

Inclusivity in Education Among Sama-Bajaos in Bohol, Philippines: A Tracer Study

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ABSTRACT

The Sama-Bajaos, a nomad ethnic tribe, came to Bohol from Zamboanga in western Mindanao. Known as “sea gypsies,” they lived on boat-houses along Tagbilaran Strait while living as fishers and mendicants in the streets and ports of Tagbilaran City, Bohol. The community lives below the poverty line. This study aimed to look into the impact of the educational intervention program for the Sama-Bajao community initiated by the Provincial Government of Bohol in collaboration with the University of Bohol - Graduate School and Professional Studies in 2007. As a qualitative research, this study stitches the narratives of high school students, college graduates, and their community leaders. The study made use of data analysis, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), In-depth Interview (IDI) and Key Informant Interview (KII). The study found out that the beneficiaries of the

program are now included in the formal educational programs. The community has produced college graduates in recent years who are now working for their community. The study established that the program has made a significant impact in the lives of the beneficiaries, their families, and community. Narratives of hope and success are integrated in the write-up to highlight the importance of inclusivity in education that provides equity in terms of knowledge-acquisition, talent and skills development, and opportunities for gainful employment among the cultural minorities.

Keywords: Cultural minorities, Sama-Bajaos, inclusivity, education, qualitative method, Asia, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The Bajau people are ethnically Malays and exhibit many Malay cultural traits and are spread over Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia (Saat, 2003). They are called in several names such as Orang Seleter in Johor and Singapore; Orang Suku Laut in Riau and Sama-Bajau in the Philippines and Sulawesi (Harrisson, 1973). The history of the Bajau communities can be traced as far as 16th Century. This group of seadwellers has been around Martaban Gulf in Burma, Malacca Straits, Sulu Sea, Borneo Island, the Celebes Sea and the seas off Northern Australia. However, Saat (2003) mentioned the possibilities that Bajau people are not originally nomads and sea gypsies; circumstances may have driven the group away from land and allowed the transformation of cultures. However, when opportunities to settle on land are presented, they adapt very quickly. Saat pointed out that the Sama-Bajau language shows similarities with the Malay used on the Malay Peninsula. However, the Sama-Bajau people in Bohol, Philippines claimed that the language they use is similar to that of the Tausug, another ethnic group found in Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia. In the Philippines, the Tausug people mostly live in Basilan, Tawi-tawi, and Sulu in Mindanao.

For this research, the spelling "Sama-Bajao" is used in favor of the tribe's preference. According to the tribe's recent history, they came to the island province of Bohol, Philippines as a group composed of six families from Tawi-tawi. The group rowed their boats, stopping from shore to shore until they reached Bohol and settled along the Tagbilaran Strait on the shores of Barangay Totolan in the Municipality of Dauis after testing the

towns of Anda and Loay. The exact year of their arrival, however, is uncertain but is estimated to be during the late 1970s or early 1980s. From the original families, the community has around 850 individuals as of 2015 (“In Bohol, Badjaos find hope” 2015). From being nomads and seagypsies, the Sama-Bajao built their houses on stilts above the waters close to the shores, which brought about social and economic changes to their community. “The reason we settle here by the sea is quite simple. The sea is the most important part of our survival. The Badjaos live as fishermen hunting fish using the spear guns,” shared Mario Cuham, the Chieftain (“EARTH DAY DIARY- Badjao Spearfishermen” 2017). Although a majority of the people continued to live as fishermen and speargun hunters, some became pearl vendors while some settled as mendicants in the streets of Tagbilaran, the capital city of Bohol. With such situation, the community lives under the poverty line.

What started as a community dialogue in 2007 with then Board Member Godofreda Tirol, who was then also the Director of the University of Bohol Graduate School and Professional Studies (UB-GSPS), brought along multiple stakeholders providing a multifaceted development program, but holistic in its approach, all geared towards giving their children a chance at education.

