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Creating Safe and Inclusive Classrooms for Learners in Fragile Contexts: Lessons from the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

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Primary grade learners in an AKAP Community Learning Center in Talayan, Maguindanao del Sur

The education sector in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) faces complex challenges stemming from socio-economic and political vulnerability. This policy brief explores initiatives to address these challenges through inclusive, safe, and disruption-proof policies and practices. Employing descriptive ethnographic research, it examines the pre, during, and post-COVID-19 delivery of basic education, incorporating literature review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that persistent educational issues were exacerbated by the pandemic. Resilient responses from the Ministry of Basic, Higher and Technical Education (MBHTE), in the form of Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) and strategic programs like Adaptive Learning Materials (ALMs) and community-based learning centers somehow lessened the gross impact of the pandemic. Despite improvement, barriers remain, including funding constraints, teacher shortages, and ongoing conflict. Recommendations emphasize the need for context-specific policies, comprehensive collaboration, and sustained peacebuilding efforts to create safe, inclusive classrooms in BARMM

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Described as a region with fragile contexts due to its socio-economic and political development, the education sector in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) needs to adopt inclusive, safe, and disruption-proof policies, programs, and learning practices. As these initiatives are believed to have been in the ground for some time, this policy brief identifies and highlights such initiatives from what is being practiced or implemented in the field.

Through a descriptive ethnographic research design, the study reviewed local literature and documents relevant to basic education delivery in BARMM before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, empirical data were collected through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) to triangulate and further inquire about the delivery of basic education in BARMM during this period.

Key Findings: Review of the Extant Literature and Documents

Basic education delivery in BARMM before the COVID-19 pandemic

Even before the onset of the pandemic, literature had documented the gargantuan education problems afflicting BARMM (then known as Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or ARMM). These problems originated from two main types of armed conflict occurring in the region - between the government and Muslim insurgents and between feuding clans or families. The armed conflicts resulted in massive socio-economic losses – so huge that immediate recovery is never once guaranteed. The region’s learning environment was far from ideal. When a conflict occurred, learners’ safety and security were automatically compromised and displacement followed. Learning without systematic intervention was disrupted or worse, it stopped. The fragile learning context is complicated by the question of teacher quality in the region, which although not isolated from the overall national situation, the peculiar context made teacher quality a more pressing concern in the overall education agenda because of the teachers’ role in the continuity of learning in the region. Inclusive and safe teaching practices existed in BARMM. They were not widespread then but it happened in pockets and were made possible through multi-stakeholders intervention of the teachers, school, immediate community, local government unit, and education partners.

Basic education delivery in BARMM during the pandemic

The poor economic and unstable political conditions in the region were some of the major factors affecting the quality of basic education delivery during the pre-pandemic period, while during the COVID-19 pandemic, the major challenge was the school closure that lasted for more than a year due to health concerns, resulting in the limited mobility of school personnel, more specifically, teachers, who serve as the frontliner in the delivery of quality education. Teachers, school leaders, parents, including the entire community were not ready for this kind of global health emergency. Given this abnormal scenario, the learning gaps and losses experienced by many learners during the pre-pandemic were exacerbated by the pandemic. Learners and other education stakeholders experienced the double learning crisis, because limited mobility means limited access to any quality education delivery. While both teachers and health workers continuously provided safe learning spaces for learners, the conduct of distance learning and/or modular learning modality, however, was not sufficient to address several learning losses, especially in remote areas in the region. Although there were several programs developed during the pandemic to address learning losses such as programs on reading literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning, the effectiveness still needs to be monitored and evaluated.

Basic education delivery in BARMM post-pandemic

In the context of schooling in the Philippines, the ‘post-pandemic’ can be understood as the gradual return of face-to-face teaching, which for the BARMM took place in March 2023. In comparison to the previous school year, it appears that the current school year has witnessed a notable increase in student enrolment and attendance. In terms of development in the education sector, one of the most noteworthy milestones would be the World Bank grant of over US\$100 million to support teachers’ professional development in the Southern Philippines, including BARMM. There remains a dearth of research on education in BARMM with the return to face-to-face teaching delivery. It is hoped that our current research activity and other initiatives will pave the way for more rigorous educational research in BARMM.



Key Findings: Themes Underpinning the Delivery of Basic Education in BARMM

Basic education policies, and programs that are inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof based on the current and emerging basic education teaching and learning delivery

The Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) instituted by the Ministry of Basic, Higher and Technical Education (MBHTE) during the COVID-19 pandemic was an inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof education policy aimed at ensuring teaching and learning continuity within the BARMM despite the threat of the pandemic. This policy was developed through Memorandum Order No. 205, drawing upon the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) of DepEd, which served as the foundation for educational programs amid the crisis. Through this education policy, a Technical Working Group (TWG) was formulated to devise adaptive strategies through consultative meetings, leading to the creation of MBHTE Memo Order No. 250, which provided implementing guidelines for educational continuity during the pandemic. Unlike DepEd's plan, the LCP of the MBHTE encompassed not only basic but also tertiary and technical education, catering to the holistic scope of the region's educational needs. Despite being regionally scoped, the policy remained flexible, allowing schools to adjust guidelines to fit local needs. This flexibility was pivotal given BARMM's diverse context, including geographically isolated, disadvantaged, and conflict-affected areas (GIDCA).

