Rural indigenous teachers' lived experiences in mother tongue education in the Philippines: Counter-stories of resistance

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Abstract

Conceptualized with Critical Race Theory, this study analyzed the lived experiences of indigenous, rural teachers in implementing a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policy in the Philippines. Qualitative data from interviews, classroom observations and focus group interviews were obtained from ten teachers from three school districts considered sub-urban and rural contexts in the northern region of the Philippines. Phenomenological methods of data analysis were employed to obtain collective composite stories from the teachers' experiences. Framed as composite counter-stories, teachers' narratives revealed deeply-embedded pedagogical challenges that they encountered, resulting from the policy implementation in their classrooms. Specifically, their counter-stories demonstrated resistance towards the top-down policy that complicated learning for their students. As their stories disrupt majoritarian narratives on MTB-MLE, implications for reconsidering the policy are offered.

Keywords: *Critical race theory, mother tongue-based multilingual education, composite counter-stories, rural indigenous teachers*

Introduction

Across the world, multilingual education, where the use of more than one language is used as a medium of instruction (MOI) remains a challenge. In developing countries in particular, where educational policies are anchored on mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), the academic literature reports that there are emerging concerns regarding the effective implementation of these policies in terms of student learning outcomes and in terms of how multilingualism supports educational equity (e.g. Burton, 2013; Desai, Qorro, & Brock-Utne, 2010; Rao, 2013; Tupas & Martin, 2016). For instance, in South Africa, where there are 11 official languages, scholars maintain that students' multilingualism is integral to effective educational policies, practices, and student learning outcomes (Makalela, 2018; Ribeiro, 2010). Similarly, in East Asia, the views of scholars and non-government organizations towards multilingual language development are anchored on the notion of equity and social justice in education. These organizations argue that language, and multilingualism in particular, plays a central role in the achievement of the UNESCO millennium development goals (MDGs), which are "a set of shared aspirations and efforts to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place" (Tupas & Lorente, 2014; UNESCO, 2015).

Efforts towards implementing language policies deemed at providing access to schooling for everyone regardless of the mother tongue have also been evident in South Asia, particularly in India and Pakistan, which still struggle to develop equitable multilingual education policies (Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013). At the classroom level, the challenges related to the implementation of MTB-MLE policies are evident in linguistically diverse countries such as Kenya, Nepal, and

the Philippines, where students bring multiple language varieties to the classroom (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). The variety of languages spoken in multilingual classrooms pose pedagogical challenges among teachers, particularly to their practices on using these languages for instruction. In the broader context, the implementation of MTB-MLE as a language-in-education policy (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005) has implications to the development of language for multilingual children (Dekker & Young, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). In other words, while there are many other elements involved in the delivery of quality basic education, "language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom" (Benson, 2005, p. 1) and even more so in the context of multilingual education.

One country where the implementation of the MTB-MLE has become problematic is the Philippines. The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia which has a national policy institutionalizing and enacting as law Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in mainstream education (Tupas, 2015). Before the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in 2009, the language-in-education policy of the Philippines had evolved through significant milestones that were influenced by sociopolitical discourse. Some American scholars argue that the language policy of the Philippines, like those of other countries that were colonized by imperial forces, demonstrates an interesting interchange of political, cultural and ideological factors (e.g. Dekker & Young, 2005, Walter & Dekker, 2011). Tupas and Martin (2016) aptly describe the country's linguistic landscape as a space which does not simply revolve around the use of multiple languages as medium of instruction but more importantly around "values, ideologies, attitudes and contending visions of nation-building" (p. 9). Moreover, a wide spectrum of forces that includes culture, equity, and human rights, among others, have influenced the language-in-education policy of the country. Young (2002) argues that the development of a language-in-

education policy is not simply an educational issue, rather it reflects curricular decisions or beliefs about child psychology. An approach to a bilingual or multilingual language policy in education also embodies national beliefs concerning cultural and linguistic diversity, equal opportunities, and human rights (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014).

In short, the general trajectory of the language-in-education policy of the Philippines derived from a monolingual English language policy, became a bilingual education policy, and most recently shifted to the current multilingual education policy. The current policy was formally implemented after the 2009 ratification of Republic Act 10533, otherwise known as the Enhanced Basic Education Program (Tupas, 2015). It was further enhanced through Department of Education Order No. 74 (Nolasco, Datar & Azurin, 2010). The institutionalization of the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines was influenced by a number of educational and sociolinguistic trends which included: (1) an increasing frustration with the outcomes of the bilingual education policy, especially the persistent dismally low scores of Filipino students in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) assessment; (2) an attempt to replace bilingual education through a bill in the Philippine Congress to make English as the sole MOI in schools; and (3) the overwhelmingly positive results of empirical studies that show the advantage of using mother tongues over English as MOI in school (Tupas & Martin, 2016).

The MTB-MLE Policy in the Philippines

The important provisions of the both RA 10533 and the Department of Education Order No. 74 underscore the salient features and guidelines that support the significance of mother tongue education in the primary levels. Section 4 of RA 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Program) stipulates that "[b]asic education shall be delivered in languages understood by the learners as

the language plays a strategic role in shaping the formative years of the learners" (p. 3). It further elaborates, "[f]or Kindergarten and the first 3 years of elementary education, instruction, teaching materials and assessment shall be in the regional or native language of the learners" (p. 3). The Act further requires the Department of Education (herein referred to as DepEd) to design a mother tongue transition program from grades 4 to 6 such that Filipino and English shall be gradually introduced as languages of instruction. The DepEd also determines the appropriate time when these two languages can become the primary language of instruction at the secondary level. In Section 5 of RA 10533, the Act clearly describes the nature of the MTB-MLE curriculum, which "shall adhere to the principles and framework of MTB-MLE, starting from where the learners are and from what they already know, proceeding from the known to the unknown" (p. 4). More specifically, the provision for a transition program from grades 4 to 6 displays the Congress's affirmation for a late exit model of bilingual education, reported by the academic literature as a strong form of additive bilingualism (e.g. Benson, 2005: Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Meanwhile, the Department of Education Order No. 16, s. 2012 provided more specific guidelines in the implementation of MTB-MLE. The order stipulated that the learners' first language be phased out after grade 3. Thus, in practice the order stipulates the use of an early exit model of bilingual education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Nevertheless, the DepEd order also included objectives that broadly underscored the influence of MTB-MLE on four areas of development which include: (1) language development, (2) cognitive development focusing on higher order thinking skills (HOTS); (3) academic development; and (4) sociocultural awareness (Philippines Department of Education, 2012).