Assistance/Projects	Partners
Facilitation of late birth registration especially among children	Barangay Council of Totolan; Municipal Government of Dauis
Establishment of a Day Care Center at the Sama-Bajao Settlement	Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)
Training of Sama-Bajao Day Care worker-teachers on Teaching Fundamentals	University of Bohol College of Education (UBCOED)
Parenting Seminars (Pre-Natal Care; Children's Nutrition and Hygiene; Effective Parenting, Parents Effective Services or PES)	University of Bohol College of Nursing (UBCON) DSWD; BM Tirol
Enrollment of Children in the Formal Basic education; Provision of one classroom for Sama-Bajao pupils with Bajao-Tausug Teacher for cultural activities	Department of Education (DepEd)
Sponsorship of the children's education	Bajao Bridge Foundation; Panaghoy Children's Foundation; and other NGOs

Provision of motorized boats for fishermen	Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)
Livelihood Seminars (How to Start Your Own Business; Coastal Resource Management)	Bohol Local Development Foundation (BLDF), DSWD, the National Commission for Indigenous People (NCIP), and the University of Bohol (UB)
Employment of their chieftain at the Bohol Provincial Capitol	Provincial Government of Bohol (PGBh); Board Member Tirol
Provision of tables, chairs, whiteboard, school supplies, books, worksheets, educational toys, sound system, USB, and shelf	University of Bohol Graduate School and Professional Studies (UB-GSPS)

The Agenda 21 or the Rio Declaration brought together various countries with the commitment of promoting sustainable development through a variety of means, which included combating poverty through education and empowerment of women, youth and indigenous communities, among others (Tilbury, 2002). The United Nations Millennium Development Goals set in September 2000 echoes the need for education; Goal 2 was to “achieve universal primary education.” (We Can End Poverty: Millennium Development Goals and Beyond 2018). These prompted the University of Bohol together with the Provincial Government to facilitate change in the community. With education as an avenue for development, a Day Care Center was established in 2007 within the Sama-Bajao settlement. The Day Care Center started with around 70 pupils with children of different age including children older than 12 years. With the consideration that the assigned social worker could not speak the Sama language, two Sama-Bajao women were trained with the fundamentals of teaching at the University of Bohol -College of Education (UB-COED) to equip them to become assistants at the center. After several years, the two took over the responsibilities as the main Day Care worker-teachers. With the Sama-Bajao as Day Care worker-teachers, the center catered to the pupils using the Sama language as the medium of instruction while gradually introducing the Bisaya, Filipino, and English that are used in the mainstream elementary schools. According to Dekker & Young (2005), the use of home language upon entry to school and progressing to the Bilingual Education Policy in the Philippines (using English and Filipino) would provide a greater foundation in the language education as well as provide greater educational opportunities as learners

from minority language communities. Classes at the center had been divided into morning and afternoon sessions with the provision of snacks from the DSWD. In 2017, the UB-GSPS provided for the needs of the Day Care Center. It is also worthy to note that to further support the Sama-Bajao community, the DepEd provided one classroom at the Totolan Elementary School for the Sama-Bajao pupils and allotted one hour daily with a licensed professional teacher, who is a Bajao-Tausug, for language and cultural lessons. Indeed, education and culture are understood to be intrinsically intertwined and are central to the life of the community (Victor & Yano, 2015).

This study aimed to determine the impact of the educational intervention program for the Sama-Bajao community initiated by the Provincial Government of Bohol (PGBh) in collaboration with the University of Bohol Graduate School and Professional Studies in 2007.

It is anchored on Doug Reeler's Theory of Social Change, which ascribed "Development Projects" as interventions that introduce the change stimulus and processes for social development highlighting participatory processes that allow all stakeholders to get onboard, paving the way for ownership and sustainability (Reeler, 2005).

