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Senior High School Students' Experiences of and Reflections on Ilokano Culture and Heritage Studies

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring the Senior High School (SHS) students' experiences of and reflections on Ilokano culture and heritage studies. This qualitative research involved twenty-five (25) purposively selected SHS students as participants. They were asked to write a reflective essay about their experiences in their qualitative research journey and their reflections on these experiences by answering five open-ended questions. The content-analyzed data showed that Senior High School students found qualitative research as a challenging and demanding task yet rewarding, remarkable, and memorable. The major difficulties encountered by student-researchers are related to recruitment, financial and resources constraints, work relationships with other researchers, and data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Moreover, it was concluded that students deemed qualitative studies as path to learning new things and (re)discovering one's identity, culture, and heritage. Qualitative research journey yielded positive transformations in students and motivated them to come up with initiatives and advocacies in promoting Ilokano studies, culture, and heritage.

INTRODUCTION

One of the salient features of K to 12 basic education curriculum in the Philippines is its relevance to the learners through contextualization and enhancements. In the subjects offered, the learners' culture, history, and community are given strong emphasis, consideration, and importance. For example, Practical Research I (Qualitative Research) is one the subjects offered in the Senior High School (SHS). It is categorized under applied track subjects. It is described as a course that [sic] develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills through qualitative research. Since its first year of offering in the SHS, Practical Research I class, in one of the biggest secondary schools in Ilocos Norte, Philippines, has become a venue for students to conduct qualitative studies on their own culture and heritage. While there is a wide array of possible topics for qualitative research, the students enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) did case studies and ethnographic researches on ethno-medicines, traditional food, occupations, agriculture, engineering, among other significant areas. Students also explored topics on Bukto gathering, a freshwater fish found in the rivers of Bacarra; traditional farming tools used by town folks farmers; traditional postpartum practices; rituals in building structures, Sukang Iloko (Ilokano vinegar) making, and farming beliefs in Garlic production. Other groups dealt with studies on traditional medical practices like panagablon, panagsuma, kulibra, traditional herbal medicines, badbadiok gathering, and traditional skin care practices. Others conducted research on tagapulot making, wild fruits and vegetables, lived experiences of Ilokano centenarians, and traditional Ilokano recipes. While the Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM) students conducted research on topics like antic

collection as business, bamboo weaving, Salakot making, the Ilokano's barter system, lived experiences of Kalesa drivers, Basi production, Harp industry in Bacarra, Tupig making, and Tobacco industry. Given these interesting and multi-ranging research topics on culture and heritage in qualitative research subject the senior high school students engaged in, the need to explore their experiences of and reflections on conducting these studies is deemed imperative.

Meanwhile, it cannot be discounted that Ilocos Norte, among other Ilokano provinces in the Philippines, has rich and unique culture and heritage. In fact, Cabie (2018) noted that the Ilokano have a colorful and lively culture that makes it distinct from the rest of the northern part of the Philippines. He added that such culture is reflected in museums and Spanish era-inspired Roman Catholic churches and galleries. Bacarra, a third class municipality in Ilocos Norte, through the years, has earned its reputation as a unique cultural spot making itself as one the province's pride. Guia (2012) described the town as idyllic as it rests in the coast of the province and rewards the curious adventurer with a wealth of natural and historic treasures. Guia added that Bacarra's rustic streets, wooden houses and imposing church structures from the Spanish era offer a glimpse into the distant past as Bacarra holds claim to being the third oldest town in Ilocos Norte. A charming locale surrounded by the endless sea, lush fields, and extensive river channels, Bacarra is a town blessed with the bounty of nature. Given these details, the town of Bacarra yields itself as a perfect setting for various ethnographic studies.

Soria (2016) posited that one rewarding aspect of being a teacher is the rare chance to enter students' lives by having interactions with them that may be formal or informal. Through their stories, teachers get to know

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the students beyond their identities. Hence, on the part of the teacher of qualitative research, it is important to explore the experiences and reflections of the student-researchers on conducting studies on topics that are genuinely theirs—their own culture, traditions, practices, and customs—their heritage. The responses from the students will serve as reflections for teachers as to how they will improve their strategies in teaching qualitative research and make the subject more relevant and interesting to student-researchers. Like what Lino (2016) posited, reflection plays an important role in the process of learning. The information about student researchers' first-hand experiences of and reflections on conducting qualitative studies specifically on the Ilokano culture and heritage may provide insights that will be helpful to teachers of the subject in mentoring or guiding their future student-researchers. The insights are also believed to be necessary to future student-researchers as guide in conducting qualitative studies.