As part of the pilot study for this research project, we conducted a review of the literature on mother tongue instruction in the Philippines that included seven peer-reviewed articles and five archival reports that traced the historical development of language policies in the Philippines from 1978 to 2015. In addition, we analyzed five empirical peer-reviewed studies and nine conceptual or theoretical articles that examined the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines. The literature reviewed showed that previous language policies in the Philippines are problematic because these are influenced by various post-colonial discourses that attempt to dismantle the nation-destructing hegemony of the English language (Tupas & Martin, 2016). More importantly, and in relation to mother tongue education, we noted critical pitfalls in the MTB-MLE policy itself and synthesized these into two significant issues.

First, there is an existing gap in knowledge about the overall impact of the policy to student learning across the country. This is attributed to the dearth of empirical studies that examine the effect of the policy implementation to student achievement relative to their language development and multilingual literacies. Second, very few studies have attempted to address the various issues that emerged from the early implementation of the MTB-MLE policy, which include: (1) use of a weak model of bilingual education and absence of an effective transition program; (2) perpetuation of linguistic marginalization or what Tupas & Martin (2016) term as "language inclusion and exclusion" (p. 25); and (3) persistent pedagogical challenges faced by teachers. Apparently, these emergent issues related to the policy implementation have a significant impact on how teachers deliver quality instruction that subsequently affect equitable learning among elementary school students.

This article addresses these gaps, particularly on the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy that reveals the ongoing pedagogical challenges that teachers

encounter in their classrooms. We framed the study with Critical Race Theory, specifically the sixth tenet described by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), unique voice of color, that enables individuals from minority status to speak competently about their experiences that the dominant group are unlikely to know. However, we related this tenet to the conceptual notion of counter-storytelling that utilizes narrative to illuminate and explore experiences of racial and ethnic oppression within a specific educational context. We used teachers' voice, or counter-stories, to ground the way that we interpreted teacher narratives and to determine the methodological approach that we used in this study. We theorized in this study that teachers, as policy mediators, have experiential knowledge of how top-down policies impact their practices and student learning within their classrooms. Such knowledge is foregrounded through counter-storytelling. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: (1) What are the stories primary level teachers tell about implementing the mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policy? and (2) how do the teachers' Composite Counter-Stories (CCS) disrupt the majoritarian narrative about mother tongue education in multilingual settings? Findings from this empirical study build upon the literature on mother-tongue based multilingual education in the Philippine context as well as a small yet growing canon of literature related to Critical Race Theory (CRT) in international contexts.

Rural Education in the Philippines

Rural areas in the Philippines continue to experience rural-urban education inequality gap (Zamora & Dorado, 2015). This reality implies that just like in other countries across the world, there is a need to improve educational provision in rural areas. Inequitable educational distribution can potentially result in situation where opportunities for quality and accessible education can only be available to major and mainstream cities, thus further widening the gap

between the rich and the poor (Ibourk & Amaghouss, 2012). In the context of the United States for instance, crisis in rural education has been cited as one of the most important problems in contemporary American education (Ingersoll, 2004). Moreover, rural schools in America are confronted with a wide array of persistent crises, including that of funding, the difficulty of meeting the basic needs of students, and overcoming barriers to curricular and instructional improvements (Bryant, 2007).

About 80% of Filipinos are poor and they live in rural areas of the country (PSA, 2017), and while public education is free, schoolchildren in rural areas continually face challenges in accessing quality education (Weinstein, 2010). Student attendance, promotion, and retention is challenging, and so graduation rates are also relatively low (Weinstein, 2010). In addition to the wide variety of challenges of rural education in the Philippines, the implementation of the MTB-MLE has resulted in a new set of dilemmas that rural teachers face. A review of the academic literature on MTB-MLE in rural contexts in the Philippines draws a clear and concrete view of how the national top-down language policy has also contributed to the increasing problems that impede the delivery of quality education in rural areas. In other words, the continual educational challenges that emerge as a result of hastily implemented policies are aggravated by language-related practices in multilingual elementary classroom settings in rural areas.

Review of Literature

This study focused on the lived experiences of rural, indigenous teachers in implementing the top-down policy on mother tongue-based multilingual education in the Philippines. The teachers' narratives, framed as counter-stories, disrupt the majoritarian narrative about mother tongue education in multilingual settings. Research about MTB-MLE abound in the academic literature,

particularly on its educational benefits to students in multilingual countries. In a very broad context, MTB-MLE provides a foundation for an advocacy embedded on democracy, equity and social justice. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 2008), for instance, anchored her models of MTB-MLE on the notion of linguistic human right, distinctly among language minority groups who need to find ways to correct deeply-embedded inequalities between them and their dominant counterparts in society. In the more specific context of education, the academic literature reports the benefits of MTB-MLE in two domains: (1) the sociocultural domain which cultivates educational equity, and the (2) academic domain which nurtures student success. Under the sociocultural domain, MTB-MLE leads to: (a) increased access and equity (Benson, 2005); (b) eradication of poverty (UNESCO, 2012); (c) reduction in repetition and dropouts (Thomas & Collier, 2002), and (d) sustainable development and global partnerships (UNESCO, 2015). Under the academic domain, MTB-MLE has the following advantages for multilingual learners: (a) facilitates understanding of the sound-symbol correspondence (Baker, 2001); (b) facilitates transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills (Cummins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2011); (c) accurate assessment of students in multilingual contexts (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000); and (d) facilitates meaningful learning and language development due to a considerable amount of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981; Tucker, 2001).