The philosophy of inclusive education among the Sama-Bajao community is akin to what Victor and Yano hoped for that the community would nurture one generation to the next especially the children with the expectation that the future generations will take on the responsibilities of continuing the life of their community and its development. Such hopes and aspirations are anchored on Paulo Friere's concept of *Conscientizacao* (Conscientization), which is "a progressive awakening to awareness on the part of an individual or a group, of the social, political, or economic contradictions of a given existential reality; a perception of alternative structures, and possibly of means of achievement" (Harmon, 1975). And to borrow the words of Smith (2003), the Sama-Bajau people can "conscientize themselves about their needs, aspirations, and preferences."

Ten years after the initiative projects, the researcher aimed to stitch the narratives of the Sama-Bajao people including the students who were the beneficiaries of the said projects. The main objective of this qualitative study was to determine the impact of education on the lives of the Sama-Bajao community in Dauis, Bohol, Philippines with the end view of proposing recommendations. The following research questions, stated broadly, were:

1. Can you please share about your situation/condition before the assistance from the government and other organizations came in 2007?
2. Can you please share about the changes that occur in your community in terms of your livelihood, education, employment or way of living after the assistance came?
3. In terms of education, how was your culture and way of life given importance?
4. What and how do you intend to preserve, change or improve and achieve through education?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed Data Mining, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), In-Depth Interview (IDI) and Key Informant Interview (KII) guided by a set of broad, open-ended questions originally stated in colloquial Bisaya. It is noteworthy that the participants can understand and speak Bisaya having been interacting with the Bisaya community. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling with the consideration that data can only be collected from specific individuals, which included former Board Member Tirol who was also the former Dean of the UB-GSPS, the Sama-Bajao Chieftain, the Sama-Bajao Day Care worker-teachers, and the college graduates. Convenient sampling was used in choosing participants who were high school students depending on their availability during the FGD. Five high school students came and joined the FGD. The study was conducted at the Sama-Bajao settlement at Barangay Totolan, Dauis, Bohol, which is seven kilometers from Tagbilaran, the capital city of Bohol and five kilometers from the Poblacion or town center of Dauis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presented herewith are the results of the discussion with the participants of the study.

1. SITUATION BEFORE THE EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION PROGRAM

- 1.1. Lack of Education; High Number Drop-outs from School
- 1.2. Lack of Opportunities for Employment
- 1.3. Social Exclusion
- 1.4. Lack of Birth Registration
- 1.5. Mendicancy especially among Women and Children
- 1.6. Lack of Proper Nutrition and Hygiene
- 1.7. Illegal Practices of Fishing especially among Men
- 1.8. Low Self-esteem and Low Self-Confidence

As a people with different ethnicity, culture, language and lifestyle from the mainstream Boholanos, a majority has not received formal education, do not have opportunities to employment, and are generally excluded in the mainstream society. Per the Department for International Development (DFID), social exclusion restricts individuals or groups from taking part in the social relations as well as economic and political life, and prevents them from asserting their rights, which, in effect, prevents livelihood, human development and equal citizenship (Beall & Piron, 2005). The question of citizenship among the Sama-Bajao due to the lack of birth registration among their people has prompted exclusion from the rest of the society. This problem has been highlighted as formal education requires the submission of birth certificates among learners. Hunter (1997) pointed out that education is a significant factor associated with the current poor outcomes for employment of indigenous people. The influence of education towards employment is greater compared to other factors such as demography, geography, and social variables. Victor & Yano (2015) pointed out that aside from the problem of access to education among indigenous children, difficulties with the language used in mainstream schools had become a barrier to their education. In the case of the SamaBajao, the language used in school, which is Bol-anong Binisaya, Filipino, and English are different from what is used in their homes and their community. In the past, several students dropped out from school due to problems in the language barrier.