More than ever, now is the time to raise the question, what is it to students who belong to Generation Z to conduct studies on culture? Do they appreciate the said academic endeavor? More so, in this time of proliferation of high technology and rapid modernization, does their cultural heritage still matter? Is it still relevant? These questions matter a lot in these times where this generation is observed to be inattentive to matters concerning their identity. In fact, Agcaoili (2008) as cited in Lino (2016) pointed out that there many Ilokano who have even lost the audacity to claim their Ilokanoness, preferring other identities that they are not [...]. Furthermore, Agcaoili underscored that many are merely paying lip service to what it means to be an Ilokano or what it means to keeps for always the language and culture of the Ilokano. Amidst this bleak scenario, Agcaoili earlier expressed strong faith in the youth and that he never gets tired imagining with the young and looking at the word and world with the lens and perspectives of these young people. Lino (2016) expressed agreement to Agcaoili's (2012) contention saying that the youth hold among other keys, the valuable key toward the death or perpetuation, promotion, and preservation of their [...] identity.

Hence, in line with the purpose of the research, the two research questions that guided the study were: 1. How do student researchers describe their qualitative research journey in terms of their experiences and the challenges they encountered? 2. Reflecting on these experiences, what are the student-researchers' realizations about their qualitative research journey and its impact their life as students and Ilokano, and their plans in and advocacies for promoting Ilokano studies, culture, and heritage?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Senior High School (SHS) refers to the last two years of the K to 12 program (Grades 11 and 12) of the Philippine Basic Education Curriculum. The two additional years are hoped to equip learners with skills that will better prepare them for the future whether they will choose

employment, entrepreneurship, skills development, and higher education (college) (What is SHS?, n.d.). With its features and characteristics, it is deemed that SHS has strengthened curriculum. There are eight core learning areas in the curriculum, namely, Language, Math, Science, Communication, Philosophy, Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical Education and Health. There are fifteen (15) core subjects that all Grade 11 and 12 students in the SHS must take up regardless of their chosen strand or career track. These subjects are, basically, likened to the General Education subjects taken in the first year or second year in Philippine colleges before. Added to these core subjects are the seven applied or contextualized subjects. Although, contrary to core subjects which are only meant to cover the most basic topics, applied subjects are designed to focus on the specific applications of certain subjects on the student's chosen career track or learning strand (Senior High School in the Philippines, n.d.). Practical Research I (Qualitative Research) is an example of applied subject. Lastly, there are 16 specialized subjects SHS students will take. These are subjects that are unique to the career track or learning strand the student chose (Senior High School in the Philippines, n.d.). They may be likened to major subjects in college.

Meanwhile, Ilocos Norte is a bastion of heritage preservation in the Philippines (Culture, n.d.). And the Ilokano have seriously exerted efforts to preserve their cultural treasures. In fact, Luzano (2018) said that as an Ilokano, there is a need to preserve the cultural heritage and traditions that unify their society. Cultural heritage and traditions serve to link the people with their ancestors, which is valuable and should not be lost. In Ilocos Norte, cultural policies have been intensified by the provincial government primarily to boost and further develop this cultural heritage. To recall, in 2017, in preparation for the province's 200th founding anniversary the following year, then Governor Imee R. Marcos was accelerating the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte (PGIN)'s drive towards developing and promoting its cultural heritage as a catalyst of growth and opportunity (Castro, 2017). Castro explained that Ilocos Norte's cultural policy is founded on Republic Act No. 10066 or the National Heritage Act of 2009 which encourages local government units (LGUs) to incorporate programs and budgets for the protection and conservation of cultural properties whether through environmental, educational, or cultural activities. She also added, PGIN had already begun the said establishment and promotion of cultural treasures in 2014. Castro quoting the former Ilocos Norte Governor Imee Marcos during her 2014 State of the Province Address, added that the Ilokano heritage is taken for granted at times and that there is an urgency to put a cultural strategy to promote art gallery spaces, endow schools of architecture, design, literature, gastronomy, and renew vanishing indigenous cultures considering that heritage is a living. It was also emphasized that while people embrace technology, Ilokano culture, heritage, and values that define the Ilokano as a people.