In the Philippine context, notable empirical studies that examined teaching practices using the students' first languages and/or mother tongues indicated academic benefits to the students. The First Iloilo Experiment conducted by Jose D. Aguilar from 1948 to 1954 started instruction of Grades 1 and 2 students in Hiligaynon. The test results showed that children instructed in Hiligaynon outperformed children who were taught in English (Nolasco, 2008). In 1999, the Department of Education launched the Regional Lingua Franca Pilot Project. The study piloted the use of the three largest lingua francae in the

country - Tagalog, Cebuano and Ilocano. After a three-year pilot implementation, the study concluded that the lingua franca "aided the children to read and write effectively, solve math problems, comprehend science concepts using the first language at home and eventually English as a second language" (Nolasco, 2008, p. 8). It further disclosed that the pupils became more engaged in their classes and had developed comprehension skills in content areas.

Another experimental study was conducted in an MTB-MLE pilot school in rural area in Northern Philippines from school years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. Basically, the study aimed to investigate the effects of language of instruction to educational outcomes in the primary level. Dubbed as the "Lubuagan Kalinga First Language Component Project", it aimed to "incorporate cultural content and the use of the learner's mother tongue in order to optimize the use of the knowledge and skills learners bring to the formal education context" (Dekker & Young, 2005, p. 154). It used an experimental method composed of a control group which used the current standard of instruction using English and Filipino as medium of instruction and an experiment group which used the local language as the language of instruction, with English and Filipino taught as separate subjects. Results revealed that students who received instruction in the mother tongue in a majority of school subjects achieved higher scores in over-all test scores across all subjects tested, including math and reading. Those in the control group fared also well but obtained lower scores in the over-all results with the same set of tests in math and reading. Moreover, results of statistical data provide evidence that the use of primary language (*Lilubuagen*) as the language of instruction is not compromising children in learning the second language which is either English or Filipino. "Over-all, the test results show a consistent advantage for children in the experimental group (MLE)

across all three grades and all subjects in the curriculum" (Walter & Dekker, 2011).

Evidence from these studies support the fact that MTB-MLE has a wide range of educational benefits. These sociocultural and academic advantages outlined earlier comprise the majoritarian narrative about MTB-MLE in the Philippine context. In fact, some scholars view this educational framework as "politically inclusive and pedagogically sound" (Tupas & Lorente, 2014, p. 6). Nevertheless, few studies have offered a critique of MTB-MLE, particularly focusing on the conditions for the successful implementation of mother tongue education programs. A critical review of both empirical and theoretical studies conducted in the Philippines and in other countries on mother tongue education reveals emergent themes on the challenges related to the successful implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in mainstream classrooms. These themes include: (1) multilingualism as a threat, which means that this educational framework is challenging in multilingual countries because the notion of mother tongue becomes elusive in classrooms where students bring several language varieties (Gacheche, 2010; Ghimire, 2012; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014); (2) the role of English in formerly colonized countries in which this 'language of power' poses a threat to other language varieties (Canagarajah, 1999; Finegan, 2011); (3) teacher factor, particularly on the fact that teachers themselves reported lack of sufficient knowledge about their own mother tongue and how to teach them and their lack of sufficient training to implement the policy (Nolasco, 2012; Tupas & Martin, 2016); and (5) structural misalignments, specifically between the intentions of the national language policy at the national level and the ways that teachers interpreted the national policy in the classroom level (Burton, 2013).

Overall, these themes imply the need to critically examine the implementation of MTB-MLE in multilingual, rural spaces. This study shares that point of view. While the academic literature reports the educational advantages and a critique of TMB-MLE, there is a dearth of research that critically examines the implementation of the MTB-MLE from the perspectives of rural, indigenous teachers. This study aimed to address this gap by utilizing a critical lens to foreground the counter-stories of rural teachers that disrupt the dominant narrative about MTB-MLE, particularly in ways that this top-down policy serves to perpetuate the marginalization of the teachers and students in rural educational contexts.

Conceptual Framework

<u>Critical Race Theory</u>

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged as a deviation from liberal racial ideology espoused in the Critical Legal Studies field (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The primary goal of CRT was "to protest inequality and its condition and treatment of oppressed people by arming the voices of the oppressed and establishing that racism is ordinary" (Bryant, Moss & Boudreau, 2015, p. 3). CRT also underscores the idea that institutional racism accounts for imbalances in academic achievement, income, socioeconomic status, and student suspension rates (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015).

As a deconstructive tool and conceptual framework, CRT is grounded in six tenets used to disrupt White, mainstream perspectives of people of color: (1) racism as ordinary; (2) interest convergence or material determinism; (3) social construction; (4) differential racialization; (5) intersectionality and anti-essentialism; and (6) unique voice of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Besides its usage as a social deconstructive tool, CRT has emerged as a framework for analyzing racial discrimination in the field of education. Ladson-

Billings and Tate (1994) argued that CRT could be used by educational scholars to explain educational inequity and its impact on students of color.

In this paper, we utilized the last tenet to frame this study by applying the basic assumptions that "unique voice of color" is relatable to the current educational context of multilingualism in the Philippines. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) state that "minority status brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism" (p. 11). Although we are not exposing counter-stories of people of color about racism, we are exposing the experiences of rural, indigenous teachers who: (a) come from minoritized ethnolinguistic groups and have experienced a long history of oppression by mainstream society, (b) have been continually marginalized by mainstream society, and (c) have not been heard and given attention by bureaucratic institutions. The use of CRT as a framework in this paper also highlights the intersectionality of language, ethnicity and racial oppression. In recounting the experiences of rural teachers in indigenous community settings in the Philippines, this study offers opportunities for "legal storytelling" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 12) to deconstruct the mainstream narrative about the MTB-MLE policy. In the process of deconstruction, rural indigenous teachers' voices are not only heard but also serve as channels for rethinking the national language policies that continue to oppress indigenous students in rural areas. In other words, the counter-stories of rural indigenous teachers pertaining to the implementation of a national language policy work in opposition to majoritarian narratives about mother tongue-based multilingual education.