2. IMPORTANT CHANGES THAT OCCUR IN THE COMMUNITY

- 2.1. Social Inclusion
- 2.2. Registration of Birth Certificates
- 2.3. Enrollment of Children at School
- 2.4. Achievement of Producing High School and College Graduates
- 2.5. Young Learners Aspiration of Becoming Professionals
- 2.6. Conscientization
- 2.7. Parents Valuing Education; Mothers as Partners of the Day Care Center
- 2.8. Personality Development
- 2.9. Employment and Economic Opportunities
- 2.10. Lower Number of Mendicants

According to available records, there were 194 Sama-Bajao families in the year 2015. In the said records, there were 108 fishermen, 34 vendors, one carpenter, two social workers, one welder, and one casual government employee. It is worth mentioning that in the community, husbands/fathers are the breadwinners while the mothers/wives stay at home to tend the household. Changes are seen as positive in the community. Mario, the Chieftain, shared the changes that he noticed in the community.

“It’s different now compared to the past when I was not yet the Chieftain. People were scattered. Nobody went to school. They were everywhere. I am greatly happy now. Since I became the Chieftain, people liked what I did, which is also good for them. My happiness is great since there are great changes now compared to the past. When people were not yet educated, they only resorted to fishing. They only went spearfishing. Now, they fish in the deep ocean [using nets]. Their catch is now bigger. Their catch is now enough ever since they got pump boats [motorized boats from DOLE]. Their earning is now also higher. They can support their families.”

Education has helped change several mindsets of the Sama-Bajao people. They have seen the importance of going to school. The Chieftain added,

“There were a lot of beggars at the time when nobody went to school. For now, there are a lot who go to school; a lot are now

educated. They shy away from begging. The school has kept them away from the streets. Schools have helped a lot."

Lorna, one of the recent college graduates, shared her experiences and her thoughts about education.

"Before I attended school, I never knew how to dress up properly. I didn't know how to wear sandals. I would just walk barefoot. It's different now. It's different when one has an education or not. If I have not attended school, I would not have known the laws and the ways of the government. If you go to school, you will learn a lot of things. You will consider your future; of what's coming; your children; your future plans. If you have not finished school, your thoughts are limited, you are limited; It's up to here [hand gesture]... then get married. If one can eat, then it's considered OK. But if you've finished school, you have higher goals. You want to save for your future, for your children who will be the next to go to school in the future. If they ask for something, you can provide for their needs. Compared to not having been to school, their goals are limited. If the kids can eat, then it's fine. And then they would think of begging."

Lorna also shared that in the Sama-Bajao tradition, their people get married at 14 years old. When women reach the child-bearing age, they are set to marry and have children. This is one of the reasons for dropping out of school. However, for Lorna, who is now 24 years old, she dreams of becoming gainfully employed before getting married.

After ten years of existence, the Day Care Center has produced young learners who are keen on finishing school. Marife, one of the Day Care worker-teachers, shared that there are four students who will graduate from Senior High School for the School Year (SY) 2017-2018.

"They were the first pupils at the Day Care. They are four of them; the two of them have children already. They got married already but continued to go to school since they've seen a good example."

Lorna further shared that the children in the community have come to recognize the importance of education through her and her sister Madonna's example.

“They would say that it’s good to be like Ate Lorna and Ate Donna who finished [school]. They saw that it’s good to finish [school] compared to not having finished [school]. They are inspired to see that someone actually finished school. Now, they are going to school.”

For the SY 2017-2018, a total of 185 children were enrolled. There were 170 pupils enrolled from Kindergarten through Grade 6; there were 11 students in Junior High School and four in Senior High School. The latter were among the pioneer pupils when the Day Care Center opened in 2007. As revealed in the discussions, all college students and graduates are women. Two finished Criminology and wanted to become members of the police force. One is presently working at the Dauis Police Station.

