



Listening to students' voices: a participatory approach in improving teaching and learning

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Abstract

The role of inclusive research in understanding inclusive education has been globally emphasized in literature. Promoting inclusive education in a newly established senior high school, students in this study were actively involved as co-creators of knowledge with the aim of transforming pedagogies and classrooms. This study employed grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in repeatedly examining the data from the actual participation of 85 senior high school students who expressed their voices on the learning experiences that they had in the first two months of school. Allowing students to become co-creator and co-interpreter of information, the analysis presents richer knowledge on how learning environments such as senior high school classrooms and grounds can be transformed into inclusive educational settings. Although it was easy to collect data, the source which is in the form of documents could be incomplete and limited the researchers in probing information that needed clarification. Inclusive research is crucial in understanding epistemic diversity, which is a domain in the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). This allows teachers and learners to further view education with greater consideration of their acquired knowledge and where everyone in the learning process benefits.

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1. Introduction

Schooling these days is becoming more exciting and liberating due to many efforts that attempt to transform education. One factor influential to this transformation is the technological revolution particularly of the world wide web; that is from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 where users are not just recipient of information but also creators of knowledge. Additionally, the global movement towards an equitable and quality education for all

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compels educators to focus on constant inquiry and reflection which can effectively facilitate the improvement of practice and enhance teaching and learning for all.

The trend for inquiry is currently leaning towards inclusive and participatory research. Rather than using students and teachers as subjects of research, the emerging praxis of research now includes them as co-producer of knowledge. They become actively involved in transforming schools into a democratic learning environment where both responsibility and glory are neither accounted to the teachers and school leaders nor the students alone. Using the metaphor of the horse and the carriage, both entities should have a collective understanding that one is not functioning well without the other.

One major effort in transforming Philippine education is the development of the Philippine Performance Standards for Teachers (PPST) where classroom diversity is emphasized (DepEd, 2017). Placing importance on the inherent qualities of the students while preparing them to become effective twenty-first century learners in the high-industrialized society underpins this policy. The growing body of literature that supports this proposition is believed to be changing the landscape of Philippine education which will be beneficial to our learners today and in the next generation.

This research adheres to the principles of the PPST capitalizing on technological advances afforded by the new school in this study. Findings of this research study have implications on how the praxis connects with theories and vice versa. Standing on the shoulder of the giants, even new researchers, as the case for this inquiry, can see further than the giants themselves, whose works have contributed significantly in the classroom, education and organizations. The nature of emancipatory research is to transform a community in different dimensions (Camarota & Romero, 2011). It is with this purpose that this qualitative research is rooted, where an understanding of the context is necessary so that the actions taken and decisions made for this research are based on the existing realities.

The school where this study took place is a newly opened senior high school in a rural community in the Philippines. Over 80% of the enrolled students moved in from the adjacent national high school while the minority consists of learners from other provinces, of students who completed an alternative program for out-of-school youth, and of returning students whose ages are beyond their current grade level. Being a new school, programs and activities, as well as funding and learning resources are not completely set in place.

The researchers in this study were four teachers and the school head of the public senior high school. Two of these teachers have just recently transferred from private schools while one has just recently completed the units required for education and passed the teachers' board. The school head is a master teacher and has recently moved in from a large public junior high school to the newly established senior high school which has a total of 85 enrolments.

The context cited above is very significant to the nature of this research since findings implicate on the establishment of the school, laying down the foundation for multiple stakeholders. The expected audience of this research are not just internal stakeholders but also the community, the educational leaders at different levels, and decision-makers who operate in both bureaucratic and democratic environments.

2. Literature Review

This section expounds teachers as researchers, emerging educational technology, and students participation.

2.1 Teachers as researchers

An emancipatory action research is geared towards improving practice and re-orienting teachers to evidence-based approaches (Nind, 2014). When teachers engage themselves in reflective inquiry, Dimmock (2016) is very certain that they can raise their professional standards because they can question their own practice. Being open to learning through examination of arguments and relevant evidence (Robinson, 2013) plays an important role in transforming classrooms as a result of teacher professionalization through research.

The insights or knowledge foster an awareness of how to redefine one's self, community, and world in more positive, just terms. These redefinitions are necessary for young people to feel capable and competent as agents of change, whether the change is initiated at individual, institutional or societal levels (Cammarota & Romero, 2011, p. 503).

2.2 The development of the world wide web

Becoming a netizen is not an option anymore; it is a need of every individual in order to gain an increased awareness of what is happening in the world (Bhang & Lee, 2017).

The revolution of technology from analogue to digital systems has created massive changes in the way people gain not just information but also skills that help them make a meaningful living. To be more specific, the development of Web 2.0 technologies has placed both the content and the user equally important (Magnuson, 2013), making knowledge creation more decentralized. With teachers effectively using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the classroom, we may address what Jimoyiannis and colleagues (2013) once concluded that young people are more superior than teachers in the use of ICT. Instead of feeling less skillful, teachers begin to harness technologies in meaningful activities such as scaffolding and mentoring. Engaging activities are more likely to occur by utilizing appropriate technologies in teaching and learning. The fit of these tools supports the notion that the impact of using technology in the classroom is not directly attributable to the technology per se but to how these technologies are being used (Hew & Cheung, 2013).