CRT in contexts outside the United States

Gillborn (2017) insists that Critical Race Theory (2017) scholarship could transgress geographical boundaries, especially surrounding issues related to educational reforms that address the eradication of oppression in the educational

arena. Gillborn contends, that "[a]t a time when policy borrowing is reaching new heights, both the specifics of educational reform and the dilemmas facing educational researchers committed to social justice are remarkably similar in many different nation states" (p. 87). While CRT traces its roots in legal scholarship in the United States (US) and has expanded into the field of education, some scholars argue that CRT could also be applied to contexts outside the US and in countries that have a post-colonial history or context. Gillborn further states, "there is no reason…why the underlying assumptions and insights of CRT cannot be transferred usefully to other (post-) industrial societies such as the UK, Europe and Australasia" (p. 97). To extend his argument, we argue that one reason why the utilization of CRT in other contexts is warranted is that there is an existing set of interrelated beliefs about the essence of race or racism in the field of education. It is a common knowledge that racism does not only exist within the limits of US society, it also comes in many forms and styles depending on the context. As such, racism in countries outside of the US may also take different forms but a common thread defines this relationship: the existence of a group of individuals being oppressed and a dominant entity that perpetuates this oppression. In the case of this study, the oppressed are the teachers while the unexamined and uninterrogated national top-down policy of the government is the oppressor.

In relation to educational and language policies, Gillborn (2005) raises the question of racism and intentionality. He states, "although race inequity may not be a planned and deliberate goal of education policy, neither is it accidental" (p. 490). This implies that policymakers and language planners in different nation-states are primarily aware of their country's linguistic landscape, and such awareness informs their convictions towards what policies are best suited for schoolchildren. As holders of power, policymakers may also unconsciously hold tacit intentionality that represent domination and racial advantage over

groups of individuals who hold lesser or no power at all (Gillborn, 2005). We argue that the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines at the outset had no intention of oppressing indigenous, rural teachers or indigenous students in geographically isolated communities. The policy itself is very supportive of the pedagogical and sociocultural benefits that students could obtain from its implementation. However, the way that the language policy was implemented and how the DepEd fails to recognize the existence of problems in its implementation has caused the policy to oppress certain groups. The educational inequity that emerged from the implementation of the policy is certainly a critical issue that needs to be addressed. As CRT still holds the primary goal of examining the role of racism and oppression in the persistence of educational inequities, the counter-stories of rural teachers could illuminate the problems that both the Philippine government and the DepEd need to recognize and address.

In this paper, the application of CRT to the Philippine context is defined through rural teachers' 'minority' status in relation to the dominant, mainstream and bureaucratic institutions of the government that manage public education. In the Philippines, DepEd is responsible for regulating national language policies that are implemented in public school classrooms. These classrooms thus become the sites of the unseen, negative residual effects of policies that perpetuate the marginalization of rural teachers in indigenous communities. These negative effects continue to take place because the DepEd is failing to recognize the emerging challenges related to the successful implementation of the mother tongue education policy. DepEd and its stakeholders continue to cling to the dominant narrative that has a predisposed belief of the benefits of MTB-MLE, without considering the narrative's flipside, that is, the drawbacks of mother tongue education in multilingual Philippine classrooms. While rural teachers' counter-stories provide evidence of the downside of the mother tongue

policy, their narratives continually fall into deaf ears and subsequently, primary level students from indigenous backgrounds unabatedly suffer the consequences.

Composite counter-storytelling (CCS) and Positionality

Composite counter-storytelling is different from simple re-telling in that it draws a composite picture of the phenomenon emerging from the study informants. When perceived vis-à-vis a phenomenological research design, CCS is employed with the primary role of illuminating both the context and the situation to allow the reader to have an increased sense of contact with the phenomenon without fully possessing it. The composite first person narrative is a reflective story that is more than a definition or series of statements about a phenomenon (Todres, 2007). Moreover, CCS aims to connect an individual story to a broader context and to universal human qualities so that the readers of the research study can relate personally to the themes espoused by the counter-narratives. As Todres (2007) states, "CCS indicates the composite-informant in the first-person sense as someone who typifies the general experience within a living and situated context" (p. 154).

The role of the researcher when utilizing the composite counter-storytelling is critical and essential. The researcher themselves had to distinguish the CCS from ordinary storytelling or writing a cumulative narrative. CCS can be considered as the researchers' interpretive perspective. According to Todres, this interpretation is informed several ways: through the researcher's epistemological orientations relative to the phenomenon being studied; through the researcher's unbiased engagement with the stories told by the participants; and lastly, through the researcher's own reflexivity. Reflexivity in this context relates to the researcher's attitude of taking a systematic stance in attending to how knowledge is constructed through the counter-stories of the study

participants. Knowledge construction as an implicit aim of CCS inherently requires a critical consideration by the researchers because of its potential to contribute to new understanding of the phenomenon under study.

In this study, we had to assume multiple roles that have defined the boundaries through which we were operating. CRT research brings about this "self-revelatory mode" (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and enables researchers to recognize the multiple consciousness(es) in which they are working. As teacher educators, we had always been very explicit in our convictions toward the MTB-MLE policy to our undergraduate students whom we prepare to become ESL teachers in the Philippines. We expressed anxiety over the long-term effects of the policy to teachers who have not had professional development to teach in the mother tongue. As university researchers, we had previously worked with rural teachers in the one of the school districts included in this study, which enabled us to establish a connection with them on a professional level. We served as resource speakers in some professional development workshops in their district and have collaborated with several teachers in writing research studies on the development of localized instructional materials. Thus, we also have a clear perspective of the linguistic, cultural and educational landscape of the school district. Lastly, as bilingual/multilingual education scholars who belong to one indigenous tribe in the Philippines called the *Bontoks*, we possess an inherent concern for our fellow indigenous people whose access to quality education has not been addressed by the government. This lack of concern is further exacerbated by national language policies that continue to marginalize both indigenous students and their teachers in rural settings. In other words, we theorize in the study that the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines could potentially perpetuate educational inequity among rural, indigenous students.