The Chieftain shared that when the Day Care Center opened, children aged 12 years and older were even enrolled. Among the 70 children who initially enrolled, only a few attended and finished the school year. Learning was difficult for first-time learners considering that the language used by the first Day Care worker-teacher was Bol-anong Binisaya. The solution was to provide assistants who speak the Sama language. In the later years, the assistants took over the role as the main Day Care workerteachers. When the center started, there was a tripartite agreement and cooperation from the PGBh, UB, and the Sama-Bajao community. The PGBh shouldered the honorarium of the assistants who were initially trained at the UB-COED. Marife, the other Day Care worker-teacher, shared her thoughts on her experience as a teacher.

“There has been a big change on my part since I was trained. I am not a college [graduate]; I only reached high school, so I don’t know how to teach children. So, I am very thankful for the training; I know how to handle children now; I know what lessons to use, what to do, and what to prepare.”

Marina, on her part, shared her experience as a teacher as well.

“In the past, I do not know how to dress up. I feel that I was ignorant. When going out especially when going to hotels, I felt so ignorant. I didn’t know anything. But I when I became a teacher, I learn a lot... what to do and not to do.”

Both Sama-Bajao women use their own language inside the classroom. Marina shared the impact of having Sama-Bajau teachers in the classroom.

“There is a big difference. When the teacher was Bisaya, there’s no comprehension. Compared to the present, the children can [understand] our language as Bajau.”

The presence of the two Sama-Bajao Day Care worker-teachers made a big difference in the lives of the children and the community. Tirol pointed out the significance of Marina and Marife’s training as teachers and as parents themselves.

“As I see it, they were educated through training... although they didn’t have diplomas. They learned how to handle children... their own children. Marina, she has a Senior High School student now. Marife, she has a Grade 8 student. If and when they didn’t get the opportunity to become teachers, and they didn’t get any experience in teaching, their children may not have gone to school, too. The education [of the community] started with the two teachers.”

Furthermore, Tirol recalled that UB held several services to help the community. To note, the UB College of Nursing (UB-CON) gave pre-natal services as well as a seminar on hygiene and sanitation among mothers. Tirol also shared that when the Day Care Center was opened, they started with a parenting seminar that required both husband and wife to come.

“Since they cannot go out to fish and prepare their food, we shouldered their meals and snacks for the entire family. We also gave them rice for the next day, since they don’t have any income that day. We did this so both parents could come and both will understand the importance of education. We also explained the importance of preparing food for the children especially breakfast.”

The teachers shared that the parents would not feed their children in the past. They would only give them hot water or coffee in the morning. Now, the parents feed them breakfast. The children also go to school early ever since the Day Care center feed them with snacks and hot meals from

DSWD. Tirol further recalled,

“We taught the parents how to raise bright children; that they have to take care of their babies during pregnancy; that mothers should eat right so children will be born bright. In the past, they would not feed their children; then put their hungry children under the heat of the sun on their boats. I mean, education starts from there... from pregnancy and parents taking care of their children.”

As partners to their children’s education, the DSWD held annual parenting seminars called Parents Effective Services (PES). Now, the parents, especially the mothers, help in the center by taking turns in preparing the snacks provided for by the DSWD. Marife noticed the results of educating the parents.

“There had been a big improvement especially when it comes to personal hygiene. Before they go to school, their mothers would prepare them for school. And they have complete uniforms. And the mothers, they participate in the activities of the Day Care. They understand the importance of the children’s education.”

Other than positive impact on the mindsets of the people towards education, sanitation, hygiene, and health, the teachers shared that there’s also a significant impact on their self-esteem. Marina shared,

“We are no longer ignorant. We go and eat at McDonald’s and Jollibee. We are not ashamed to eat there. And we use cell phones and Facebook, especially the young ones. Some of us can get jobs in the malls now. And these days, only a few would beg on the streets.”

Furthermore, the two women highlighted the most significant impact on their lives. They said it is the way the families treat each other. They mentioned “family bonding; strong family ties; shared parenting, and partnership between couples.”