Concomitant to the policy, strategic programs were implemented to ensure responsive education continuity across schools in the region during the pandemic. The development of Adaptive Learning Materials (ALMs) was one of these programs. These learning materials were contextualized, reflecting the local needs of the learners and considering the nature of learning during the health crisis. A notable feature of these ALMs is that it is experience-centered, drawing on learners' prior knowledge to introduce new concepts. Such a feature allows the learners to deal with the learning materials with less supervision. This peculiarity comes from the fact that the materials are borne out of the ever changing situations and dynamics of the teaching-learning process as dictated by the local peace situation and adjusted accordingly by the community.

In addition, the establishment of community-based learning centers and floating schools was a hallmark of MBHTE's program implementations during the crisis. Community-based

learning centers were built through the AKAP program, providing access to education for learners in school-less communities and underserved areas. This has become MBHTE's flagship program responsive to the current demands of multifaceted teaching-learning processes in the community. The floating schools were constructed for Badjao learners, who are often marginalized when learning in mainstream schools.

Moreover, the implementation of the 5Bs (Bawat Bata sa Bangsamoro Bumabasa at Bumibilang) was an initiative of the MBHTE in an effort to address the low literacy and numeracy rates among learners in the region. The program is evidence-based, drawing from the results of region-wide student assessment using CRLA (Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment). The program serves as a regular interventional activity that fosters foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, the provision of pandemic-related supplies and learning resources bring forth the bayanihan spirit in education, ensuring the safety and well-being of students and teachers during challenging times.

Overall, MBHTE strategic response to the pandemic highlights its commitment to educational continuity, incorporating inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof education policy and programs to address diverse needs and challenges of learners within BARMM. Through collaborative efforts and flexible methodologies, the ministry has navigated the challenges of the crisis, ensuring that no learner was left behind.

Basic education practices that are inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof based on the current and emerging basic education teaching and learning delivery

Because of the pandemic, the school and the MBHTE ability to establish meaningful school-community collaboration and engagement has become more important than ever. Some of the institutions BARMM schools can engage with are local government units (LGUs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The role of LGUs is important in education teaching and learning delivery. Given the MBHTE limitation in budget allocation, funding from the LGUs and logistic support can offer vital contributions as shown during the height of the pandemic.

Although BARMM has been a long-time recipient of development aid from various NGOs, the education sector should continue to apply culturally responsive approaches in their policy formulation and decision-making. This also applies to the teaching and learning delivery inside the classroom.



Efforts towards the development of culture-based and context-based learning resources have been strongly advocated by both teachers and key education officials. To be able to integrate culture and context in policy formulation and decision-making, it is imperative that consultation with education stakeholders is always practiced. In the study, the MBHTE, especially in the mainland provinces, seems to be consistently implementing consultative practice.

In general, the Philippine education system is replete with numerous challenges. Schools in highly urbanized and urban areas like Metro Manila, Metro Cebu, and Metro Davao surely experience them even at varying levels. Since BARMM has the least favorable conditions in achieving quality education among the Philippine regions, it is expected to face far more serious problems than its counterparts. The practice of bayanihan in schools and communities ease the burden of parents, teachers, and students alike regardless of religion and socio-economic status. Cotabato residents have various challenges brought about by their unique role in the history of Central Mindanao; thus, many have developed resilience as a way to survive. Being resilient is still a good practice but it is not achieved overnight. Still, people should be equipped with skills and be provided with means so they could overcome the challenges. Resilience is not achieved in an instant but it can be learned or acquired overtime. Establishing a network of like-minded teachers or education workers and advocates may help while people and institutions are still in the process of developing resilience.

Barriers for creating safe and inclusive classrooms for learners in BARMM

The key barriers to creating safe and inclusive classrooms in BARMM include funding and financial constraints, teacher shortages, and the ongoing armed conflict in the region. With the region's transition to BARMM, funding mechanisms are not clearly set out and it remains unclear if the new governance structure will improve the funding in the region. Reportedly, over 200 villages do not have schools and where there are schools, there is a lack of proper infrastructure and facilities in place. Furthermore, as a geographically isolated area, many of the islands do not have access to technology and caused severe interruptions to teachers and students' teaching and learning during the pandemic. This places students from BARMM vulnerable during disasters and natural calamities, such as the pandemic.

There is currently a teaching shortage in the BARMM region especially in the early childhood context. Early childhood teaching is not attracting enough intake in teacher education institutions. This is due to a lack of esteem among potential university students for this level of teaching. This is partly because low wages and lack of career progression are among the reasons why early childhood education workers are usually scant, especially in remote areas.

The ongoing civil unrest happening in the BARMM has caused disruptions in education. Absenteeism is often due to tribal clashes. Moreover, this situation has also threatened staff, teachers, and other students should there be physical violence taking place within the vicinity of a school.