Methodology
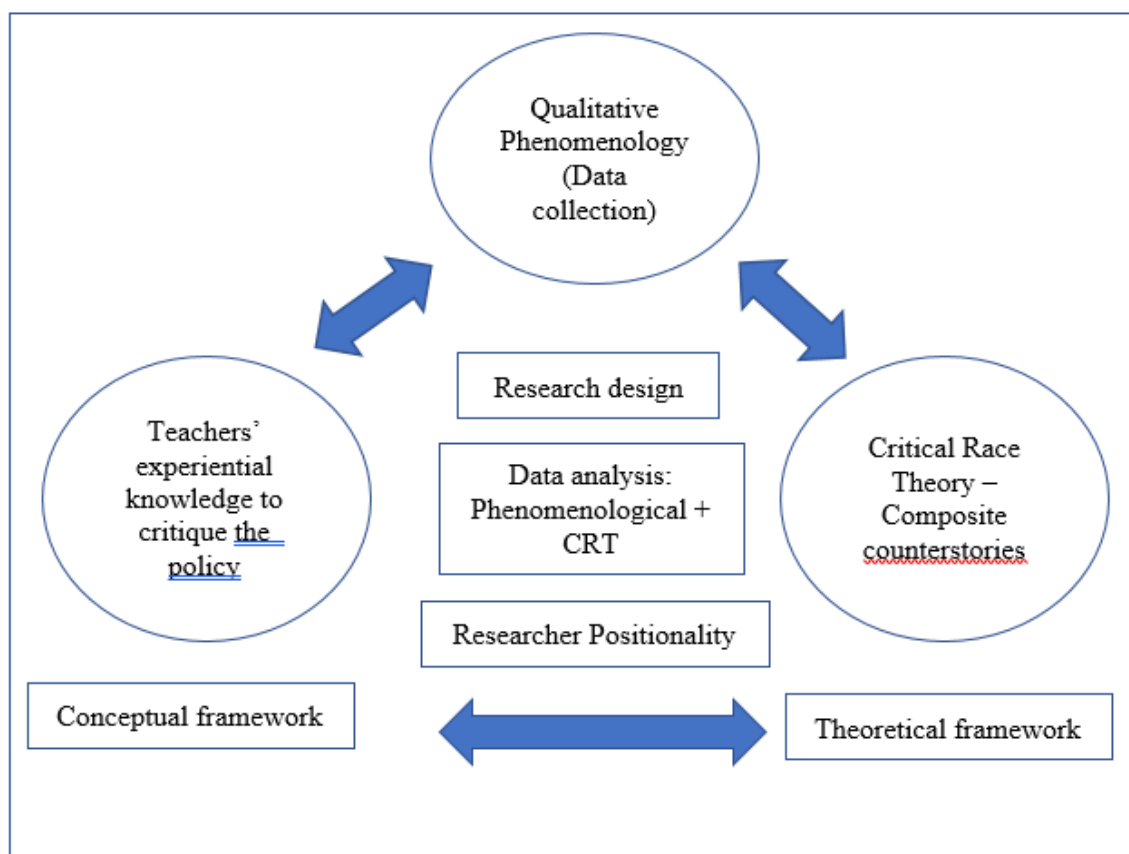
<u>Research design</u>

In this paper, we combined a phenomenological study design (Creswell, 2013) with Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Parker, 2000). In the analysis of data, we read the teachers' counter-stories through our own epistemological and interpretive facilities and reported these composite stories through an essential tenet of CRT: the art of storytelling.

In utilizing the phenomenological approach, we first explored the experiences of teachers on the use of mother tongue instruction in primary school classrooms in Mountain Province, Philippines. Since we theoretically framed this study by the notion that teachers are co-constructors and resistors of language policies, we used phenomenology to provide a venue for the participants to describe and narrate how they mediate the policy and their classroom practices. Their narratives, in turn, provide evidence for resistance of national language policies in their classroom level. As such, the teachers' lived experiences on resistance become instruments that have an inherent value for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders.

To complement the phenomenological design of the study, we employed composite counter-storytelling (CCS) that primarily serves to disrupt the dominant narrative about mother tongue instruction in mainstream Philippine education and to protect the identities and the status of the study's participants from the bureaucratic institutions governing them as public school teachers. By populating this paper with rich and thick descriptions of the rural teachers' experiences through counter-storytelling, the participants' voices, which are not often heard by the bureaucratic institutions such as the Department of Education national office, are given an opportunity to be heard. Through CCS, the stories of marginalized teachers which are equally significant with those of mainstream

teachers could provide essential implications for rethinking the national language policy which purportedly benefits teachers in the grassroots level of implementation—the local, rural classroom. Figure 1 illustrates the study's methodology.

Figure 1. Methodology used in the study

Context of the Study

We conducted the study in three school districts in Mountain Province, one of the six provinces in the Cordillera Administrative Region in the northern part of the Philippines. Thirty percent of the total indigenous people in the Philippines live in this mountainous region, reaching an estimated six million as of 2015 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015). School District A is situated in the province's center of commerce, trade and education and is considered as sub-

urban area with a total population of 24,643 as of 2015 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015). This district is the seat of one elementary public school with diverse students coming from different indigenous tribal groups like the *Applais, Balangaos, Majukkayong, Bontoks, Ibaloi and Kankanaey* (PSA, 2015). Two other elementary schools located in School District B with a total population of 8,799 and` School District C with a total population of 9,315as of 2015 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015) were also included in the study. These school districts, located in geographically isolated areas in the province could be reached only through rugged, mountainous terrains. At the very least, we need to acknowledge also that there is no equivalent general definition of rural, sub-urban and urban available for Philippine educational researchers.

Across the 3 districts, the student population is predominantly multilingual where most elementary pupils speak at least 4 languages to varying degrees of proficiency: (1) their mother tongue (*Bontok, Kankanaey, Ibaloi*); (2) *Ilokano*, the regional lingua franca; (3) *Filipino*, the national language; and (4) English, one of two of the country's official languages, together with *Filipino*. This multilingual status is consistent with what Malone (2007) reported about South Asia that MTB-MLE includes four languages–the students' mother tongue or first language, a regional language, the national language, and an international language. These school districts also have 90% of their students coming from different indigenous tribes and ethnolinguistic groups in northern Philippines, particularly in School District A. According to the report of the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous People (2010), schooling for many indigenous communities primarily found in mountainous areas of the country is still inaccessible. In their communities, basic social services like public schools and health centers do not exist at all. If public schools exist, these schools either provide very low quality of education or do not have enough qualified teachers to instruct the students. The two school districts in the study are perfect

representations of the distressing realities of many indigenous communities in the country.