3. EDUCATION GIVING IMPORTANCE TO CULTURE AND THEIR WAY OF LIVING

3.1. Sama-Bajao Day Care teachers helped their children love their culture and treasure their learning experiences.

3.2. People have conscientized after their needs and aspirations without sacrificing their rich culture and their traditions by the sea.

Five high school students shared their experiences at school as well as their dreams in life. The students dream of becoming professionals in the future. Eighteen-year-old Mikka, who is in Grade 11, wants to be a part of the police force.

“What I want is to finish school so I can help my family. In school, I feel happy. Sometimes, I feel anxious. But I try to learn what the teachers are telling us. Our teacher said they can’t tease me since we are all the same.”

Sabrina, 20 years old, joined in. She said that she is happy at school. However, she gets bullied at times. The Grade 12 student dreams of becoming a teacher someday.

“What I don’t like about school is that my classmates would tease me. I would absent from school because they bully me. Sometimes, I would skip class because the subject is difficult.”

Andrea, 17 years old, wants to be a teacher as well. The Grade 9 student also shared her experience of being bullied. However, she pointed out that she is still happy at school.

“I like school because I have friends. The Bisaya [students] are my friends as well. I want to be a teacher so I can help my fellow Bajao.”

Marijane, 19 years old, shared her excitement as she is hoping to graduate high school. She wishes to be part of the police force just like Mikka.

“I am studying at Tabalong National High School. I am now in Grade 10. I am excited to get to Grade 11. I will graduate from

High School soon. When I get to college... I want to be a police officer. When I graduate from school, I want to help my family."

On the other hand, Rosminda, 16 years old, wants to be a nurse. She is in Grade 9 just like Andrea. Lastly, the two college graduates shared their plans, hopes, and dreams for the future. Lorna shared her plan.

"My plan is to have a stable job so I can help my family and the tribe."

Madonna, who finished Criminology, shared her sister's plan of getting a stable job.

"I hope to encourage our children who see us having good jobs. What helped me in school? God used people so I could finish school. That time when father was working at BM Tirol's office... and the NCIP, too. My parents will not worry about us anymore since we finished school already. We have knowledge; we have diplomas to show to others. We will not be shy away from others."

4. WHAT AND HOW DO YOU INTEND TO PRESERVE, CHANGE OR IMPROVE AND ACHIEVE THROUGH EDUCATION?

4.1. However the changes, they wish to preserve their culture as Sama-Bajao people who live by the sea, who speak their own language, perform their own dances or sing their own songs. As education created changes in terms of personality development, social inclusion, and economic opportunities, it did not change their cultural traditions. For, one their language is preserved.

4.2. Inclusive Education that is mindful of the Bajao's cultural identity, needs and aspiration is considered a milestone in the local educational system and in the community that promotes respect for diversity and equity.

Lorna shared that apart from their culture, they are not different from the Bisaya and other people.

"It's our songs and dances... our language. If not for our culture, there's no difference between the Bisaya people and us. Our culture includes our way of living here at sea. That is the reason why we don't want to be transferred to the hills."

CONCLUSION

The following conclusion was drawn from the discussion:

1. The multifaceted development program, which encouraged participatory processes with beneficiaries, paved way to conscientization, ownership, and sustainability without sacrificing their rich culture and their traditions by the sea.

2. Education prompted various changes in terms of personality development, social inclusion, and economic opportunities; however, it did not change their cultural traditions.

3. Education provides equity in terms of knowledge-acquisition, talent and skills development, and opportunities for gainful employment among the cultural minorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After results and conclusions were drawn, the following recommendations are herewith proposed:

1. It is recommended that the different stakeholders revisit their own projects and assess its successes and shortcomings after ten years.

2. The Government should push for the inclusivity in employment as mandated in "The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8371).

3. Involvement and support of other stakeholders such as NonGovernment Organizations and Civic Organizations are encouraged.

4. Regularization of Sama-Bajao Teachers under the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

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