technical capacity and empower them to take greater responsibility for addressing their needs.

Through forest, land, and water management in the uplands, ecological services are provided to people down the valley. These include rainfall infiltration, more stable river flows, local climate influences, biodiversity and aspects of primary production. Hopefully in the near future, there will be a greater appreciation of these ecological services as well as an increased application of forms of payment to upland communities.

Road opening and maintenance, infrastructure development, and provision of access to market are critical support initiatives of local government. However, these developments often lose sight of the negative impacts on communities if there is no proper consultation with communities and no proper understanding of the interplay of socio-economic and political factors. The local government can have a critical role in strengthening local capacity in assessing market dynamics if it avoids further destabilizing indigenous peoples.

Livelihood opportunities essential to family and community are often compounded in the uplands with peace and order difficulties. The reduction of fear needs strengthening within a community and not merely by constructing road booms and curfew checkpoints. Communities need a clear justification of how they are positioned in relation to all groups in securing basic needs and in reducing fear in a context of armed groups where the community is caught in between and always loses.

Land use rights and access in both the implementation and management of lands and community based forest management agreements should result in a greater productivity, sustainability and sense of wellbeing in the uplands. This will only happen if financial mechanisms and appropriate crop development accompany these programs along with reduction in bureaucratic red tape and conflicting or unclear local government and line agency policies.

All these concerns need to be integrated in education, for if education only provides knowledge of the social ways in the lowlands and does not evoke thinking of real local options, then education remains as information without the power of action.

MLE and its need for a culture basis

Thus, while the MLE strategy is a welcome and refreshing development in Philippine education, its success with culture groups in the Philippines can only be ensured if there is also a strengthened sense of ancestral domain. There is no sense in running a school and developing the curriculum if there is no sense of culture.

A full and genuine MLE strategy must be predicated on a strong sense of culture in a community, which means their human development beyond mother tongue preservation. This involves a whole package of services that must be ensured such as food security, health and sanitation, livelihood, resource access, and other human security prerequisites for full human development.

By using MLE in a culture-based setting where curriculum development is an integrated package of learning for IP children to value their culture and ways of life, the culture gets stronger and there is the transference to the next generation of the culture's set of values, with the added value of the ability to engage with mainstream society and the modern world.

In a broader understanding of the landscape and diversity in the environment where a culture lives, a history of the people and their genealogy clearly links them and reveals any of the concerns of peace and order. Today many communities in contact with government programs have in some form mapped the resources in the area and are seeking access and rights. They are in need of real management plans and a more integral understanding and recognition from government of the ecological services provided. This requires a level of commitment to self-help, and on all sides the commitment to social equity and integrated resource management.

What then should children be learning beyond skills for getting a job engaging in the world? To belong, children need a story of how and where they belong. In time they need an understanding of their history and relation, the awareness for their language, meaning and richness. From this comes a lifelong emergence of values, responsibilities, the roles in community and society and all the forms of leadership. Only in all of this does a child develop the capacity of commitment and the ability to engage.

What children need to learn, families should be practicing, and the environment should be benefiting.