Participant Overview

We chose the school districts in the study via purposeful and convenience sampling. School District A qualified for the maximum variation sample because in the school district's central school, primary level classrooms are more heterogeneous and multilingual, with students coming from nearby provinces like Ilocos Sur, Kalinga and Benguet and even as far as the southern Philippine region like Mindanao where indigenous tribes also dwell. In fact, the town where School District A is located is now becoming an economic and educational melting pot in northern Philippines. School Districts B and C were categorized under the homogeneous sample since all students in the primary classrooms speak the same language and share common characteristics in terms of cultural backgrounds, low socioeconomic status, and limited access to quality education. We also employed convenience sampling because as instructors and researchers of the university who work closely with the school districts under study, we continually engage in extension and research endeavors with rural teachers in School Districts A and B, and as mentioned previously, we have an existing professional and working relationship with the teachers.

Ten primary level school teachers participated in the study. Participants' working experiences represented diverse aspects like length of teaching experience, age, educational experience and teaching contexts. For instance, All 10 teachers were female but their teaching experiences ranged from 1 to 35 years and whose ages ranged from 24 to 55. Six of the participants taught in highly rural school districts while the four others taught in the suburban School District A. These diverse backgrounds represent varying perspectives towards education in general and towards mother tongue-education in particular. The 10

teachers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds were similar to those of their students All of them were native to the school districts where they taught; they were also members of two ethnolinguistic indigenous groups of northern Philippines, *Bontocs* and *Applais*, whose different dialects, *Ifontok* and *Kankanaey* respectively, are mutually intelligible. We used these local languages to communicate with the teachers during the focus group interviews. These teachers were also multilingual, being articulate in *Ilokano*, the regional lingua franca, Filipino, the national language and English (an international and widely used language in the Philippines).

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data through a series of open-ended, semi-structured and in-depth phenomenological interviews following Seidman (2013). Phenomenological interviews were consistent with the framework and suitable for purposes of this study because of their focus on the experienced meanings of the participants' teaching practices vis-à-vis the national language policy (Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 2014). We utilized a semi-structured interview format, together with a teacher interview protocol that comprised of six questions that we formulated based on a synthesis of the academic literature and guided by the goals of the study.

To collect primary data, we conducted interviews with the teachers, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also generated field notes from a total of 20 classroom observations with the 10 participants, with each observation generally lasting for 50 minutes or a total of 1,000 minutes. In addition, we also facilitated two focus group discussions (FGD), with each lasting for 90 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the first FGD, we aimed to clarify some initial findings that were unclear to us, while in the second FGD, we aimed to

verify the primary codes that we developed and to validate the general themes generated from the data.

For the initial phase of analysis, we employed open coding (Meriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the data sets using an inductive approach (Creswell, 2011). We manually coded the data word-by-word and line-by-line, marking incidents that stood out for us while trying not to rely on our knowledge and current frames of thought that might influence our reading of the data. In other words, rather than employing pre-existing categories, open coding allowed us to grapple with the data. To obtain broader meaning units, we employed a second cycle of coding, mining through the data again in relation to the issues affecting the implementation of MTB-MLE in rural classroom settings. We considered these broader units of meaning as themes that captured the teachers' stories. Four major themes emerged from the data: (1) deterioration in second language(L2) and third language (L3) acquisition; (2) irrelevant or archaic terms to student learning; (3) inappropriateness of mother tongue to certain content areas; and (4) inconsistency in policy and practice. These thematic stories provided the foundation for the CCS that we composed in subsequent sections. Moreover, the first author re-analyzed the emerging themes whether and how they correspond with the tenets of CRT, specifically counter-storytelling (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In other words, we synthesized the broader themes into narratives considered as legitimate counter-stories (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that allowed us to establish and legitimize the voices of rural teachers on their implementation of MTB-MLE to dismantle the dominant narratives about mother tongue education.

Following this, the authors used the participants' individual stories to create composite characters. . We took the elements of intersecting stories to create the

foundation for a character. While we analyzed the individual interview data and while we coded them, we were mindful of each participant's individual story and were guided by the main question, "How do the teachers construct meanings of their experiences in implementing the MTB-MLE policy. This process also ensured that each participant's story was captured in the collective composites and gave light to the collective experiences of the rural teachers. After identifying the composite characters, we then placed them in larger social, educational situations to discuss the emergent themes that emerged across the teachers' stories.

Next, the authors used a CRT methodological framework to develop the counter-stories from the interview and FGD data, the existing academic literature on MTB-MLE and from our own experiences and knowledge in mother tongue-based education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). While coding the data for themes, we wrote the story of each participant. To ensure that we could capture the essence of each individual's story before constructing composite characters, we mined through the data set meticulously while relating them to larger issues about MTB-MLE. All the authors then concurred as a group in creating composites by aligning the characters with the themes that emerged from the data.

Teachers' Composite Counter-stories

The use of qualitative phenomenological research design was appropriately complemented with counter-storytelling that allowed the researcher to integrate reality into creative writing. Moreover, the study's use of composite counter-stories introduces a different way of making sense of qualitative data, which are otherwise presented through re-telling of a series of statements about the phenomenon. In addition, the teachers' CCS are not too exhaustive for the readers, but are rather more imaginative, thus allowing readers to connect more

with universal human qualities to clearly understand the phenomenon under study.

With meticulous attention to details and creative writing, we were able to write an innovative composite narrative drawn from field notes, classroom observations, interview transcripts and focus group discussions. We obtained counter-stories from an analytical method that combined phenomenological interpretation with CRT. The characters in the CCS were used as representatives of the ten rural teachers' narratives and not just individualized stories of teachers with pseudonyms (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Also, in reading the CCS, Cook and Dixson (2013) advise readers that the dialogue, setting, and thoughts of the composite characters were directly sourced from research data but were edited to sustain the narrative's flow. The section that follows the teachers' CCS is the analysis of the composite stories tied to the broader context of the study.