Meanwhile, the inclusion of the subject Practical Research I (Qualitative Research) gives various opportunities to novice student-researchers to study on their culture and heritage. Although, planning qualitative research for the first time can be a daunting undertaking for novice researchers (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). Gaudet and Robert (2018) mentioned that qualitative research is a never-ending journey that zeroes in on understanding the nature of complex, historically situated, multi-vocal social, and subjective phenomena. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research, inheres in a long-time investigation requiring ambitious data analysis. It usually results in lengthy reports without firm guidelines to direct researchers (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, it does not follow standardized methods in analyzing data (Saldaña, 2011).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative study that utilized content analysis. The primary source of data was the reflective essays written and submitted through email by the purposively selected 25 Senior High School students of one of the biggest secondary schools in the province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines. The data were collected from May-August, 2019. There were five open-ended questions for the participants to answer in their reflective essay. Four questions focused on their experiences, challenges faced, realizations, impact of qualitative research in their life, and their plans regarding Ilokano studies, culture, and heritage. The data were content-analyzed. The researcher first coded the data into small units. The codes were combined to create sub-themes, and then the sub-themes were incorporated into themes to form meaningful patterns to create the unity and coherence between and among the codes, sub-themes, and themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data revealed the student-researchers' varied experiences, the different challenges they encountered, their realizations, the impact of qualitative research in their life, their plans and advocacies for Ilokano culture and heritage preservation and promotion.

Qualitative Research Experiences

The students cohesively narrated and vividly described their experiences in conducting their qualitative studies. Some students pointed out in their narratives the difficulty of conducting qualitative research. They noted how they were overwhelmed with the demands of doing the studies the undertook. However, it is interesting to underscore that despite these difficulties, they viewed their journey to be rewarding. The following statements from some students reflect these claims:

It was certainly one tough endeavor especially the formulating of research topic. The teacher rejected our topic several times. I found it, however, interesting as I got to socialize with different people of different backgrounds and perspectives. (Student 7)

It was a challenging experience specially that we were

under time constraints. The journey brought us a wider perspective about our own culture and about making of qualitative research. (Student 5)

[...] It required us to immerse with the people in the community. Truly a great experience. (Student 4)

It was never easy, but it was remarkable one to learn things done by old-aged people of our town. (Student 3)

Some students emphasized the difficulty of finding informants or participants for their studies.

It was challenging, [...] Finding informants made it very challenging. Our study needed informants for traditional medicines but no one wanted to speak to us at first. We had to exert much effort to convince them to join in our study. The good thing about this qualitative research journey was we had a chance to explore different places in our hometown which we had never been to. (Student 10)

We [talking as a group] discovered and learned a lot about our [Ilokano] practices. Our fear before was that where were we going to find for informants who want to help us. (Student 8)

Some students also highlighted the stark contrast between conducting qualitative and quantitative research by noting that the former was more fun and interactive considering the socializations with the locals from various communities they immersed in.

Quali[tative] research is more interesting than quanti[tative] which has lesser social interactions. (Student 2)

We conducted quantitative research in the junior high school, and we found it boring as we simply gave the survey questionnaires to our respondents and we did it in the school only, now with the study we did, we enjoyed going to our research participants' places. (Student 12)

Some students noted the pleasure of interacting with and learning from the locals who served as their participants. (Student 1)

We [talking as a group] had fun talking to our research participants. We learned more and had deeper understanding of who we are as a people. (Student 4)

Conducting our qualitative research was remarkable because we experienced things we didn't expect. (Student 13)

It is an unforgettable experience, especially the interviews with our participants where we discovered and learned things that are significant [...]. (Student 18)

I will never ever forget it, especially the stories we heard from our informants. (Student 24)

The above students' statements and related codes signify that qualitative research was challenging and demanding yet rewarding. Qualitative research was deemed to have opened opportunities for the student-researchers to explore their Ilokano culture and heritage through their immersion in Ilokano communities and interactions with the locals making their journey remarkable and memorable.

The Challenges Faced in Qualitative Research

In terms of the challenges the student-researchers faced in the conduct of their qualitative studies, some students recounted the difficulties they experienced in the conduct

of their research which are mostly related to finding key informants, dealing with other student-researchers, looking for references, transcribing, and lack of resources. Some researchers relayed narratives about the difficulty of finding key informants or participants for their respective studies. They also noted that while there were some locals who could be informants, some would not want to participate due to personal reasons. Two students articulated this challenge that they faced:

Some of our supposed to be respondents didn't want to be interviewed due to privacy issues. (Student 21)

We had a hard time convincing the target informants to speak for an interview. Most of them were shy, some were old-aged and had health issues. (Student 6)

Students also admitted that they got problems with resources and money. Two comments from the student-researchers reflect this problem:

I could still remember how we were cramming to beat deadlines while our pockets were draining. (Student 19)

We had to go to the most remote barangays where transportation is a big problem. We had to hire tricycles. (Student 22)

Students also brought out their problem regarding absence or lack of references for their study. They noted that there were few if not no available references in libraries or on the internet. For example, student 9 revealed:

Because some of the cultures we studied are being set aside, source of information and facts are [were] hard to find. My classmates also had a hard time locating for books or periodicals about their study.