2.3 Students and their voice

Schools have agency in providing students with meaningful experiences where their individualities are thoughtfully considered. The role of schools in inclusion is very crucial in creating environment where all students feel safe and experience equal opportunities. As argued by Carrington and colleagues (2013), public schooling is ideally an avenue where students are apprentice for democratic participation, and it prepares them to be actively involved in the shaping and transforming of the society. This exists in schools where student opinions matter; where teachers are not the only “experts” in the classroom; and where everyone feels that they have something worthwhile to say (Kane & Chimwayange, 2013). This level of inclusivity is what this paper believed to be more socially-just and research-based in improving the praxis at MDSHS. Supplemented by the top-down development activities, the bottom-up approach of understanding teaching and learning is seen to be an effective way of honing teachers into quality educators. Being informed of the pattern used by the literature in listening to student voices (e.g. Kane & Chimwayange, 2013), this research draws on students’ written reflections on their learning experiences inside and outside the classroom.

This inquiry is focused on how Grade 11 students voice out their learning experiences, how their experiences are translated into best classroom practices, and how these findings help in improving teaching and learning. In writing the research questions, we decided to follow the basic principle of appreciative inquiry. This conceptual framework was introduced by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) in their *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* with research perspective pointing to social innovation rather than problem-solving. Bringing fresh perspectives, appreciative inquiry suggests what might

work which provides a clearer vision of realistic opportunities for improving classroom practices. Another essential element is the style of research that taps on the affective dimension of an individual. Appreciative inquiry is based on affirmation which fosters belief, trust and conviction; not on criticism which is based on negative feelings like skepticism and doubt. This type of inquiry results to the development of theory based on data represented by the collective will of an organization. As proposed by Serrat (2017), “every organization has something that works right” (p.596). The essential step for the organization is to find its life-giving forces that sustains the organization.

3. Methods

Greater interest for inclusive research has motivated the researchers to consider qualitative approach in this study. As posited by Nind (2014), this method of research gives participants a high regard for their voice as owners of valid perspectives about their experiences. These experiences were examined using the grounded theory approach by creatively and imaginatively theorizing out of the data. Suter (2014) emphasized the non-routinized nature of qualitative approach because there are many ways to think about this approach. With grounded theory, allowed our minds to wander on data and we made free associations of information by comparing and questioning until we discover new meaningful concepts (Thornberg, 2012a).

An online platform was used to conduct an evaluation of student experiences on each course. In this platform, all students in the school were asked to transfer their written evaluation from paper to a Padlet named Storying MDSHS. They were informed that their posts would be collected for the teachers’ inquiry on what works best in the classroom. A total of 274 posts from 85 students across their Grade 11 courses were printed out for analysis. There were four teacher-researchers in this study which enabled multiple coding (Stoner, 2015). The researchers invited 6 other student-researchers as independent coders for consistency check (Suter, 2014). During students’ assembly, the themes that emerged were presented using data display to confirm their experiences which ensured the credibility of analysis.

The advantage of using appreciative inquiry as method of questioning is that the informants shared only the positive side of their experiences. This approach is less intrusive since sensitive issues are less likely to occur in their posts. The ethical consideration for this research is also drawn from the premise that student participatory approach is ‘more ethically aware’ (Nind, 2014) because the researchers share their power to interpret the data with the participants. They were also informed that their

posts would be used for the teachers' inquiry on best classroom practices. Lastly, as Stoner (2015) clarified, a collection of posts from a site maybe considered a public document – a less intrusive source of data - which this research has prepared by conducting a course evaluation.

4. Results

This analysis highlights the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

4.1 Collaboration skills through social learning

Students learned a lot from their experiences in dealing with group mates during the group activity. Sense of belongingness was reported as experiences. Based on the comments, collaborative approach used by the teachers helped them to be cooperative. With these experiences, the grouped activities have helped them become creative in planning and executing activities. Students further narrated that engaging themselves in collaborative activities improved their confidence and enabled them to exercise and develop both their social and leadership skills. Their involvement in group activities encouraged them to enjoy the entire discussion and hone their communication skills as they were given an avenue to share their insights with their fellow students or with the whole class without much restrictions.

In this subject, the most enjoyable thing for me is our group activities as we can always collaborate during class recitations. I can also enhance my English skills (Post#71).

4.2 Technology for engagement and understanding

Based on the student's reflection regarding the use of technology in the classroom, it highly motivated them to learn and be more participative in class. They were able to develop and enhance their creativity skills. The learning that they experienced is not just applicable in the four corners of the room, but even outside the school.

We learned how to create a website, login and post. And in making an infographics, we composed a good slogan that is full of information and it was exciting because we edited our infographics in a creative way, with different colors and shapes (Post#41).

Relative to this, the students enjoy much the use of online applications while performing their individual assessment. Doing online review sessions through educational sites like “Quizzizz” gave students a fun-filled learning with a motivation to do situational analysis, and courage to take criticisms. Online quizzes provided challenge to most of them, as they were required to do careful reading and analysis of every item on the test. They could find satisfaction in doing such type of assessments as they were presented with the reasons or justifications for every misconception about the lesson they once held in mind.