Opening Pandora's Box

During the annual literary competition[1] among elementary students from the 10 different districts in the province, three veteran teachers and oratorical coaches had the chance to meet again and catch up on the work in their respective schools. As they were walking towards the school canteen[2] to have coffee, they started talking about the recent implementation of the mother tongue instruction policy across the country. Surprisingly, the school canteen was busy and only two tables were empty. Having taken their orders, they found an empty table in the far left corner of the room and soon, they sat comfortably. Rosa has been teaching in first grade for 19 years; Nora has been teaching third grade for 23 years and Mary has been teaching second grade for 35 years.

"I am about to retire from service in 2 years and I am compelled to learn new strategies for teaching my students using the mother tongue," Mary uttered.

"It's the order and we have to comply; but what mother tongue or home language are we going to use in school?" she asked. "You know," she continued, "our kids in this school district come from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds and so they bring with them a plethora of mother tongues. If I decide to use one of these varieties, then I would be isolating the others!" she exclaimed.

After sipping from her coffee mug, Rosa uttered with apparent disgust, "I have never grappled with instructional strategies and assessment in my entire teaching career until the policy implementation! They expect us to deliver when no sufficient training and PD was provided to ensure the smooth transition from the bilingual education policy to the mother tongue policy. The implementation was so abrupt that we are even unable to catch up with the demands of the district office!"

Trying to restrain herself, Nora grumbled, "I feel bad for my students. I teach some content without any instructional materials or textbooks provided by DepEd because all they did was provide us with a mere outline of the curriculum content and standards. And so, we are left with no choice but to design our own lessons, provide our own instructional materials and spend money from our pockets." Lowering down her voice and bending closer to the table, she whispered, "I might retire a pauper!"

Surprisingly, in a more relaxed tone, Mary said, "Well, I guess the national policy was implemented in a haste, and we, in the grassroots who have never been consulted nor asked, are the ones to bear the brunt of the negligence of concerned authorities." Seemingly staring to a far direction, she added, "Look what happened to the oratorical competition in English. The judges were

dissatisfied with our students' performance and the expressions in their faces makes me feel that I am to be blamed for their poor English oral proficiency."

As the conversation shifted from the national policy to the just-concluded, local oratorical competition, the teachers expressed their struggles in training their students.

"For this English oratorical competition, I had spent many days on just proper pronunciation of English words with my student!" exclaimed Mary as she reached out for the copy of the oratorical piece from her bag. "What could be wrong with our students? They are not even able to properly articulate words in English," she added. Pointing to some words from the oratorical piece, she said, "These words are not difficult to articulate, are they?"

Rosa added, "I have a strong conviction that the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy has led to the deterioration of our students' proficiency in the second language, particularly English. I remember my conversation with our principal, Mrs. Toribio two weeks ago, regarding the policy implementation. She conceded and told me that the problem was on the absence of an effective transition program from 3rd grade to 4th grade onwards. Mrs. Toribio also observed that my colleagues who use the mother tongue to teach also concomitantly deteriorate in their communication abilities in English or Filipino.

Affirming what the principal said, Nora exclaimed, "Indeed, we are also swayed into such practices that cause deterioration in our language proficiency in either English or Filipino. As a matter of fact, teachers in 4th and 5th grades are also blaming us that we have instructed our 3rd grade students with their mother tongue, and yet they also blame us that their teaching is compromised when

they use English because the students could hardly understand the lesson in a foreign language like English. Their students demand that they be instructed in mother tongue because they have been used to it. And if teachers do so, it would be a blatant violation of the policy because in 4th grade, students should be instructed in English and Filipino."

Trying to assuage Nora of her guilt, Mary passionately shared her own experience of being blamed by parents on their children's deteriorating proficiency in English. Mary narrated that at one point, one mother approached her and asked, "Why are you asking our children to list down old, ancient terms in the mother tongue? Are these relevant for their learning at all?" Mary admitted that she was not prepared at that moment to explain the assignment's purpose to her student's mother.

Rosa was quick enough to respond and exclaimed, "Because that is what the DepEd is requiring us to do based on the core curriculum on mother tongue that they provided us - to teach our students these archaic terms in the mother tongue and their meanings. Your student's mother was right after all. Why do we need to dig out those ancient terms and concepts, when in fact, even parents do not make use of these ancient terms anmore. So if learning is supposed to be built on the pupils' home language, we should be using a dynamic or functional home language, right?"

Mary agreed with Rosa and argued that the irrelevance of archaic terms in the mother tongue also affects the ways that she perceives her own competency in the mother tongue. She strongly posited, "None of us can even speak the deep native terms (referring to archaic terms). As I have argued earlier, what dialect do we use for pupils in this school who come from different (cultural) backgrounds? The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction can be

problematic, with consideration of our indigenous students' multilingual nature and apparently, the DepEd has not anticipated this reality."

Nora jumped back into the conversation to build on what Mary raised about the issue. She said, "the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction is not appropriate for certain content areas like Math and Science." In a gradually increasing tone in her voice, she added, "Just look at this! There are mathematical terms that could not be translated into the mother tongue right? In science, terms like petals, pistils, stigma, for instance, do not have mother tongue equivalents and what do we do with these? Just use English then and combine it with mother tongue? Why don't we just teach the subjects in English then so as not to confuse our students in switching from one language to another?" Rosa and Mary didn't realize that they were continuously bowing their heads in amazement of Nora's passion and enthusiasm.

Realizing that they were the only people left in the canteen at about 4:30 in the afternoon, the teachers started to wind up their conversation. With her sustained enthusiasm about the conversation, Mary suddenly uttered as they were leaving, "And by the way, did you even realize that while we instruct our students in the mother tongue, they are assessed through the national test in English? Where is social justice here?" As they walked through the almost deserted school premises, the three teachers blankly stared at the ground. As they reached the school gate, Nora suddenly asked, "Have we just opened Pandora's box?"