Some informants also pointed out that they had problems with their fellow student researchers. Student 16 shared:

We argued a lot of times as to who we had to interview, as to where to start, as to duties and obligations of each of us. The good thing is, we patched up our differences immediately.

Students also mentioned that all their informants spoke the Ilokano language, so they had to translate the responses to English. Also, they said that there were a lot of Ilokano terms that had no English equivalents. The following sentiments reflect these claims:

[...] the translating part, was hard, very hard. (Student 15)

One of the hardest parts was to transcribe the recorded interviews. After that we had to translate the Ilokano responses to English. Sadly, we have very limited vocabulary in both languages. (Student 24)

It can be deduced from the above codes that students dealt with difficulties relating to overarching themes like recruitment, financial and resources constraints, work relationships with other researchers, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The difficulties may have caused delays in the completion of their study, but these did not prevent the student-researchers to finish their work. While there were misunderstandings between and among the researchers, these were resolved at their level.

Realizations from the Qualitative Research Experience

The students also shared their realizations they got from

their experiences of qualitative research. The combined codes show that students realized that qualitative research is path to learning new things and (re)discovering one's identity, culture, and heritage.

Some of them commented that doing qualitative research is like navigating a path to discovering new things and learnings:

As a person, qualitative research had many contributions to me: it made me discover, learn, and explore things that is [are] new to me and it gives [gave] me knowledge about how the old things work. (Student 3)

In the conduct of our qualitative research, I came to the realization that this is like a journey of learning - learning new things [...] I had stored in my mind and heart several information and insights about our research topic on Ilokano food. (Student 21)

It made me realize that there are things that I did not know yet and there are lot of things to discover when you conduct this kind of research [...]. (Student 9)

I realized that there are really things that need to be discovered. (Student 8)

Other participants noted their realizations about (re) discovering their identity as an Ilokano, their culture and heritage. The following comments reflect these realizations:

I realized that there are rich cultures around us and we just have to research and pay attention to them. (Student 6)

There are so many interesting parts of our Ilokano culture that remain still unknown to some people and doing research about these things will help us to preserve our very own and unique culture. (Student 10)

After conducting our qualitative research, I realized that there are so many interesting things around us that need[s] to be known and learned for the benefit of the next generation. (Student 2)

I realized that our culture is really interesting [...]. (Student 4)

I've got perspectives on our being Ilokano. (Student 17)

I see that there are other parts of our ilokano culture that are waiting to be [re]discovered soon. (Student 11)

I was educated and informed that there are lots of things remain undiscovered about our being an Ilokano. (Student 21)

I realized that our culture makes us a real Ilokano. (Student 1)

It gives [gave] me information/background about our Ilokano culture and traditions and helped me trace back my roots. (Student 20)

[Our] qualitative research widens[ed] my thinking regarding our culture and the different behaviors of the people in the community.

Conducting the qualitative research taught me lessons and it deepened my understanding towards Ilokano culture. (Student 2)

Through their exposure to different people, places, culture, and practices, they realized that there are much to learn and discover about their identity as Ilokanos

and qualitative research helped them to do such. While quantitative research may yield information about Ilokano culture and heritage, qualitative research permitted the student-researchers to probe vital information about the Ilokano identity, hence, gaining deeper understanding of it.

Impact of Doing Qualitative Research in their Life

The students, generally, also articulated the impacts of doing qualitative research on culture and heritage in their life. The data, taken all together, revealed that the research journey yielded positive transformations to students.

Some participants noted their improvements as a person as reflected in the following statements:

The day [when] we [were] finally done [with] our research, it gave me sense of self-satisfaction - to the point that I felt excessive satisfaction as I gave my very best in conducting our study. Also, it added color to my life as it thought [taught] me to persevere and remain committed in achieving a goal.