I really enjoyed learning in oral comm, especially when we had online quizzes on QUIZZIZZ. I love it as it shows how modern we are now. I enjoyed those quizzes because aside from being interactive, fun or thrilling, it is also very educational. I got to learn from my mistakes because the questions weren't identification. It makes us read more and understand and eventually, learn (Post#67).

4.3 Real-world connections

The students were able to reflect and take themselves outside their comfort zones. They were able to realize things they were interested in and that in the future they will apply. They emphasized that they gained skills they could use later in life. The students reported that they learned more whenever they are engaged in activities dealing with the trends, current issues and challenges and apply what they learn in their real life, outside school.

Development of technology is growing so fast and we cannot just look at it, we need to learn and know it. We need to be part of it (Post#128).

4.4 Teacher quality

The quality of a teacher was revealed in this analysis. The students expressing their admiration for their teachers implies that the teachers have impacts on student motivation. Moreover, the difficulties experienced by the learners in different courses can indeed be addressed through the guidance of an adult. This creates an emotional and relational transformation on the students.

I learn a lot in this subject especially from our teacher. I like my teacher so much because she always helps me understand the lesson (Post#88).

4.5 Twenty-first century skills

The students expressed their advancing speaking skills through meaningful activities such as role-playing. They reported that they loved to express their ideas in front of their class. They believed that this has developed their confidence as they progress with their chosen tracks. Students further revealed that they mostly preferred activities that allowed them to employ creative thinking skills. In particular, students could take delight from assuming various roles, exploring different ideas, and creating their own theories or concepts which helped them understand the lesson better. In one of the tasks facilitated in class, creating a fictional country escalated students' drive towards learning Intercultural communication.

In this subject (Oral communication), I enjoy and like the most is when we had a group activity whereby each group was asked to think of its own country, culture, literature, traits, values, and language. It let us to communicate with different nationalities and build good relationships with them. It also improved my English skills (Post#265).

5. Discussion

This research advances three important implications for teacher and learning: listening to students' voices, teachers as researchers, and transforming teaching and learning.

5.1 Listening to students' voices

This paper emphasizes what Onders (2017) considers as one major factor why students become less engaged in the classroom. Often, students have weak feelings toward schooling including the subjects and the school itself. This is an important reason why the approach of appreciative inquiry was used in formulating the questions. The mode of questions allows students to find their "life-giving forces" (Serrat, 2017) and then building on those strengths to gain worthwhile learning experiences. These students come to believe that their voice can inform the way they ought to be thought in the classroom (Kane & Chimwayange, 2013).

This is part of youth development where senior high school students participate in activities promoting healthy identities (Cammarota & Romero, 2011). The use of different technologies is very engaging for many students because it taps into their skills in the use of devices and various tools and platforms (Bell, 2010). As the students reported that their ideas were always being considered, they were able to develop a positive regard for

their school performance. They are not just students who come to school regularly; but they are the students who portrait their sense of responsibility.

5.2 Teachers as researchers

Researchers claim that there is a common understanding that high quality teachers induce learning (Bhang & Lee, 2017). As such, feedback plays a significant role in teachers' development. Upon reading the posts from their own students, the co-researchers in this study had the feeling of affirmation with the best practices that they employed in their courses. They were provided with a tool facilitating reflection. The reason why the contexts of the researchers and the school are included in this paper is because of the awareness that action research can reorient teachers' perspectives. In this paper, the use of grounded theory allowed student voices to emerge (Stoner, 2015) which has helped the researchers to become reflective while affirming the worth of their practices.

5.3 Transforming teaching and learning

The themes intersecting at some point confers with Bell's proposition (2010) on student learning. For example, while students are working collaboratively, they develop twenty-first century skills such as when they brainstorm and plan for their project. They build on one another's ideas as they listen and share. They also evaluate the successes of their group activities. They become reflective when they are given opportunities to communicate their understanding. They also see that their courses are not an isolated area because they can make meaningful connections between their classroom activities and the real world.

6. Conclusions

Democratizing the creation of knowledge by involving the most important audience of education – the students – allows us to think about our world better and how we can operate as thinking and learning individuals. Although the term improvement in teaching and learning can be ambiguous, it cannot be denied that personal changes have taken place among students who shared their learning experiences. Equally important, the teacher-researchers were able to affirm their best practices adding up to their confidence in facilitating their classes despite being new to public schooling. This pedagogical and epistemological transformation, however small-scale it maybe, is more effective than learning from experts alone because it is context-based and inclusive in approach. Once again, the strength of using appreciative inquiry has been highlighted through this study, which the researchers find effective in improving and eventually transforming teaching and learning. Consistency in the use of an online platform for

student evaluation on the courses using a less intrusive approach is strongly recommended. An online platform where students can freely express what works in the classroom is inclusive as it does not discriminate anyone. Finally, using a simple technology in undergoing a sophisticated process of inquiry may guarantee quality findings, helping the youth to realize the value of good judgement and hardwork.

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