Discussion

Teachers' CCS: Disrupting the Dominant Narrative

The implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines is considered an educational innovation based on the country's need to preserve its rich linguistic heritage. Its integration into the formal education system is backed by both

international research and majoritarian narratives that underscore the benefits of mother tongue education on students' better access to quality education. However, there is also evidence from the academic literature that recognizes the challenges of mother tongue education, particularly in multilingual countries like the Philippines and South Africa (e.g. Tupas, 2015, Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). The composite counter-stories of the rural teachers presented in this paper have served to substantiate such claims on the problematic aspects of the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines. In contrast to the majoritarian narrative that the MTB-MLE program has on both educational and cultural advantages for Filipino students, the teachers' counter-stories provide the foundation that could deconstruct the dominant narratives. Recounting the teachers' experiences through a composite story has helped bring the challenges to the forefront of the debate about this recent educational reform in the Philippines.

The finding related to the deterioration of L2 and L3 acquisition among students as a consequence of the policy's implementation is most interesting in that it directly contradicts the discourse offered by bilingual education research (e.g. Cummins, 2000). For instance, language scholars underscore the pedagogical advantages of mother tongue instruction in terms of cross language transfer. Specifically, these scholars claim that MTB-MLE facilitates transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills and a two-way transfer across languages (CAL, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Dutcher, 2001, Kirkpatrick, 2011; MacSwan, 2017). While these theories were generated in the West, they could be applicable to situations in developing countries in Southeast Asia because individuals across different countries have common underlying abilities to acquire and use different languages in learning.

Analyzing this finding via a more critical lens further highlights the deficiencies of the policy, particularly in its inability to implement a well-rounded and

comprehensive program. The discourse on L2 and L3 deterioration is attributed to the fact that the MTB-MLE policy lacks well-established bridging practices, particularly between grades 3 and 4 when the transition to the use of English and Filipino as media of instruction takes place. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 2008) insists that for MTB-MLE programs to be successful, appropriate transition programs have to be in place, such that operational transitions can warrant the transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills from the home language to the second and third languages (Cummins, 2000).

While the dominant narrative on mother tongue education backed by academic research supports the idea of cultural preservation, the teachers' composite stories manifest the irrelevance of archaic terms to students' learning processes. Strictly speaking, archaic terms refer to words that were used in ancient times and are not being used at the present time because they have equivalent terms that are more commonly used in the contemporary times (Spolsky, 2004). It is worth recognizing that lesser-used language varieties in the Philippines have a quite comprehensive orthography; however, a serious consideration on the unfavorable impact of introducing archaic terms that is detrimental to the development of students' academic language is equally necessary.

In relation to the development of students' academic language which is necessary to facilitate learning in multilingual settings (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), the counter-stories presented in the study support the notion that mother tongue is not appropriate for certain content areas across the primary level curriculum. For the teachers in this study, they believe that the absence of academic terms in the mother tongue orthography, which is being used in content areas like Math and Science, serves as a disadvantage for learning among primary grade students. Other empirical studies conducted in the Philippines affirm this challenge. A study by Burton (2013) reported that since

the implementation of the mother tongue policy, teachers constantly adjust their teaching practices. For instance, in teaching content areas, they incorporate English with the mother tongue, they implement more reading activities in English rather than in mother tongue, and they employ literal translations in content areas like Math. Burton elaborates, "When no words in the mother tongue are found, teachers use English terms instead" (p. 88).

Lastly, the teachers' CCS is in stark contrast to the dominant narrative of the MTB-MLE policy that assessments should be conducted in the mother tongue being used by the school district. While this provision may be referring to formative assessment in schools, the national assessment of students being instructed in the mother tongue is in English. To a large extent, there is utter disregard of the welfare of students whose mother tongue or home language is not English. The inconsistency between the policy and practice exhibits a high form of hypocrisy in the Philippine educational system that exacerbates the further deterioration of learning among indigenous students whose access to quality education is very limited. Mainstream K to12 Filipino students undeniably have the access to other forms of educational opportunities to learn English, and to be assessed in English is in their favor. Indigenous students in rural areas who have limited access to these opportunities will suffer the consequences of being assessed in English.

Conclusion

With the need for more qualitative studies to examine the impact of the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy to both K-12 teachers and students in the Philippines, and building upon the increasing use of CRT in international contexts, we have featured in this article the counter-stories of rural teachers that disrupt the dominant narratives about mother tongue-education. While some empirical studies attempted to examine the implementation of MTB-MLE

in the Philippines, none of these studies highlighted rural teachers' counter-stories embedded within CCS. This study contributes in filling that gap in the literature and at the same time, it opens up spaces for future empirical research to use CRT to frame rural teachers' experiential knowledge about educational policies.

As the study was also conceptually guided by CRT, it allowed the creation of a space where the experiences of marginalized teachers in rural settings in relation to a top-down language policy are given prominence. The essence of experiential knowledge, not only in CRT research but also in its potential to uncover social injustices in education, has been utilized appropriately in this empirical study to serve its purpose in disrupting dominant narratives that perpetuate educational oppression. It is discernible from the study that the counter-stories emerged from rural teachers who are also members of indigenous groups and who comprise a marginalized group in Philippine society. They do possess a unique voice, and such voices are powerful enough to shake the very foundations of mainstream narratives and allow for them a space to be heard by the wider, global community.

With Pandora's box opened, albeit not because of teachers' curiosity but because of their desire to unearth the challenges that they continually face in light of the policy's implementation, there is no other step to take but for the Philippines' Department of Education to address the issues unleashed by this phenomenological study. It seems difficult to close the box, unless the realities change in the nick of time.

Notes

[1]In the K-12 school district, extracurricular activities like literary-cultural competitions, sports competitions and cognitive-based competitions bring opportunities for

teachers/coaches to catch up with their own work and personal lives; these activities enable teachers to meet in person across geographical settings.

[2]The school canteen was used as the story's setting. Two interviews were conducted in the school canteen after the teachers' daily work. In the Philippines, the school canteen is also considered as an academic and cultural space where teachers feel free to be themselves and talk about anything under the sun.

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