Possibilities for creating safe and inclusive classrooms for learners in BARMM

The creation of more schools of peace in BARMM aimed to address the challenges of fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment amid prevailing conflicts. For instance, the J. Marquez School served as a notable example of such efforts, established in 1996 following a significant peace agreement between the Philippine national government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Despite initial challenges, the school's commitment to peacebuilding transformed both the school and the surrounding community. The success of the school as a peace-focused institution in conflict-prone areas created a safe and inclusive environment tailored to peacebuilding programs suited to local needs and contexts.

Teachers played a crucial role in this transformation, undergoing seminars and workshops to understand their students' experiences and to foster empathy and understanding. Through these efforts, teachers shifted from resentment to love for their students, facilitating a culture of peace within the school. Furthermore, the positive transformation of teachers from individuals facing frustration to empathetic educators underscores the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs.

The background of learners, influenced by the prevalent culture of violence, posed additional challenges. However, initiatives such as exchanging toy guns for edible fruits helped redirect their focus toward peace and nurturing life. The initiative



symbolized a shift in mindset which is crucial from instruments of violence to agents of growth and renewal at school and the entire community. As the students embraced their newfound responsibility, the integration of peace content and its applicability into lessons and community engagement further reinforced the school's commitment to peacebuilding.

The sustainability of these efforts relied heavily on partnerships with NGOs such as Peace Tech, World Vision, and Act for Peace, which provided support and resources for peacebuilding initiatives. Through continued collaboration, these organizations contributed to the school's mission of nurturing a generation of peacemakers and changemakers. Facilitating collaboration between schools and NGOs can extend peacebuilding efforts beyond the classroom, fostering a more holistic approach to wider ownership and acceptability of peace programs and initiatives.

Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

On the basic education policies, and programs that are inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof

1. Continue devising needs-based education policies, reflecting the local context and needs of the Bangsamoro learners and learners.
2. Ensure comprehensiveness of coverage in crafting education policies, highlighting the interconnectedness of basic, higher and technical education.
3. Encourage a multi-sectoral approach to policy making, ensuring key participation from various education stakeholders.
4. Integrate flexibility as an integral component of any crafted education policies, allowing modifications by schools depending on their local contexts.
5. Promote personalized learning through contextualization of learning materials and providing the teachers with the needed professional development opportunities.
6. Invest in establishing more community-based learning centers for school-less communities and floating schools for vulnerable learners such as Badjao.
7. Employ stringent monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure the sustainability of the programs.
8. Sustain the practice “bayanihan” spirit in education.

9. Provide good facilities and infrastructure especially community-based learning centers for school-less communities and floating schools
10. Provide continuous professional development among teachers and school personnel.
11. Ensure that learners get the proper nutrition (i.e., feeding program) and hygiene inside and outside the school.

On the basic education practices that are inclusive, responsive, resilient, and disruption-proof

1. Continue forging meaningful engagement and collaboration among school-community-University, LGUs, and non-governmental organizations.
2. Apply culturally responsive strategies and approaches in policy formulation and decision-making. The same applies inside the classroom.
3. Implement consultative approach to policy formulation and decision making.
4. Practice bayanihan, solidarity, and resilience.
5. Consider the formation of a network of concerned educators.
6. Make every school a “school of peace.”

On the barriers to creating safe and inclusive classrooms for learners in BARMM

1. Strengthen the government support mechanisms in the BARMM which can improve the budget allocation in the region for school infrastructure, feeding and hygiene program, access to digital technology, and the recruitment and retention of teachers
2. Provide policy frameworks, including sustainable incentives, to attract and retain quality teachers in BARMM which are context-specific but also informed by global practices
3. Consider a whole-of-system approach in addressing tribal conflicts and the geo-political conflict in the region that sees education as a significant player for long-term solutions

1. On the possibilities for creating safe and inclusive classrooms for learners in BARMM

1. Expand the implementation of Peace Education Programs through peace-focused institutions suited to local needs and contexts that seek to address the root cause of the problem in conflict-prone areas through education.

2. Strengthen support for comprehensive continuous professional development programs that aim to equip teachers with the necessary competencies (knowledge, skills, and values) to create peaceful and meaningful learning environments and understand the students better.

3. Encourage collaboration with NGOs as such to formalize continuous partnerships and collaboration with relevant organizations providing support (e.g. finance and resources) on program implementation to achieving a culture of peace that is sustained over time.

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Conclusions

In the context of the BARMM, the region has long grappled with the inaccessibility of quality education due to socio-political challenges, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these obstacles, the MBHTE has demonstrated resilience and inclusivity through initiatives such as the LCP and the development of adaptive learning materials. By tailoring policies and programs to various local contexts and engaging in collaborative efforts, MBHTE is trying its best to find alternative solutions to create disruption-proof and accessible to all learners. These efforts underscore the region's commitment to overcoming longstanding educational challenges and fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future for Muslim learners.



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2. Share research expertise and competence in teacher education research with other TEIs throughout the country;
3. Develop and disseminate the University research agenda
4. Design and implement the research capability program for faculty and staff;
5. Manage University's research production particularly the conduct of educational policy studies in education and teacher education; and
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