I became a better individual, it inspire[d] and motivate[d] me. (Student 17)

It also helped me to bring out the best in me. (Student 13)

Other participants also noted how they improved in terms of their social skills. Two students expressed this development:

As a person, conducting qualitative research helped me to develop mainly my social skills. (Student 4)

It develops[ed] my skill on how I talk with our research participants because there was a lot of verbal interactions with different people. (Student 12)

It is also interesting to note how students observed that they became more appreciative to cultural researchers after their experience in qualitative research.

This is how some students commented:

Dakkel ti nai-contribute-na ti research kaniak kasi mas na-appreciate-ko ti ag-research,lalo about culture-tayo. Mas na-feel ko ti essence na. [It had a great contribution to me because I was able to appreciate more conducting research especially on our culture. I felt more its essence] (Student 20)

I have become more passionate about the Ilokano culture. (Student 1)

“It made me more reflective of our own culture, the people, and the beliefs they hold. (Student 9)

The above quotations imply that the qualitative research journey that the students had helped them to improve as a person, specifically on the enhancement of their social skills and their being appreciative of Ilokano culture and heritage. Also, their experience motivated them to do more qualitative studies.

Plans and Advocacies for Ilokano Culture and Heritage Studies, Preservation, and Promotion

Reflecting on their experiences in qualitative research, the student-researchers signified their desires and plans to conduct similar researches in the future. They also articulated that they develop personal advocacies in promoting cultural studies, and the Ilokano culture and heritage.

The following quotations are examples of the students’ willingness to conduct qualitative research in the future:

I hope in the future, I will be given again the chance to gather more information[s] regarding on Ilokano culture, specifically the construction of the historical houses and churches in our locality. (Student 6)

Someday, I want to conduct research studies focused on Ilokano culture only and keep them all in one place for the future generations to appreciate our roots and how unique our culture is. (Student 8)

I hope that I will have chances to dig more information about Ilokano culture. To have more knowledge and understanding about it through the help of the early inhabitants who will serve as my respondents. (Student 23)

[...] It would be an honor to conduct a qualitative research on Ilokano culture again in the future. (Student 15)

Furthermore, some students also explicitly articulated that they would promote qualitative studies on culture by encouraging and helping future qualitative research students. Below is example of quotation supporting this claim:

I will encourage and help future students who will conducting qualitative research to not only finish their studies but also to see the worth of the culture we have. (Student 17)

Also, the students noted that they want to expand the areas they will work on when they will conduct qualitative research in the future. This is evident in the following statements:

This time, I’m aiming for a well-balanced cultural-technological qualitative research, were Folk culture (Ilokano, etc) cannot only be displayed in framed pictures but through time it can fuse with technology and be upgraded for a well-balanced world. (Student 20)

After this, perhaps, I should look more on the culture of Ilokano, more so on its products, the behaviors of the Ilokanos and more of the beliefs. (Student 9)

I have plans regarding qualitative research on Ilokano culture and this is to give regard and priority to the vanishing culture of the Ilokanos and how we should apply it research so that we can revive it. (Student 7)

I intend to rediscover more about the Ilokano culture so that Ilokanos must know and practice well our own culture because as of today our culture may forget by the young generation because they don’t have enough knowledge. (Student 3)

I hope I could study about the ethnic groups in the province. (Student 14) student.

The above codes reflect the students’ willingness and excitement to work (again) on qualitative studies in the future covering a wider range of topics and their personal initiatives and advocacies to promote qualitative research and Ilokano culture and heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at exploring the experiences and reflections of the Senior High School (SHS) students in

conducting qualitative research on the Ilokano culture and heritage. Drawing from the findings of the study, it was concluded that students found qualitative research as a challenging and demanding task yet rewarding, remarkable, and memorable. The major difficulties encountered by student-researchers are related to recruitment, financial and resources constraints, work relationships with other researchers, and data collection, analysis and interpretation. Moreover, it was concluded that students deemed qualitative studies as path to learning new things and (re)discovering one's identity, culture, and heritage. Qualitative research journey yielded positive transformations to students and motivated them to come up with initiatives and advocacies in promoting Ilokano studies, culture, and heritage.

It must be noted, however, that the present study is not without limitations. The researcher worked with a small number of participants due to personal reasons of other students and time constraints. Also, there might have been some factors that affected the participants' narratives and reflections about their experiences of qualitative research. These limitations must be noted when using the results of the study.

It is recommended that teachers of qualitative research may utilize the findings of the study to improve their strategies in teaching the said subject, and for future students who will take the subject in the future to learn from the participants' experiences and reflections. Furthermore, it is recommended that future researchers on this topic may consider working with more participants and using other research methodologies.

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